

Before the Dawn

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/426992) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/426992>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warnings:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Rape/Non-Con, Underage Sex
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Twilight Series - Stephenie Meyer
Relationship:	Edward Cullen/Bella Swan
Characters:	Joham , Carlisle Cullen , Esme Cullen , Emmett Cullen , Rosalie Hale , Jasper Hale , Alice Cullen , Aro , Serena , Nahuel , Alexander
Language:	English
Collections:	Works I Want to Lovingly Put on My Bookshelf Bound in Soft Leather and Embossed In Gold
Stats:	Published: 2012-03-12 Completed: 2017-01-03 Words: 236,635 Chapters: 33/33

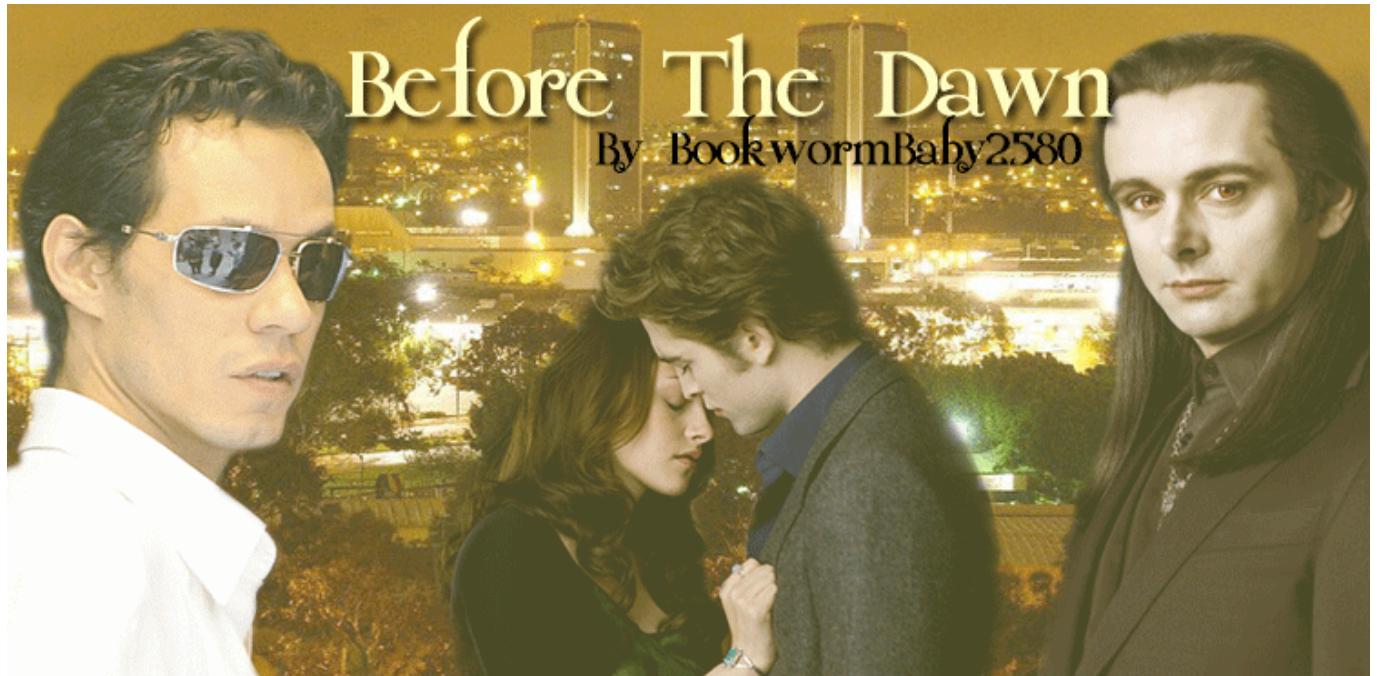
Before the Dawn

by [BookwormBaby2580](#)

Summary

After her mother's wedding in Mexico, Bella encounters a vampire with less altruistic motives than those held by the vampires she might have met in Forks under drastically different circumstances. One bad decision, she discovers, can change her entire life.

Banner by vbf1 Designs.



Notes

So. The beginning of this fic is pretty rough. There are short, non-eroticized depictions of rape, an ugly death scene, and a whole slew of other crap that makes the first chunk altogether unpleasant. That lasts for six chapters, and after that things get easier. Six chapters. You can power through it, if you're so inclined, and the Cullens will be waiting for you in Chapter 7.

I've had a couple of people tell me that they'd have found the reading experience better if they had known how long it would take to get through the really oppressive stuff, so I thought I'd share it right up front.

What Happens in Mexico

May 4, 2004

Tijuana.

Bella had told herself that she wasn't going to stop. She had an eight hour drive home from the resort in Ensenada where her mother had just married Bella's new step-father, and she knew that the responsible thing to do would be to drive straight through, *without* stopping.

But she didn't. She was sixteen years old and she had never done a daring thing in her life. It drove her mother crazy sometimes, how carefully Bella planned everything. Occasionally, her meticulous nature came in handy, like when Renée wanted to get married in Mexico and needed someone detail-oriented to make all of the arrangements. But more often than not, Bella felt like she held her mother back. She knew that Renée loved spontaneity, and Bella's fastidiousness could be a buzz kill.

"Sometimes you have to just let go," Renée had told her, time and time again.

So Bella was. For the next two weeks, she would be entirely without parental supervision. Renée and Phil would be on their honeymoon, and they hadn't thought twice about leaving careful, responsible Bella at home alone. Renée had worried a little bit about letting Bella negotiate the trip back across the border on her own, but Bella assured her that she had all the correct documents, so her mother had relented.

Truthfully, it had been Bella's intention to go straight home. But something about driving the highway up the beautiful Mexican coast left her feeling free and independent, and when she saw the signs for Tijuana in the fading light, she found herself getting restless.

Who went to Mexico without hitting a club and doing a few tequila shots, after all? It was the first time Bella had traveled outside of the United States, and she wanted to experience the culture.

At least, that was what she told her practical, responsible self. But to the teenager buried way down deep, she winked. It was time to try something just a little bit out of character.

And really, it was almost as if Renée had been trying to encourage Bella to do exactly what she was doing. Having her wedding on the third of May meant that Bella was making her way home as the city was gearing up for its annual celebration of the Battle of Puebla.

Cinco de Mayo.

The streets were teeming with color. Bright decorations and bright clothing were everywhere, and music poured out from the open doors of the downtown shops. It melded together with the animated conversation on the streets in a chaotic cacophony of sound that set Bella's body humming in anticipation.

Cinco de Mayo, Bella had discovered, wasn't as big of a celebration in Mexico as she had been led to believe. It had always been a day to pay homage to Mexican culture in Phoenix, and so she had assumed it would be a major event when she got here. It wasn't. At least, it wasn't in most places.

But Tijuana was a city that catered heavily to tourists, and the Americans were out in droves, looking for exactly the same thing that Bella was seeking —an experience.

So the city had thrown open the doors of its bars and clubs to play up the holiday and entice the foreigners, and Bella was enticed. And terrified. She was alone in a strange city where she didn't speak the language and didn't understand the currency, and she was doing something completely out of her comfort zone. A big part of her wanted to steer the car back to the freeway and get herself home, but she simply couldn't bear the thought of passing up this opportunity.

She parked her car in the lot of a club that looked clean and fairly new, where a doorman leaned lazily against the wall outside, not bothering to check IDs. He looked her over cautiously as she approached him.

"You no make no trouble," he said sternly.

She stopped, startled. "What?"

"Tu madre no come here? Be angry for you drinking?"

"My mother?" she asked, confused. "No, she's not here. Just me."

The man nodded and returned to his leaning, allowing her to enter the club.

She stepped out of the oppressive evening heat into an inferno. The club was packed, and apparently not air conditioned, and the lack of air flow combined with the press of bodies to raise the temperature several degrees. It was dim and smoky, brightened occasionally by the roving of colored search lights or the staccato flash of a strobe from the dance floor. The loud music filled the air, the repetitive baseline shaking the walls and vibrating right through her into her core.

Bella nearly turned on her heel and went right back outside again.

But she had already cleared the first obstacle—the doorman—with far less difficulty than she had anticipated, and she was that much closer to having her non-Bella experience.

Imagine what Renée will think, she told herself. Imagine what everyone at school will think. Picture their faces when you actually have something to contribute to the conversation. Something interesting. Something cool.

Her pep-talk helped, and she made her way around the crowded tables to the bar . . . or anyway, almost to the bar. There were patrons three deep, waiting to be served, so she stood at the back of the crowd and waited. After a few minutes, though, it became clear that waiting wasn't the way to get anywhere in this particular bar. People pushed their way to the front, heedless of their more polite peers, and Bella never actually got any closer. She gave it a few more minutes, but when it was obvious that her patience wasn't getting her anywhere she gathered her nerve and slipped through the tiny spaces in the crowd, successfully making it to the bar almost unnoticed by the other patrons.

Once there, though, she realized she had another problem. She had no idea how the process of ordering drinks was supposed to go. This wasn't something she had read about, and somehow it wasn't happening like it did in the movies, where a bar tender would approach her and give her a friendly, "What'll it be?" In fact, Bella was pretty much ignored as she stood there, waiting to be acknowledged.

But that wasn't so bad, because she suddenly realized that she didn't know how she was supposed to go about paying for her drink. She had spent the last of her Mexican currency when she filled up her gas tank in Ensenada, and she wasn't sure whether anyone here accepted American money. Nor did she know *when* she was supposed to pay. Did she buy each drink as she ordered it, or would they keep a tab and have her settle up at the end of the night? Should she order a particular brand of drink, or just tequila in general? She wasn't particularly familiar with the brands. Renée probably would have let her drink, had she been the type to keep alcohol around, but Bella's mother hadn't been much of a drinker since her high school days.

Bella watched surreptitiously as a doughy man in a Hawaiian shirt pushed his way to the counter next to her.

"Jose Cuervo!" he demanded loudly, and one of the three thick-set men behind the counter poured him a shot and passed it across the bar. He slipped them a few dollars—American money—and then licked the salt from the rim of his glass. He threw back the amber liquid, his eyes squeezing shut, and then he plucked the lime from the rim and sucked it hard.

All in all, it was a thoroughly educational display. Bella was pretty sure she could mimic that. Except for the yelling. She couldn't just demand a drink, she would have to wait to be acknowledged.

Waiting, though, turned out to be an ineffectual use of her time once again. She tried to screw up her courage to speak up, to yell out her order with the expectation of being heard the way the others did, but it was simply too hard for her to do. Ridiculous as it made her feel, Bella couldn't tolerate drawing so much attention to herself.

So she gave up. She resigned herself to the fact that her daring, out-of-character experience was an utter failure, and she turned and started pushing her way back through the press of bodies. She was about halfway to the door when a hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. She let out a little shriek that couldn't even be heard over the pulsing music and spun to face the person who had grabbed her.

He was another American, and he appeared to be several years older than Bella. He was seated at a small table surrounded by five other guys, all roughly college-age, who were laughing and ignoring her, for the most part.

"Hey, baby," grinned the one holding her wrist. "Aren't you a little young to be in here?"

Bella covered her rising panic with a sweet smile and a shrug. "They're pretty lax. I don't know if you noticed."

The man laughed loudly, drawing the attention of his friends. Bella felt herself flush as they all turned toward her, and she tried to pull her hand out of his grasp.

He pulled back, dragging her closer to the table.

"Hey, who's the jail bait?" one of the others asked, while another whistled suggestively.

"What's your name?" a third asked, and Bella's blush deepened.

"Bella," she said nervously.

"Let me buy you a drink, Bella," said the one who still held her wrist.

She started to shake her head, but she suddenly realized that this may be the way for her to have that out-of-character experience after all. And oh, wouldn't the story be so much *better* when she told her friends that she'd had drinks with a group of college boys?

But that meant staying here and enduring the attention of six intimidating men, all focused intently on her.

She chewed at her lip in indecision, wanting to be brave, to do something worth talking about, yet naturally timid and anxious to escape anything new and frightening. And this was *frightening*. She was so far out of her comfort zone that she wasn't sure she could ever find her way back to it again.

Her fear got the better of her, and she shook her head, stumbling back a step. "Your table is full," she offered as an excuse, trying to extract her hand from the guy's grip.

"That's no problem, baby." He stood up and released her, but immediately grabbed her by the hips and lifted her up onto the table beside his chair. "See? Plenty of room."

The other guys laughed drunkenly and one of them yelled for a waitress. "What are you drinking?" he asked her.

"Um . . ." Bella hesitated, but she wasn't getting anywhere by making excuses, so she just surrendered. "Jose Cuervo?"

A round of shots was ordered, and the guys crowded close around Bella, taking seats on the table next to her and dragging chairs in front of her. She was peppered with questions—Where was she from? What was she doing in Mexico? Was she there alone? Was this her first time in a bar?—and she realized with a start that the guys were flirting with her. The questions seemed innocent enough, but they were punctuated with touches to her knee or squeezes of her shoulder, and one guy was winding a lock of her hair around his finger.

The whole thing was a little bit thrilling. She had never been one to appreciate a lot of attention, but six attractive college guys were flirting with her at once and she couldn't help the flush of excitement that came over her.

"It's not fair that you know my name and I don't know yours," she told them, ignoring several of the questions she had been asked.

"I'm Aidan," said the guy who had grabbed her wrist. "And this is Jesse, Chris, Sean, Jeremy, and Ryan."

Bella looked around at each of them as they were introduced, but she had forgotten which name belonged to whom before Aidan finished the introductions. "It's nice to meet you. Are you all down here for Cinco de Mayo?"

"Kind of," one of them spoke up. "And to celebrate Jeremy getting dumped by his bitch of a fiancée."

"Are you Jeremy?" she asked the guy playing with her hair.

"I'm Sean," he said, looking slightly put out.

"I'm Jeremy," said one of the guys who had dragged a chair in front of her. "And I think you need to dance with me to help me mend my poor, broken heart."

Bella giggled. "There's no way I'm dancing. At least not before I've had a drink."

As if on cue, the waitress reappeared with a tray full of shot glasses and passed them around. These ones were different than the one Bella had seen at the bar, she noticed. The rims of the glasses weren't salted and didn't have a lime wedge perched on one side, though the waitress did set a small bowl of them in the center of the table.

"Do you know how to drink tequila?" Aidan asked her.

She thought she had a pretty good idea, but she smiled and shook her head anyway, letting him take the lead.

He licked the inside of his wrist and snatched up a shaker from behind her on the table, sprinkling a dash onto his moist skin. He held his wrist up to Bella's mouth with a grin. "First you lick the salt," he said. "Then you drink."

Bella hesitated, but the guys were all watching her expectantly and a shot glass was being pressed into her hand, so she capitulated with a self-conscious smile. She ran her tongue across Aidan's wrist, tasting the bite of the salt, and then brought the glass to her lips—

And nearly choked. She barely got half of the tequila into her mouth before her body revolted and tried to force it back out again. She clapped a hand over her mouth and willed herself to swallow what was, hands down, the *worst* thing she had ever tasted. For a moment her muscles refused to contract properly, but eventually she was able to swallow.

Her companions were howling gleefully at her reaction, slapping their knees and rocking with laughter. Sean pushed a lime wedge into her mouth, and she sucked at it desperately, letting the sharp tang clear away as much of the horrid aftertaste as possible.

"That was awful!" she gasped. "You guys drink that on purpose?"

Her question was answered with more raucous laughter, which Bella ignored in favor of fishing another lime from the bowl, still trying to rid her mouth of the flavor of the tequila.

"You didn't even finish it," one guy said, taking the shot glass from her hand.

"Maybe you'll like beer better," another said, replacing the glass with a bottle.

Bella nodded. Beer had to be better. *Anything* had to be better. She brought the bottle to her lips and took a tentative sip, grimacing as yet another unpleasant taste filled her mouth. It wasn't quite as hard to choke back as the tequila, but she shuddered in revulsion and pushed the bottle back to the person who had given it to her.

Aidan gave her a patronizing pat on the head. "You're so cute, Bella." He started to say something more, but Jeremy grabbed Bella's hand and pulled her off of the table.

"There, you've had your drink, now dance with me."

"Hold up, she has to try whiskey," Sean said.

Bella decided that dancing was a lesser evil than sampling more of the offensive drinks her new friends kept giving her, so she ignored the protests and followed Jeremy to the dance floor. The rest of the guys followed, and though she started out shifting from foot to foot with her hands gripping Jeremy's upper arms, she was soon being passed from one partner to another while the guys jockeyed for position.

It was all a little bit disorienting. Bella's head was swimming from the heat, from the unpleasant flavor of the alcohol, from the excess of attention, and from the general newness of it all. It wasn't a pleasant feeling, and she was starting to wonder if it had really been a good idea for her to come here tonight. Had she continued on, she could probably have been across the border by now, well on her way to the safe comfort of her home, her bed.

But then she would still be the girl who lived vicariously through her books. The girl who was uninteresting to the other kids her age, and who was perplexing to her mother. Renée would almost definitely have approved of this detour, Bella thought, so she couldn't bring herself to regret it. She was eager to see her mother's face when she told her about this little adventure later.

She was doing a good job of convincing herself that she had made the right decision, until the hands on her hips—Sean's, she reminded herself—slid around and cupped her backside through her jeans. She jumped, startled, and tried to take a step back from him to free himself from his uncomfortable grip. She collided with a warm body behind her before she had moved more than a few inches, though, and two more hands circled around her, slipping up under the hem of her shirt.

Bella's breath caught, and she shook her head quickly. "Don't," she said, but her nervous whisper was lost in the noise of the music. The two bodies pressed closer, trapping her between them, and she pushed blindly at the wrists that held her, fighting down a spike of panic. "Don't, please," she said again, louder this time, trying to wriggle free.

"Shhh, baby, relax," a voice murmured in her ear, and she recognized it as Aidan's. "We're just dancing, having a little fun."

"I-I want to stop," she stuttered.

Jeremy frowned at Aidan. "Hey, back off a little, man. You're crowding her."

Aidan removed one of his hands long enough to give Jeremy a shove, and then it returned to Bella's body, beneath her shirt, and he let his hands inch up over her ribs.

Jeremy just rolled his eyes and stalked away, muttering under his breath. Two others seemed to lose interest, drifting away on the dance floor, while one, whose name Bella couldn't remember, stood back and watched, smirking.

Bella tried again to wriggle out of the hot press of the two large bodies that had caught her between them. "Stop, please. I . . . I don't want to do this." She clawed at Sean's wrists when they refused to release her, and he let out a low growl, grabbing her hands and pulling them in front of her.

"Play nice," he hissed threateningly.

"Stop, I mean it!" Bella said, louder this time, hoping to catch the attention of someone who might step in and break things up.

Aidan brushed his thumb over the cup of her bra. "I know you're not going to be a little cock tease," he growled in her ear. "Nah, you're not like that. You wouldn't get all flirty and let us buy you drinks and then not follow through."

She chewed at her lip, her cheeks flooding with heat. "I didn't—I didn't mean . . . I'm sixteen."

Sean's smile faltered and he took a step back, but Aidan only laughed softly in her ear. "What happens in Mexico . . ."

"Excuse me."

The words were spoken in a warm, almost musical voice that carried just a hint of a Spanish accent. Bella looked around and found herself staring at a wiry man with an easy, self-assured stance.

"May I cut in?"

Sean opened his mouth to tell him off, but the stranger shot him a fierce, feral glare, and Sean stumbled backward. Aidan's hands dropped as well, and he stepped away from Bella.

The stranger's frightening expression melted away as quickly as it had appeared, and he gave Bella a warm smile, holding out a hand to her. "Would you like to take a walk with me?"

Relief washed over Bella with such startling suddenness that an involuntary giggle escaped her throat. "Yes!" She took his hand, too giddy over her reprieve to spare more than a fleeting thought to wonder where he had been for his hand to be so *cold*.

"Come." He led her to the door and they slipped outside, welcoming the light breeze and the escape from the loud music.

Bella took the opportunity to gaze up at her rescuer, a bit bemused by what she saw. He was pale—extremely so—but the faint olive cast to his skin and the shape of his features gave her the impression that his pallor was somehow wrong for him. He had dark, heavy eyebrows and a short ponytail tied at the nape of his neck, and though Bella judged him to be well under six feet, he had such a remarkable *presence* that he seemed much taller.

He was significantly older than Bella, late thirties or early forties, she guessed, and she wondered if that had something to do with the vague sense of unease she felt. Bella hadn't had a strong male presence in her life since her toddler years, and she had always felt uncomfortable around her mother's boyfriends. Even her visits with her father were often awkward and uncomfortable, though she was more at ease with him than she was with most men.

Bella shoved her negativity aside firmly. This man had clearly shown that he was trustworthy, and she smiled gratefully up at him. "Thank you," she breathed.

"For what?"

"For helping me. For . . . noticing."

He smiled at her, his muddy brown eyes roving over her face. "Beautiful girl, I noticed you the moment you walked in."

Bella felt her cheeks warm, and she once again had to tamp down her feelings of discomfort. He wasn't flirting with her; she was reading too much into his kind words.

The man tucked her hand into his elbow and started off down the busy street, setting a leisurely pace for them. "You're far from home," he observed.

Bella nodded and told him about her mother's wedding and her reckless decision to stop in Tijuana and try something new.

"For what it's worth," he murmured, his chilled hand covering hers, "I'm very glad you decided to stop tonight. If you hadn't, I would have been denied the pleasure of your company."

She shivered slightly and sidled a little closer. He was more than twice her age, sure, but how often did she get the chance to take a walk with such a charming man?

"Do you live here?" she asked.

"I recently acquired some property beyond the city limits."

"You don't look . . ." She stopped herself abruptly, not quite certain if her comment would be construed as rude or insensitive.

The stranger cocked his head curiously. "I don't look what?"

"Mexican," she said sheepishly. "You're so pale."

He chuckled softly. "You are correct. I'm originally from Portugal, though my coloring is the result of a skin condition."

"A skin condition? Is it painful?"

"Just a bit inconvenient." He smiled warmly at her. "Tell me, pretty girl, are *you* affected by any ailments or illnesses?"

The question surprised her a little, but she shook her head. "Not unless you would classify chronic clumsiness as an ailment."

"You're in perfect health, then?"

She smiled playfully. "Yes, Doctor . . ." she trailed off and cocked her head. "I'm sorry, I didn't get your name. I'm Bella."

He stopped walking and turned to her, letting his cold thumb brush over her cheek. "You may call me Joham."

A chill prickled down her spine, and she wasn't sure if it was fear or anticipation. This evening hadn't gone at all the way she had expected, and she certainly hadn't foreseen herself going off alone with a handsome, charming stranger. Her heartbeat picked up as he leaned in close, breathing in deeply as he nuzzled her neck.

"You smell intoxicating," he whispered.

Bella's breath hitched at his words, anxiety mingling with excitement. She was unusually drawn to this man, but it was all wrong. She was sixteen years old, alone in a strange city, and every logical thought that managed to slip through the haze of her muddled emotions told her that it was time to

leave. But her teenage hormones, the rush of adrenaline, and her gratitude over his intervention all demanded that she stay.

Joham eased away again, resuming their walk. "I read an interesting study a few years back," he said conversationally. "It was rather gratifying, I thought, because it confirmed a theory that I started experimenting with a very long time ago."

"What theory?" she asked, since he clearly expected her to.

He smiled. "We've long been aware that scent plays an important part in the mating process—for animals as well as humans. But I theorized that those whose scents are most pleasing to one another are the most likely to produce healthy offspring."

"Oh." Bella blinked in surprise. "I guess that makes sense, evolutionarily speaking. And the study you read confirmed it?"

He nodded. "A man's genetic make-up determines his scent, and our bodies are fine-tuned to *sniff out*, as it were, the partner whose make-up best complements our own." He stopped and turned to her again, taking both of her hands in his. "And you, little Bella, have one of the sweetest, most delightful scents I have come across in a very long time."

She stared at him, her eyes widening. The direction the conversation was taking was getting a little bit weird. "So . . . you're saying that you think we're genetically compatible?"

"I'm quite sure of it, my dear."

The prickling sense of foreboding was back, and this time Bella gave it credence. "I should really get back. I still have a ways left to drive tonight."

He clicked his tongue disapprovingly, tightening his grip on her hands to prevent her from pulling them out of his grasp. "I'm afraid I really can't let an opportunity like this pass me by," he said apologetically.

"An opportunity—" Bella stopped suddenly, staring at his eyes. In the light that shone on them from a nearby building, his eyes didn't appear to be the muddy brown that she had thought they were before. They looked mottled now, and in some places almost . . . red. "Your . . . your eyes . . ."

Joham blinked several times and the brown seemed to fade away completely, leaving only a deep maroon color. "It seems I'm out of time for niceties," he said, sounding almost regretful. "Come." He took her elbow and steered her down the street, walking much faster this time.

"Wait. I really have to get back." Bella tried to extract herself from his grip, but though he wasn't holding her particularly hard, his fingers were as immovable as iron.

"I am sorry for the rush," he said, ignoring her protests. "It has been my wont to make this as pleasant as possible for my girls, but my former habits have proven to be inadequate." He dragged her to a car parked on the side of the road and pulled the passenger door open, pushing her effortlessly inside despite her resistance.

"No!" Bella tried to scramble out again, but he drew the seatbelt over her and clicked it into place. His hand closed over the buckle and Bella gaped at it when the metal crumpled under his grip. She

tugged at the mangled metal, but it had curled in on itself, making it impossible for her to free herself from the restraints.

The panic that had threatened her before finally found purchase. "No, stop!" she yelled, struggling against the seatbelt and praying that someone would hear her. "Help me! Some—"

Joham clapped a hand over her mouth with bruising force, and an animalistic growl escaped his throat. "That's enough, girl. I would prefer it if you didn't make me hurt you."

His threat only deepened her panic, and she fought harder, shoving uselessly against him. Joham pulled his hand away, but before Bella could draw a breath to scream he had plucked a handkerchief from his pocket and was stuffing it in her mouth. He reached down, and quicker than she would have thought possible, he untied and unlaced her shoe. He brought the lace up and tied it around her head, holding the makeshift gag in place.

Bella shoved and kicked against him, one hand clawing at his face while the other moved to tug at the shoelace, but Joham seemed completely unaffected. Again, more quickly than he should have been able to, he unlaced her other shoe and used the string to tie her hands together and secure them to the lap belt that held her in her seat.

Without another word, he stood and slammed the car door closed.

Bella stared down at the bindings that dug into her wrists, writhing desperately against them, struggling to work her hands free. A black haze washed over her vision, and for a moment she was worried that she might faint. But then Joham slid into the driver's seat beside her, and her senses snapped back into focus. If she was going to have any chance of getting out of this, she would have to be alert enough to take advantage of any opportunity that presented itself.

"Just relax," Joham urged soothingly. "If you behave yourself, everything will go much more smoothly."

But Bella couldn't relax. She watched carefully as Joham steered the car away from the curb, trying to memorize the route he took. It was impossible, though. He took so many turns in the unfamiliar streets that soon she was hopelessly lost.

Once they left the city behind and got out onto the open road, Joham accelerated to such a terrifying speed that another panic attack threatened. Bella had herself convinced that she was going to die in a fiery automobile accident, so she was shocked when he slowed and turned off of the highway onto a long drive lined with scrubby desert vegetation. He drove for several more miles, still going way too fast, before he finally slowed in front of a two-story house.

Bella stared at the stucco and Spanish tile, wondering if this was the property he had mentioned. It looked deserted, and her mind kicked into gear again, scanning the countryside for landmarks that might be familiar to the police, should she manage to get to a phone and call them.

Joham parked the car, and he was pulling her door open almost as soon as he had exited his. In a show of strength that left Bella reeling, he ripped through both the lap belt and shoulder belt without the slightest difficulty. He pulled them away, but left her hands tied as he lifted her out of the car.

Bella fought back the urge to bolt as he set her on her feet and took her elbow. Even if she managed to break his grip this time, even if she didn't trip over her unlaced shoes and end up flat on her face,

even if she could see well enough by the light of the moon and stars to run . . . there was simply nowhere to go. All she could see in any direction was desert. She let him guide her up the walk, stumbling awkwardly, and into the dark house.

Without the light of the moon, Bella could barely see a thing. Joham seemed to have no problem, though, and without breaking pace he dragged her inside and up a set of stairs. She tripped and stumbled all the way, but he gripped her arm tightly, holding her up when she lost her balance.

She heard more than saw the creak of a door as it swung open, followed by a disorienting moment when she was scooped up in Joham's cold arms, and then deposited on a soft, springy bed.

A bed.

Her blood ran cold and she tried to scramble away, but Joham caught her easily and dragged her back. His hands moved immediately to her jeans, not bothering to unbutton them, simply tearing them from her as easily as if they were made of paper. Bella screamed against the gag, trying desperately to roll away from him, but he climbed onto the bed and pinned her down with a knee to her stomach. He yanked off her shoes and socks and then made short work of her T-shirt, shredding it and tossing it aside. Her bra and panties quickly followed, leaving her bare and writhing in terror. She screamed again and again, but Joham ignored her. She heard his belt buckle jangle and his zipper slide down, and then he was pushing her hands over her head and crawling on top of her, wedging his body between her legs. The chill and unnatural hardness of his body intermingled with her fear of the inevitable, and she sobbed against the handkerchief in her mouth, desperate for anything that would stop this man—this *thing*—from following through with his intentions.

But there was no savior this time, no handsome stranger to step in and rescue her from the trouble she had gotten herself into. She felt fingers sliding between her legs, teasing and exploring, opening her for the invasion. And then something much larger, much more frightening was pushing into her. She felt the searing pain as her hymen tore and his member forced inside of her inadequately lubricated body. The friction and the painful stretching around his unforgiving hardness drew another agonized scream from her throat.

The pain and humiliation were too much, and Bella tried desperately to think of anything but what was being done to her. She sent her thoughts back to her mother's wedding, to the Practice SATs she had been taking in school, to the zoo that she had visited with Charlie the previous summer.

Charlie. Dependable, predictable, *safe* Charlie.

Thoughts of him only made her cry harder, as heavy regrets settled onto her. Bella had been so caught up in earning her mother's approval with her daring and spontaneity that she hadn't stopped to think about what her father would say. The thought of his underage daughter drinking alone in a foreign city would have been enough to send the man into conniptions. And he would have been justified. Had Bella spared a thought for what her father would have thought of her plan, she might have reconsidered.

But she hadn't, and she would have given anything at that moment to be with him, safe and protected in the dreary little town that she refused to even visit these days.

She cried harder, mentally punishing herself as the man on top of her pummeled her body mercilessly. With every bruising thrust she repeated her castigating mantra: *Careless . . . reckless . . . irresponsible.*

Bella was too exhausted to react when Joham cried out and spilled inside of her, but once he released her and pulled back, the terror returned full force. Now that he had gotten what he wanted, what would he do to her? Surely he wouldn't release her? Just take her back to her car and let her go home? Would he kill her? She curled into a ball and cried softly, not even trying to run away. She knew by now that it was pointless.

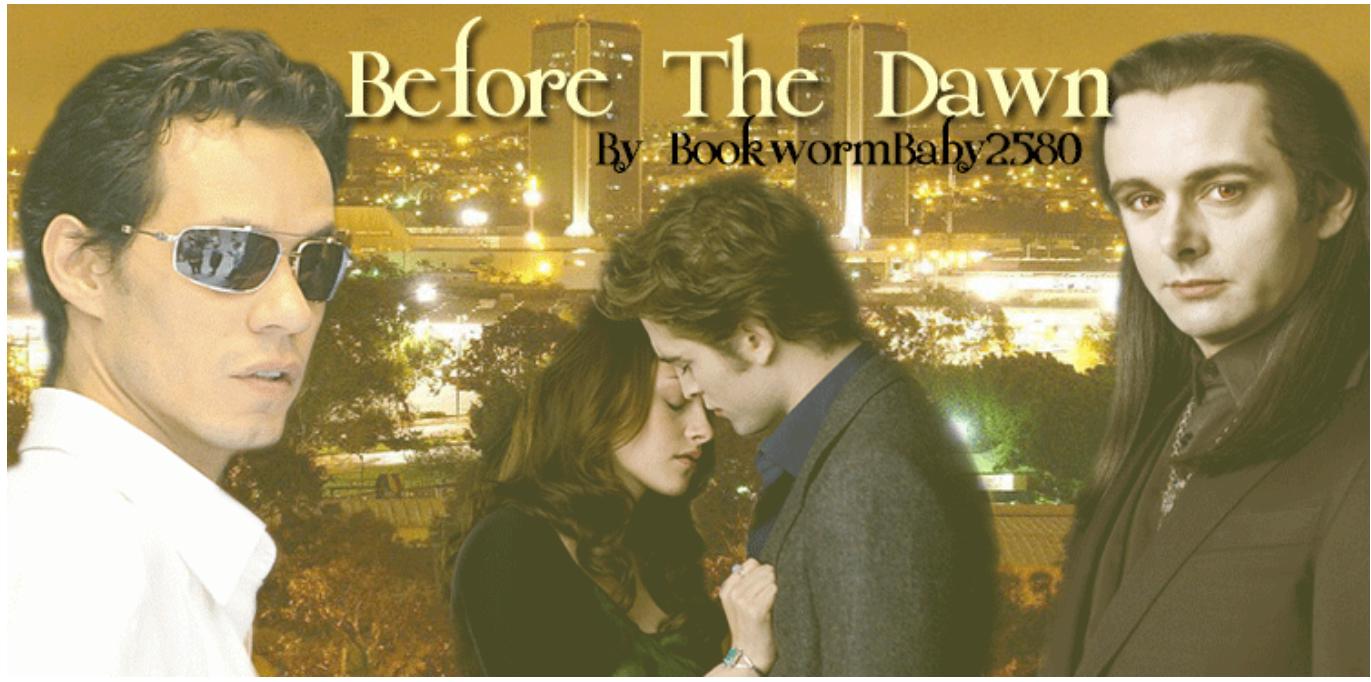
She heard Joham moving around the room, and then the sound of a drawer opening and closing. The bed dipped under his weight, and he slid his arms under her, shifting her higher on the bed. Bella tried to curl in tighter, but he deftly snapped the string that tied her wrists and seized one hand, stretching it above her head. She felt a much thicker rope coiling around her arm, securing it to the headboard of the bed, and again, she didn't try to fight. She just squeezed her eyes shut as he quickly knotted the rope, then did the same with her other hand. He tied each ankle, trailing lengths of rope down the large bed to secure them to the footboard, before moving back up and giving her a gentle kiss on her forehead.

"I know this is uncomfortable, sweet girl, but it won't last long. I just need to make a few arrangements."

With that, he strode out of the room and left her alone, bound and bruised and completely devastated. Bella heard the front door open and close, followed shortly after by the growl of a car engine. A few more tears slipped from her eyes and slid down her temples and into her hair.

Mentally, she ran through the list of people that she loved, crafting apologies to them in her mind, wishing desperately that she could have had a chance to see each of them one more time. But before long the exhaustion and tears caught up with her, and her thoughts morphed into fitful, self-pitying dreams.

The Desert Sun



Bella was in agony. She never would have imagined that lying still could be so *painful*. Her joints throbbed from being held in the same position for hours, her hands had fallen asleep from the loss of blood flow, and she had rubbed her wrists raw trying to get relief from the ridges of the rope that dug into her skin. Her jaw ached from being held open as well, and the handkerchief had soaked up all of the moisture in her mouth.

And she was cold. Joham had left her with no clothes or blankets, and the heat of the day had ebbed and left a chill in the night air.

She tried to sleep, and occasionally managed to doze for a little while, but she was awakened frequently by a shiver, or a shooting pain in her shoulders, or a dreamed revisit to the horror of the evening.

And then the noise started, killing any chance she had of sleep. It began at dawn, as the first light of morning filtered through the open curtains, with the rumbling of large truck engines approaching the house. Doors slammed, and then the house below rang with activity. Voices conversed in what Bella assumed was Spanish, and she could hear a lot of thunking and banging that she couldn't identify. She was curious, but terrified, wondering what new horror this commotion would bring.

And she *hurt*. She twisted her arms again, wincing in pain, and let out a frustrated cry that fell somewhere between a growl and a sob. If she could just *move*, she would feel so much better.

The bedroom door swung open a moment later, and Joham stepped in. He had pulled a hooded sweatshirt on over the clothes he had worn to the club, and he pushed the hood back as he closed the door behind him.

He smiled warmly down at Bella. "Poor, sweet girl," he said sympathetically, moving to her side and gazing down at her with his unsettling red eyes. "I'm sorry I had to leave you alone for so long." He sat down on the bed and laid a square of folded cloth next to her before he started untying the knots around her wrist. Bella ground her teeth into her gag, but though she wanted to make it perfectly clear just how much she hated him, she was afraid that letting him see her ire would stop

him from releasing her from her bonds. She couldn't tolerate that. If she didn't move soon, she would lose her mind.

So she smoothed her expression and felt a surge of relief as the rope gave and blood rushed into her icy, aching hand. Joham leaned over her to free her other hand, and then her feet, and Bella sat up and flexed her joints before pulling her knees protectively up in front of her. She reached for the shoelace that held the handkerchief in her mouth, but Joham's cold hands covered hers.

"Now, my dear, let's have an agreement. You may take this off if you can keep silent, but if you make any noise the consequences will be quite unpleasant. Do you understand?"

She met his stern gaze and nodded, though she hadn't entirely made up her mind to obey him. If there were other people downstairs, maybe they could help her. She would have to find the right opportunity, though. Joham was fast, and he was strong. Just yelling for help wouldn't get her anywhere.

Joham loosened the tie and Bella pulled the sodden handkerchief from her mouth, relieved that she could close her jaw again. Every part of her ached, and she hugged her knees tightly, tensing and relaxing her muscles to work the soreness from them. The position put pressure on her bladder, and it occurred to her that she could really use a bathroom break. She wasn't sure she was allowed to speak, though, and she chewed at her lip as she glanced around the comfortably furnished room.

Somehow, she couldn't picture Joham having decorated this place. There was a lot of chintz and lace, and the pictures on the walls showed a smiling, brown-skinned family that bore no resemblance to Joham. She wondered how exactly he had come to be in possession of this property.

Not that his possibly-shady business dealings were anywhere close to her biggest problem right now.

Joham picked up the folded cloth and held it out to her. "Here. You may put this on."

She took it hesitantly and unfolded it, revealing a thin hospital gown. She glanced up at Joham, alarm bells going off in her head, and her eyes darted around the room in search of her own clothes. They weren't there. At some point he must have taken them away, and though the hospital gown made her mind race with sinister possibilities, it was better than nothing. She pushed her arms through the sleeves and Joham moved around behind her to fasten the ties in back.

"There, that's better." His hands smoothed the gown over her back. "Such a pretty thing . . . Are you hungry, little dove?"

She nodded, though she wasn't sure that her nerves would allow her to keep anything down. She guessed that refusing his offer of food would only antagonize him, and she didn't think that was the best idea, under the circumstances.

"I'll make you something to eat," he said, his hands still caressing her back and shoulders. "Our friends downstairs are almost finished, and once they're gone you can come see the arrangements I've made for you."

He sounded very pleased, but Bella didn't really know how to answer him. Fortunately, he didn't seem to expect a response. He stood and moved toward the door.

"Can I—" Bella's voice came out as a dry whisper, and she cleared her throat before trying again.
"Can I use the bathroom?"

"Of course." He returned to her and took her hand, drawing her to her feet and out into the hall. He escorted her to a bathroom a few doors down, but then turned her toward him and took her jaw in his hand, giving her a stern look.

"You may see to your needs and wash up, but when you're finished you are to return to the bedroom immediately. You are not to visit any other part of the house. Do you understand?"

She nodded. But she didn't mean it. If she saw an opportunity to escape, she would take it.

Joham left her, striding down the hall to the stairs, and she locked herself in the bathroom. She rushed to the sink and gulped water straight from the faucet before relieving herself. She washed her hands and splashed some water on her face, then turned her attention to more pressing matters.

She had to get out of here.

Joham said his "friends" would be leaving soon . . . maybe she could leave with them. She moved to the window and peeked out, seeing two large delivery trucks parked in front of the house. Maybe she could get to them, stow away in the back of one, and let them drive her back to civilization.

But she would have to hurry. She unlatched the window and pushed it open, leaning out and searching the front of the house for any handholds. She was eyeing a trellis a couple of feet to the right of the window when the bathroom door burst open with a loud bang.

Bella jumped and spun around in time to see Joham stalking toward her, his eyes dark with fury.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demanded, his angry words punctuated by a low, animalistic growl.

"I—I just—I wanted some air . . ."

"Liar!" he hissed. His hand closed over her jaw again, and he shoved her back against the wall. "I have no patience for uncooperative girls, little Bella. You would do well to remember that."

"I'm sorry," she whimpered, her voice trembling in fear. "I'll cooperate, I swear."

He growled again and grabbed a handful of her hair, dragging her back to the bedroom and throwing her roughly on the bed. He took both of her hands and tied them together with one of the ropes that was still secured to the headboard, then turned without another word and left her there.

Bella gasped. He was just so *fast!* No normal person could have done that in a matter of seconds.

She looked toward the window, frustrated at the setback in her plan, but refusing to be beaten just yet. She worked her hands around in the ropes until her fingers could just reach the knots, and she started to pick at them.

They were tight, however, and time was shorter than she had realized. She hadn't made any headway with the ropes when she heard the sounds of the front door opening and heavy footsteps filing out. Truck engines roared to life, then drove away, the noise and Bella's best hope of escape fading into the distance.

She tugged weakly at the knots, trying to ignore the heavy weight that settled in the pit of her stomach.

The door to the bedroom swung open a moment later, and Joham stepped in. He didn't smile at her this time, but he didn't seem to be angry anymore, either. "Come," he said, crossing to the bed and deftly loosening the knots that Bella had been struggling with. "I want to show you the preparations I've made for you."

Bella let him draw her to her feet, and she smoothed the thin fabric of the hospital gown down around her as she followed him out of the bedroom.

He led her down the stairs and into a large room that spanned most of the lower level. A spacious kitchen opened into an airy living room, but what furniture might have been there before had been moved out. In its place stood six low beds, lined up in two rows against opposite walls. Bella recognized them as old-fashioned hospital beds, with rickety iron frames and thin mattresses. Each of the beds had been made up with white sheets and brown felt blankets.

Joham was beaming proudly around the room. "There now, doesn't that look comfortable?" He looked at her, clearly waiting for some kind of praise.

Bella stared at him incredulously. Was he kidding? He had kidnapped her, raped her, tied her to a bed, and now he wanted her *approval*? And for what? Because he was apparently setting up a hospital ward in his living room?

The implications trickled through her mind and she shuddered. Just what did he want with her? Was he some sadistic sociopath who cut out people's organs and sold them on the black market? Was that why he had brought her here? She couldn't help but remember some of the horrific things that she had seen on the crime drama shows that Phil liked to watch, and she was suddenly terrified that prime time fiction was about to become her reality.

Joham growled low in his throat, clearly not pleased by her response. "Children," he muttered darkly. "They grow more ungrateful with every generation." He grabbed her elbow and pushed her roughly to the bed closest to the kitchen, wrenching her arm to keep her on her feet when she stumbled. He reached down next to the bed and came up holding a heavy chain that Bella hadn't realized was there. One end was attached to the iron headboard, and from the other dangled a heavy leather collar.

Bella's eyes widened and she fell back a step, trying to yank her arm out of Joham's grasp. "No," she whimpered. "Please, no."

But her pleas once again fell on deaf ears, and Joham deftly slid the collar around her neck, locking it in place with a small padlock. Bella tugged at it desperately, trying to tear it from her throat. It wasn't tight, but she still felt like the stiff leather was choking her, cutting off her air and leaving her breathless.

"I expect you'll find this more comfortable than being tied down," Joham said tersely.

Bella fell silent. He had a point. Being collared and chained to a bed was as degrading a situation as she could imagine, but it was far less painful than the way she had spent the previous night. She glanced at Joham, who seemed to be waiting for some kind of response, so she nodded.

"Good. Perhaps in time you'll learn to appreciate the consideration I'm giving you, my pet."

Bella lowered herself onto the cot. "Thank you," she whispered, seeing no point in further piquing his temper.

"That's better." He moved into the kitchen, talking over his shoulder as he worked at the counter with something Bella couldn't see. "This is going to be an interesting experiment," he said amiably, all traces of his bad humor gone. "It has the potential to be tedious at times, but I'm confident that the results will be worth the extra effort."

Bella tugged at the collar, trying to put as much space between the leather and her trachea as possible. She was finding the restriction so distracting that she nearly missed it when Joham turned and strode back to her bed carrying a plate of food. She quickly dropped her hands as he settled at the foot of her bed and handed her the plate.

She took it, scanning the offering. Two strips of bacon, several chunks of steamed squash, an orange, peeled and sectioned, a small dish of yogurt, and a slice of buttered toast. It looked surprisingly tempting, even with the butterflies in her stomach, and she picked up the fork and speared a chunk of squash.

Joham's crimson eyes never left her, and she cringed back as she forced herself to eat a bite of her breakfast. His expression warmed as she chewed and swallowed, then took another bite. "There's a good girl," he said. "Eat up. It's very important for you to maintain your strength."

Bella's stomach did a flip, and her mouth suddenly felt as dry as the desert sand outside. She forced back the food she was chewing, having to swallow repeatedly to get it down, and stared in distaste at her breakfast.

"Eat," Joham snapped when she made no move to take another bite.

She nibbled at her toast, but it felt like sandpaper on her tongue. It was only Joham's glare that kept her going, one painstaking bite after another, chewing as little as possible, choking down too-large chunks of food. When she had eaten about half of her meal, she set the plate down on the bed and pushed it away.

A feral snarl erupted from Joham's throat, and Bella shrank back, pressing herself against the metal bars of the headboard.

"I told you to eat," he growled, his lips pulled back from his gleaming white teeth.

Bella looked at the plate again, but she wasn't sure that her quivering stomach would accept any more. "I can't," she protested. "I don't feel good."

"And how do you expect to feel *better* if you don't eat?" Frustration and fury glittered in his eyes as he glared at her.

A terrified sob broke free and she pulled her knees up in front of her. "I just want to go home," she whimpered. "Please, I won't tell anyone anything, I swear. I just want to go home."

"Enough!" Joham jerked the plate out of her hands and snatched a strip of bacon from it, cramming it into her mouth. The sudden move startled her, and she choked and twisted away, trying to spit it back out. He clamped a hand over her mouth and wrestled her down onto her back, pinning her to the mattress with his body. "If you won't eat willingly, you'll be force-fed. I'll not have you jeopardizing my work with your carelessness."

Bella was desperate to know *what* work he was talking about, and what her eating had to do with it, but fear and his hand over her mouth prevented her from asking. Knowing this wasn't a battle she could win, she chewed and swallowed the bacon, praying it wouldn't end up coming right back up again.

As soon as she had swallowed, Joham removed his hand and stuffed an orange wedge into her mouth. He fed her the rest of her breakfast that way, barely waiting until she had swallowed one bite before forcing another on her. When the plate was empty he let her up and carried it into the kitchen.

Bella massaged her aching jaw, feeling the tender spots where his fingers had dug into her flesh. She was sure they would turn into bruises before long, much like the ones he had left on her body the night before. She pulled the thin pillow into her lap and hugged it tightly, drawing her knees up again.

She hoped that Joham would leave her alone now that he had gotten his way, but he returned to her bed again, his hand reaching out to smooth down her mussed hair.

"You must learn to obey me," he said, his voice tinged with regret. "I don't like hurting you. It's unnecessary and counter-productive. You must stay as healthy as you can, for as long as you can."

Fear prickled down her spine once again. For as long as she could? What did that mean?

"My parents don't have money," she said in a tremulous voice. "They can't pay a ransom or . . ." she swallowed hard. "Or anything."

Joham reached out to stroke her cheek. "Sweet Bella, I don't want money from you. I can get that whenever I wish."

"What *do* you want?"

"You," he said with a tender smile. "You should be flattered. You've been chosen to be a part of an experiment that will change the world."

She swallowed back her fear and pressed for more information. "What kind of experiment? What do you want from me?"

"It's very simple. I want you to grow my child."

For a moment, his odd phrasing threw her off, but when the meaning settled in on her she gave a violent start. "Your—you want me to get *pregnant*?" Her voice broke under the weight of her incredulity. "I can't get pregnant!"

He arched an eyebrow, his eyes going cold and hard. "Do you have some sort of medical condition that would prevent it?"

"No, I just—I can't!" She scrambled off the bed, backing toward the kitchen, only stopping when the chain that tethered her to the bed went taut. "I'm only sixteen! I'm still in high school, I have to get home!"

Joham's smile returned. "You no longer need to worry about silly things like school, my dear. I have lifted you up above the mundanity of your race. You are to have the great distinction of giving birth

to a little god or goddess, a child who will alter the course of history."

"But I don't want to!" she cried, tugging desperately at the chain. "I just want to go home. Please, let me go home."

"Hush, now." Joham reached out and grabbed the chain, drawing her back to the bed despite her frantic attempts to keep away from him. "I have a deep reverence for each woman who forfeits her own life to give rise to a better one. Your sacrifice will be remembered always."

"S-sacrifice?" Bella stuttered, the fight draining out of her.

"That's right." He pulled her closer, gripping the chain where it connected to her collar and dragging her back onto the bed. "We will do all we can to keep you healthy and comfortable while the child grows, but I'm afraid the delivery is simply too much for a fragile human body to bear. The birth of the child will require you to pay the last farthing."

A sob escaped her throat as she tried to jerk out of his grip again. "Please don't do this," she begged. "I just want to go home. Please!"

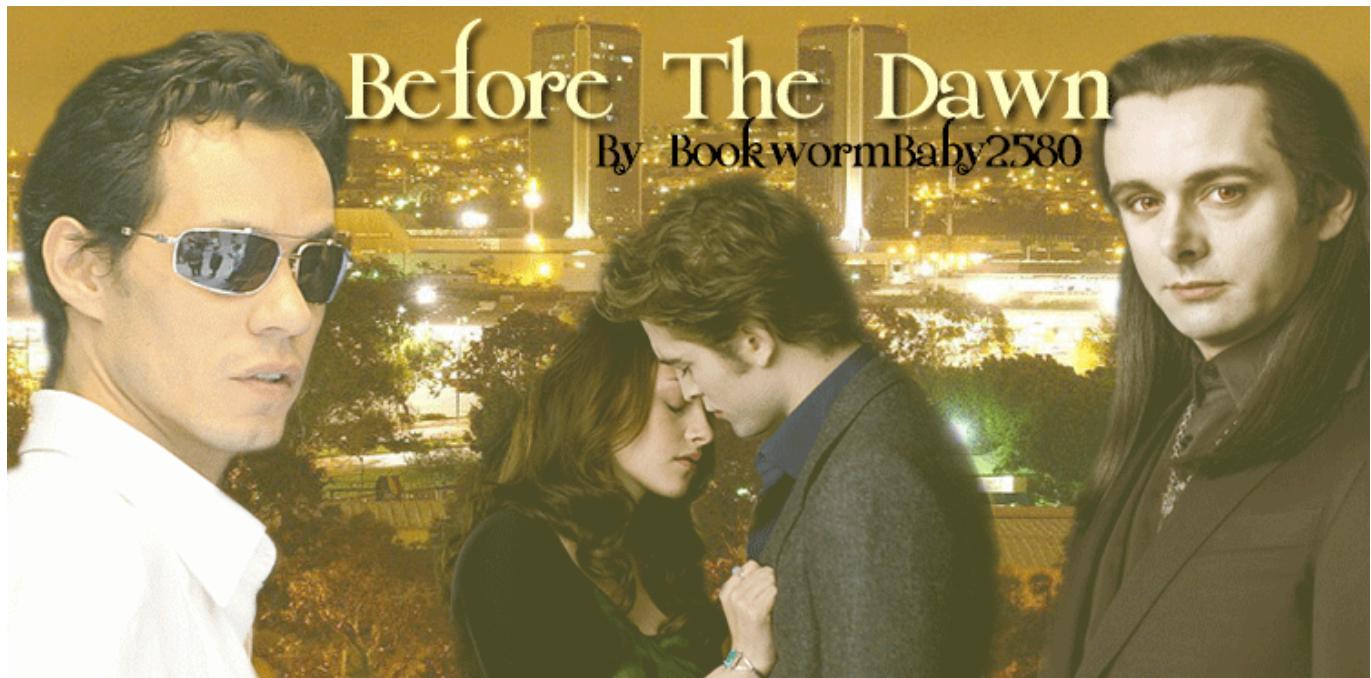
"This is your home, now." He let his gaze sweep over her body, and he held her close by the collar as he let his free hand slide from her thigh to her hip, carrying the fabric of the hospital gown with it.

"No!" She tried to squirm away, but he pushed her back down onto the bed and rolled on top of her, trapping her beneath him. His hands roamed her body beneath her shift and he forced her legs apart with his knees. She screamed and clawed at him, fighting desperately for her life, but her struggles were too weak to make any impression on him. He unzipped his pants and pushed himself inside of her, heedless of her efforts to resist him.

It was even more painful than the first time had been. Bella was still bruised and raw from his rough treatment of her the night before, and his body was as hard and unforgiving as ever. She sobbed and begged him to stop, pleading with him not to hurt her anymore, not to kill her. But Joham continued doggedly, whispering softly in her ear about what a privilege it would be to carry his child and how he would always honor her memory. When he was finished with her he kissed her sweetly and tucked her blankets around her, then disappeared up the stairs and left her alone on the bed.

Bella turned on her side and stared out the window beside her bed. The sky was cloudless and empty, too blue in the light of a sun that shone too brightly. She prayed for a storm, for dark thunderclouds to roll in and make the world outside as bleak as the desolation inside of her. But no god answered her prayer, and when her exhaustion dragged her down into fitful dreams, the sun still shone, bright and merciless, on the harsh Mexican desert.

The Devil's Daughter



Before The Dawn

By BookwormBaby2580

Bella was surprised by how quickly horror could morph into boredom. Four days had passed since she had met Joham in the bar, and there was little to break up the long hours of nothingness. Three times a day, Joham brought her food. After breakfast and dinner she was subjected to the agony of his attempts to get her pregnant, and after lunch he would take her upstairs to the bathroom to shower. She would have taken her time there, scrubbing herself raw with the dried-up bar of soap, except that Joham apparently didn't trust her enough to leave her alone. He stayed in the bathroom, watching her wash through the frosted glass of the shower door, and that was enough motivation for Bella to get through the process as quickly as possible.

Four days. At least, she thought it was four days. But the hours of mind-numbing boredom were starting to run together. Excepting the times she was released to shower or use the bathroom, she spent all day, every day, tethered to her bed. The chain gave her about six feet of leeway, letting her get no further than the foot of her bed. If she contorted herself into some uncomfortable positions, she could move to sit on the cot next to hers. She could sit on the floor. She could stare out the window.

But that was pretty much it. There was no television, no music, no reading material, nothing to occupy her mind. She spent much of her day trying to think of anything other than the fact that she was going to die.

Four days. She was pretty sure. But it made her nervous that she wasn't completely sure. She was starting to understand why prisoners in movies scratched out hash marks on the walls. She felt a morbid compulsion to count down the days she had left in her life. At best, it had to be somewhere around a year, and that was if she didn't get pregnant right away. But what if she lost count of the days? What if death came when she thought she still had time? The idea made her chest tighten in fear, and she rolled onto her stomach and reached through the metal bars of the bedframe to scratch four hash marks into the wall with her thumb nail.

One year, if she was lucky. She'd have to start again with nine months, after she found out that she was pregnant. Or maybe eight months. She didn't want to be taken by surprise. She wanted to be

ready.

But how could a person ever really be ready to die?

She rolled onto her back again and stared at the ceiling. Her hair was still wet from her shower, which helped cool her down in the heat of the day, but pretty soon the afternoon sun would be at just the right angle to shine down on her through the window, and she would have to move to the floor to escape it. It was too hot here. The house had a swamp cooler that Joham had turned on when he had noticed her sweating the day before, but it was all the way in the kitchen, and swamp coolers only did so much to fight the oppressive desert heat.

She was tired of the sun.

She pulled at the light fabric of the hospital gown, peeling it away from her sticky skin. Joham had seemed almost surprised when her clothes had started to smell of sweat, and had left the house for several hours that morning, returning with a large box filled with folded hospital gowns. Bella tried not to think about how many of them there were, just as she tried not to think about the other beds in the room, or where Joham disappeared to at night. There were a lot of things she tried not to think about.

Instead, she tried to picture what her mother was seeing. A stately cruise ship, the deep blue waves of the ocean, lavish meals, the bright colors of the port cities, and Phil, a man who loved her more than anyone else in the world.

That, Bella decided, was her biggest regret. She had never loved anyone that way, had never felt the flutter of anticipation in her stomach when she caught sight of a boy. And now she would never get the opportunity. She was going to die here in this house, probably without ever seeing another boy her age again.

Which was another thing she didn't want to think about.

She wondered if her mother had tried to call her yet. She wondered if she was at all worried not to get an answer. Probably not. It had only been four days, after all. Renée was a worrier, but she was also easily distracted. It was entirely possible that she would go the entire two weeks without even checking to see if she had cell service at any of the ports. Bella had been prepared not to hear from her at all.

A knot formed in her stomach every time she thought of her mother coming home to an empty house. What would she think had happened? Would she assume Bella had run away? Been injured? How long would it take her to track down the car abandoned in the parking lot in Tijuana? Or would she be able to? Bella didn't know anything about law enforcement in Mexico. Whether they had the resources to search for abandoned vehicles or whether they were willing to work with American police. In fact, it was possible that her car had been stolen or towed, and what then? No one would have any idea where to start searching for her.

And even if they did, it was unlikely that they would find her out here in the middle of the desert, far away from the site of her initial bad decision. The guilt and regret over her impulsiveness made her stomach twist painfully, and it was all she could do to choke back the bile that rose up in her throat.

This was her own fault. She deserved this.

Tears pricked at her eyes, but she fought them back, too. She had done her share of crying over the last few days, but it always seemed to put Joham in a bad mood to hear it—and he *always* heard it. He didn't spend a lot of time in the room with her when he wasn't feeding her or . . . doing other things. But if she started crying, she could pretty much guarantee herself a lecture from him about her lack of gratitude, laced with veiled threats about how much less comfortable things could be for her.

So she couldn't cry, and she couldn't throw up, and she couldn't hope for rescue, and she couldn't let her thoughts dwell on the reality of her situation. There wasn't much she *could* do. She tugged at the collar around her neck, chafing again at the closeness of it, the feeling that it *should* be cutting off her breath, even though it wasn't. She would trade everything she owned to be tethered by her wrist or her ankle rather than this torturous collar.

But why stop there? As long as she was fantasizing, why not dream up a story worth the effort? Like, maybe some handsome stranger would happen across this house in the desert and discover her plight . . .

She spent the rest of the afternoon imagining the daring exploits of her nameless, faceless hero, until Joham came downstairs to make dinner. He was practically glowing with pleasure, and he carried on a one-sided conversation with Bella as he pulled dishes out of the cupboards and started preparing her food.

"We're going to have visitors tomorrow," he said, his voice bright with excitement. "My children. I can't wait for you to meet them. You'll see right away how remarkable they are, and then you'll understand that the work we're doing is worth the little inconveniences."

His callousness barely fazed her. She was getting used to his dismissive attitude toward her. After all, a girl could only be shocked over her death being referred to as an inconvenience so many times before the shock wouldn't come anymore.

"You're going to love my girls," he went on, setting something in a microwave and turning it on. "They're stunningly beautiful, and all so clever and delightful. They're my greatest work—aside from my son, of course. Nahuel. He has been reluctant to join me in the past, but I'm sure he'll change his tune once he hears what I have planned."

Bella sat up and drew her knees up to her chest. Having Joham's creepy family here didn't sound like a good thing, but there was only so much horror a person could absorb and she was at capacity. It might even be an improvement to have his kids around. Maybe they would take Joham's attention off of her, or possibly provide some distraction from the mind-numbing monotony of her days. Maybe they'd even turn out to be half sane and convince Joham to let her go, though she wasn't about to get her hopes up. If he was inviting them over, they were probably just like him.

"I particularly think you'll like my youngest daughter," Joham was saying, chattering on despite Bella's lack of response. "I imagine the two of you will have a lot in common. You even look a little bit alike, with your brown hair and American coloring —though, of course, my Jennifer is much prettier. She was born in 1991, so I suppose that makes her a few years younger than you, doesn't it?"

So one of the kids would be a young teenager, she thought, rocking back and forth in an unconscious search for comfort. She wondered idly how old the others were. They couldn't be much older than twenty, she figured, assuming she was right in her estimation of Joham's age.

Somehow she didn't find it comforting that there would be more people her age in the house — particularly the son he had mentioned.

But again, she couldn't get worked up about it.

The microwave beeped and Joham retrieved the plate from inside, quickly adding a few things to it before carrying it over to Bella's bed. She accepted it wordlessly and forced down the food, letting her mind drift back to her fantasies of rescue to try and block out what was going to happen next.

Joham disappeared at sundown that night, as usual, and as usual, Bella lay awake in bed. She was suffering from insomnia lately, no doubt brought on by long days of occasional naps and no physical exertion. The nights were cooler than the days, at least, but she would have preferred to be able to sleep away the hours. Day *and* night. And yet, at the same time, she felt a panicky desperation at the thought that the last days of her life were slipping by her, wasted in a haze of boredom. At times she thought she might as well be dead already, and even almost wished for it. But there was a spark inside of her that still vehemently rejected the idea of giving in, and so she clung to her life, such as it was, and grew anxious and short of breath when she imagined the diminishing sands in her hourglass.

Several hours after Joham had disappeared, he returned, this time leading a dark-haired girl who seemed to be a year or two older than Bella. At first she wondered if this was one of the daughters he had told her about, but the way he touched her told a different story. He ushered the girl upstairs without turning on the lights, and though she didn't fight him the way Bella had, Bella got the distinct impression that their circumstances weren't very different. She tried to tune out the noises that drifted down to her from the room above, but it became difficult once the girl started screaming.

Bella understood. Joham had a tendency to be a little rough. She turned her head into her pillow and wrapped it around her ears, trying to shut out the reality of the situation. It was better if she didn't think about it.

Several minutes later, Joham dragged the sobbing, struggling girl back down the stairs and over to the cot next to Bella's. She was already wearing a hospital gown, and was quickly fitted with a thick brown collar like Bella's while Joham lectured her sharply in Spanish. He disappeared back up the stairs when he was finished with whatever he had to say, and the girl huddled on the bed, sniffling and staring at Bella.

Bella stared back blankly. She had been right, she thought, though without any sense of satisfaction. This girl was just like her.

The girl asked a question that Bella didn't understand, and when she got no response she asked again.

Bella heaved a heavy sigh. "I don't speak Spanish," she muttered.

The girl lowered here eyes and fell silent. After a few moments she clasped her hands and started to whisper to herself, and Bella realized that she was praying. Much the way she herself had done. She wanted to point out to the girl that praying wouldn't do her any good—or at least, it hadn't done Bella any good. But even if they had spoken a common language, she doubted she would have said anything. She didn't want to know this girl. What was the point? They were both going to die soon anyway.

On the other hand, maybe this was all she had left to do with her life. Maybe passing up the chance to get to know her was essentially wasting the time she had left.

But it was a moot point. They didn't speak the same language, and Bella couldn't bring herself to care all that much. She turned over on the bed, tugging uselessly at her heavy collar, and stared out the window at the starry sky.

Joham was in high spirits the following morning. He chattered happily at Bella and her new companion, alternating between English and Spanish, as he prepared breakfast for the two of them. He watched them both to make sure they ate, much of his attention focused on the new girl, who was less than cooperative. Bella ate her food silently and tried to ignore Joham as much as he could. She didn't even look at him when he sat next to her and stroked her hair while he said something in Spanish, clearly showing her off to the newcomer as an example of proper behavior.

I've been well-trained, Bella thought darkly, and she tugged again at her collar.

Once both girls had finished eating, Joham carried the dishes to the kitchen and returned to Bella's bedside. She had a brief moment of panic, wondering if he was going to force her right there in front of the other girl, but he simply unlocked her collar and slipped it off, taking her by the arm. Relieved that they wouldn't have an audience, she let him steer her up the stairs and into the bedroom where she had spent her first night. Joham untied her gown and slipped it off of her, and Bella stared studiously at the ceiling as he guided her down onto the bed.

"Poor, sad girl," Joham murmured, brushing a lock of hair back from her face. "You really should learn to enjoy this, my pet. It can be quite pleasurable, if you allow it to be."

Bella swallowed back her disgust but didn't answer. It was just easier not to say anything.

He sighed, and his fingers slipped between her legs to tease a reaction from her body. "Ah, well. At least you've learned to be more cooperative. I can't tell me how much your obedience pleases me."

She wished he would just get it over with, but he seemed determined to take his time today. She tilted her head back and stared at the vibrant blue sky beyond the window while Joham settled on top of her and murmured unacknowledged words of encouragement in her ear.

When he was finished, when fresh bruises marred her skin on top of the older, yellowing ones, he took her back downstairs and replaced her collar. She looked pointedly away as he moved to the new girl's bedside and removed her collar. The girl cried and fought all the way up the stairs, and screamed loudly throughout her ordeal.

Bella wrapped the pillow around her head again, trying to block out the noise.

Joham stayed downstairs with the girls throughout the day, pacing the length of the living room, pausing now and again to straighten picture frames that weren't crooked or adjust the position of a piece of furniture. He didn't approach Bella or the new girl often, and when he did it was mostly innocent, simply beaming down at them or gracing them with a pat on the head.

Bella was actually glad he was there. His occasional bursts of one-sided conversation made the hours pass a little bit faster, and kept her from having to pay too much attention to . . . *her*. The new

girl. Who was going to die, just like Bella was. She didn't know how to handle that, so she just didn't.

Lunch passed, and the girls were fed and allowed a shower and a change of clothes. Bella escaped the sunlight from the window by slipping to the floor and watching it as it crept its way across the room. She was staring, unfocused, through where the patch of light fell across the floor the first time Joham stepped across it, and she started violently when a bright flash left her momentarily blinded. Her eyes snapped into focus and followed Joham across the room, and she looked him over, searching for a watch or a piece of jewelry that might have reflected the sun back at her. She saw nothing. It wasn't important, exactly, but with the complete absence of anything that could hold her attention, the mild curiosity of the flash of light was something Bella desperately needed to explore.

Joham turned and paced back the way he had come, and once again a flash of light was flung back at Bella, though she still couldn't determine the source. It wasn't until his third pass, when he allowed himself to step more fully into the light, that she realized that the light was reflecting off of the bare skin of his arm, his flesh glittering and sparkling in the sunlight as though it were encrusted with diamonds.

She gaped at him, and glanced quickly at the girl next to her, who was also staring at Joham with round eyes. She looked Bella's way, and the two of them locked eyes for a moment before Bella turned away.

This was further evidence to support her belief that Joham was something *else*—though she didn't know what. Some kind of alien, was her best guess. She had never been one to give much credence to UFO sightings and government conspiracy theories, but she didn't know that she had much choice now. Whatever this strange man was, he wasn't human. Human skin didn't refract light.

The girl next to her burst into tears and started praying again, and Joham frowned at her. His mood was growing darker as the day wore on, and Bella hissed sharply at the girl, trying to shut her up so she wouldn't make things worse. The girl didn't fall silent, but she did drop her voice to a whisper, and Joham resumed his pacing.

Dinner came and went. Joham was rough and impatient. The new girl screamed louder than ever.

By the time the moon was high in the sky, Joham was snarling to himself. His expected visitors had not arrived, and he was furious. He still didn't retreat up the stairs, but stomped around the house grumbling to himself and adjusting the positions of the bed until they all had exactly the same distance between them. His obsessive straightening reminded Bella of a nervous habit—not unlike her own, which had resulted in her nails being bitten down to the quick.

Finally, as the Eastern sky was just beginning to lighten, something seemed to grab Joham's attention. He spun toward the door and stalked to it, throwing it open and staring out across the dark desert. He smiled, apparently pleased with what he was seeing, and he stood still and unmoving for several minutes.

Eventually, Bella heard the sound of a car engine approaching the house. She pulled the felt blanket up over her shoulders and huddled beneath it, trying to make herself as small as possible. Another couple of minutes passed, and then Bella heard the sound of the car parking outside, followed by footsteps on the porch.

"My Serena," Joham said warmly. He stepped outside to greet his guest, and Bella heard a feminine voice answer him. They exchanged pleasantries and Joham invited the visitor inside.

Bella couldn't help but sneak a peak. The woman who stepped into the house was exquisite, if somewhat intimidating. Long raven hair fell down her back in soft waves, and dark eyebrows that were a more delicate copy of Joham's arched over icy blue eyes. She was fair, but her skin held a healthy glow rather than mirroring Joham's deathly pallor. She surveyed the room, her disdainful gaze lingering on Bella and her companion for a moment before Joham drew her attention back to himself.

"Where are the others?" he asked, his voice polite and expectant. "Was there a delay? I expected you hours ago."

Serena's stance tensed, one hand bracing on a curvaceous hip. "They're not coming."

Joham's smile froze on his face. "Excuse me?"

"Maysun says this is a bad time for her, and Jennifer isn't interested in being a part of your experiments."

Bella cringed at the stormy look on Joham's face.

"And Nahuel?" he asked tersely.

"I couldn't find him."

A feral snarl ripped from Joham's throat, and Serena rushed to defend herself. "I could have kept trying, but then I would have been even later. Besides, I got the impression that he was taking great pains not to be found. I didn't think he would be interested in anything I had to say."

Joham ground his teeth, but drew in a deep breath to calm himself. "You'll just have to go back. Summon *all* of your siblings, and this time don't take no for an answer."

"I'm not going back." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I could coax and wheedle, I could even drag them all here by their hair, but they'd only end up being more of a burden than a boon."

"I *must* have them here—my other daughters, at the very least."

"Oh, let them alone." Serena dropped her defensive stance and waved her hand dismissively. "They're a couple of bubble-headed girls who care more about fashion than science."

"They will learn—"

"But they don't want to. Forget them. I'll help you with whatever you need, just like I've always done."

Joham smiled proudly at her. "Yes, my Serena. You've always been the most loyal of my children. But the work I have for us may be more than two can handle."

"We'll start," she said decisively. "When Maysun and Jennifer see what we're doing they'll realize that it's smarter to join us."

"And Nahuel?"

Serena pursed her lips, and Bella got the impression that she didn't particularly care for this Nahuel. "You don't need him. If we're successful—*when* we're successful—you'll have so many children that you won't even notice his absence."

Her words seemed to appease Joham, and he smiled. "My faithful daughter. You are such a treasure."

She gave him a perfunctory kiss on his cheek and pulled back. "So. Only two so far?"

Joham turned a smile on Bella and her companion. "Yes, so far. I'm being very careful not to draw attention to what we're doing. The last thing I need is those meddlesome Volturi poking around."

Serena eyed the girls and gave a disapproving sniff. "They're young."

"Youth is strength, my dear. Your mother was only seventeen."

"Are either of them pregnant yet?"

"It's too soon to tell. It hasn't been a week since I discovered my Bella, and I only acquired Yesenia last night."

Bella glanced at the girl next to her. Yesenia. She was sleeping, and hadn't stirred at the sound of her name. Bella looked away from her and tried not to think of her. She didn't want to know her.

Serena's eyes met Bella's briefly. "So she's the one who set all this in motion, is she?"

Joham moved to sit on Bella's bed and stroked her hair fondly. "She is. My little flower. I simply couldn't pass her up."

"Why? What makes her so special?"

"Her scent." Joham leaned close to Bella and breathed deeply. "I've rarely come across one so sweet. She'll bear me a son, I'm sure of it."

Serena's expression soured. "You know, usually when one of your kind comes across a particularly inviting scent, he drinks. Only you would smell sweet blood and decide you need to impregnate the source."

Joham laughed good-naturedly, still playing with Bella's hair. "I do have a few odd habits, don't I? But it's worth it for this one."

"You're not getting attached, are you, father?"

"I always do. How could I help it? These sweet, brave girls, offering themselves as noble sacrifices to bear my children."

Bella tried to make herself even smaller. She certainly wasn't *offering* anything, but that didn't seem to matter to Joham.

"Hmph. Sentimental fool." Serena maintained a haughty, impassive look for a few seconds, but then she caught Joham's eye and allowed a small smile. "Let's hope this son you've got your heart set on turns out to be more cooperative than Nahuel."

Joham patted Bella's head and rose. "Why don't you show me what you've brought to help me with my work?"

"Let me get my bag." She darted outside and returned much too quickly, carrying a large suitcase. She placed it on the floor in the kitchen and Joham joined her.

Bella's curiosity once again got the better of her, and she rolled over to face them.

Serena had the suitcase open on the floor, and she pulled out a complicated looking electronic device. "This is a fertility monitor," she said, placing it on the island. "It will help you determine when your girls are most likely to conceive."

"Serena, darling, these technological toys take all the fun out of the process," Joham said with a laugh.

"The take a lot of the risk out of it as well." She tossed him a saccharine sweet smile. "You do get carried away every now and then, father. You wouldn't want to put precious little Bella in harm's way more than absolutely necessary, would you?"

"Fine, fine. We'll do it your way." He patted his daughter's shoulder affectionately.

She just smirked and pulled out several boxes of over-the-counter pregnancy tests. "We'll obviously need plenty of these . . . and some vitamin B6 to enhance fertility." Several bottles joined the pregnancy tests on the counter.

"Did you bring anything for after the children are born?"

"Of course. My car is full of learning toys and puzzle books. But let's get them conceived first, shall we?"

She turned to face Joham, propping one hand on her hip. "Why now, father? Was it really just this girl's scent that motivated you to act, or is there something else?"

"Can't you feel it?" he asked, cupping his daughter's chin in his hand. "The winds of change are blowing. Pluto is in retrograde and the Venusian transit is mere weeks away—"

Serena snorted and Joham frowned.

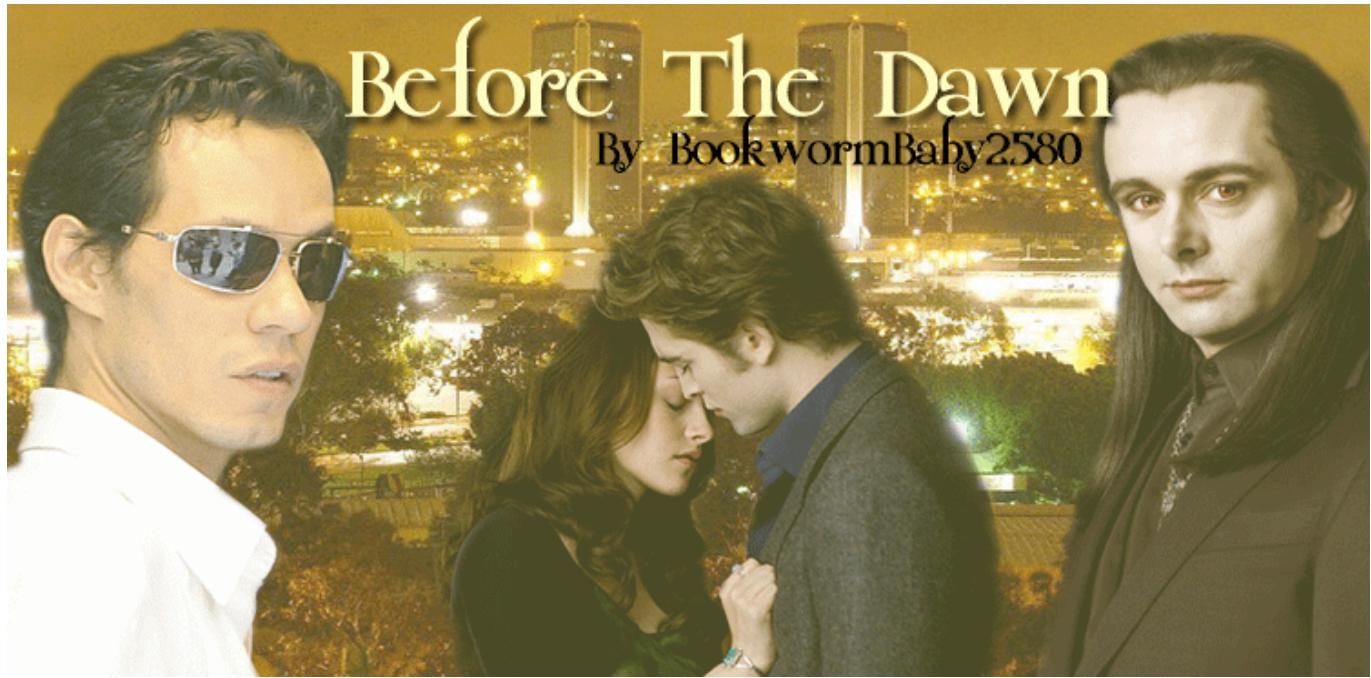
"Don't let your modern trinkets distract you from the ancient sciences." He gestured to the items she had set out on the island. "These are convenient, but the truly great minds of the world have understood that the stars hold power that the inventions of silly little humans can never rival."

Serena rolled her eyes. "You watch the stars and I'll watch my fertility monitor, and we'll see which one yields better results."

Joham clucked his tongue disapprovingly, but he couldn't keep the affection out of his voice. "Still so much to learn, after all these years." He kissed the top of his daughter's head and took her hand. "Come, my dear. Show me these toys you've brought for your brothers and sisters."

The two of them headed out the door again, and Bella watched them go with a heavy sense of foreboding.

Scratches on the Wall



Bella's routine changed a little with Joham's daughter in the house. The morning after Serena's arrival, she unlocked Bella's collar and grabbed her arm, steering her roughly to the bathroom. "Here," she said, thrusting a plastic cup at Bella. "Fill it to the line."

Bella stared at the cup and then looked back up at Serena. "What?"

"Are you stupid? Pee in the cup." She gave Bella a shove into the bathroom and crossed her arms over her chest, waiting for her orders to be obeyed.

It was humiliating—even more so than being watched by Joham every day, though Bella couldn't quite put her finger on why. She awkwardly positioned the cup and filled it as directed, leaving it by the sink so Serena could do whatever she was planning to do with it. She finished up and scrubbed her hands, then followed Serena back to the cot and allowed herself to be locked up again.

Serena repeated the process with Yesenia, though she didn't seem quite as impatient or condescending with the other girl. Bella wasn't sure what she had done to earn Serena's ire, but it made her uncomfortable. She had submitted wordlessly to countless indignities in order to protect herself against Joham's temper, but she couldn't see how to earn Serena's good favor. Just the fact that she was trying was aggravating, but her self-preservation instinct had kicked in and she couldn't help but search for ways to win her captors' approval.

Breakfast was served with a vitamin B supplement that morning, and though Serena cooked it, Joham made an appearance to coax Yesenia into eating. She was being particularly stubborn this morning, and it wasn't long before his coaxing turned into a much more violent affair, with Joham pinning her hands down with his knees while he forced the food into her mouth. Bella turned away and ate in silence. She didn't like seeing this girl do all the same things that she herself had done. She didn't like thinking about how alike they were.

When he was finished with the force-feeding, Joham carried Yesenia's dishes into the kitchen and watched while Serena cleaned up. "Well?" he said. "What did the fertility monitors tell you?"

"Yesenia's hormone levels are low. You can leave her alone for a few days."

"And Bella's?"

Serena looked over her shoulder, shooting Bella a narrow-eyed smirk. "Hers are quite high. She's not ovulating yet, but she will be soon. I would continue on as you have been."

"Thank you, my dear." He kissed the top of her head and then moved to Bella's bedside, releasing her collar. "Come, little dove. We mustn't waste our opportunities."

Bella used her usual coping mechanism to get through the ordeal, trying to think of anything except what had become her new reality. It was getting more difficult, though. Serena's talk of hormones and ovulation had made it all seem so inevitable. She was going to get pregnant, which meant she was going to die. That was a hard thought not to dwell on.

The news seemed to excite Joham, however, which meant that he finished quickly. A small mercy. He guided Bella back downstairs and locked her up again, then started discussing fertility indicators with Serena.

Bella rolled onto her stomach and scratched a sixth line into the wall.

Two tally marks later, Joham returned before dawn carrying a blonde girl over his shoulder. She was unconscious when he carried her upstairs, but that didn't last long. Bella heard the screams starting, closely followed by quiet whimpering from the bed next to her. She tried to tune out both of them, but she wasn't doing a very good job of it. The curtain of numbness she had been hiding behind seemed to be getting thinner, and she found herself sympathizing with the other girls. They hadn't asked for this any more than she had.

She rolled over in bed and looked at Yesenia, trying to convey understanding with her eyes. She wasn't sure if Yesenia ever stopped crying long enough to notice.

It wasn't long before Joham was escorting the sniffling blonde down the stairs and into the living room. He murmured ineffectual words of comfort as he guided her to the bed across from Bella's. She screamed and tried to run when he produced the collar, but she was no match for his superior strength, and soon she was tethered to the bed just like Bella and Yesenia.

One of us, Bella thought darkly.

As soon as Joham had disappeared up the stairs again, the blonde turned wild eyes on her companions. "What the hell is this?" she demanded.

Bella sat up, running a hand through her tangled hair. "It's where you're going to spend the rest of your life," she said bitterly. "Joham wants us to get pregnant, and apparently, having his babies will kill us. Welcome to hell."

The girl gaped at her in horror, and for a moment, Bella felt bad for her cold words. But then the girl's horror morphed into crazed laughter, and Bella just stared at her, perplexed.

"Pregnant?" she laughed, sounding a little hysterical. "That's going to be a little hard, considering I just got my depo shot."

Bella was trying to process what that meant for the new girl when Joham came thundering down the step, his red eyes burning with rage. He stalked over to the blonde and grabbed the chain at the base of her throat, dragging her to her feet.

"The depo shot?" he hissed, his icy voice sending chills down Bella's spine. "You introduced chemicals into your body, to alter your natural processes and prevent yourself from carrying a child?"

She gaped at him, wide-eyed, her entire body trembling in fear.

"Answer me!" Joham yelled.

"Yes," she whispered.

He roared his rage and grabbed her collar, ripping through the heavy leather as though it were paper. He tossed it aside and grabbed the girl by her hair, yanking her head back roughly. Bella cringed as she heard a sharp crack and saw the girl's body go limp. Joham caught her before she could fall and lunged for her neck, his teeth sinking into the pale flesh.

Bella stared in horror as the girl's body convulsed. She barely registered Yesenia's screaming, consumed by her own shock and rising panic. Joham, this alien, this . . . *monster* . . . was *drinking her blood*. Her own hands flew to her throat, clutching the leather collar that covered it, and for once she was actually happy to have it. It offered her no real protection, as she had just seen, but somehow it felt less frightening to have her neck covered.

The girl's body dropped from Joham's grasp, pale and lifeless, and he turned his wild eyes on the screaming Yesenia. She shrieked louder at the sight of his blood-stained lips, leaping off of her bed and scrambling underneath it. Bella watched, frozen in terror as Joham leapt forward, but suddenly Serena was there, blocking his path and shoving him back.

"Father, stop!" she yelled. "Get yourself under control! If you kill all of them you'll have to start from scratch."

For a moment Bella thought Joham was going to attack Serena, but then the snarling subsided and he composed himself with apparent difficulty. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stared at the blood, breathing heavily.

"Go get cleaned up," Serena said calmly. "I'll take care of the body."

Joham turned without a word and stalked upstairs. Serena strode over to the lifeless blonde, grabbing her around the waist and hoisting her up in an awkward grip. She carried her through a door in the back corner of the kitchen, kicking it closed behind her and leaving Bella and Yesenia alone.

Bella stared down at the girl, who was still cowering beneath the bed, sobbing wildly. She wasn't really seeing Yesenia, though. It was Joham she was seeing through fear-clouded eyes. She had already deduced that he was something unearthly, unnatural . . . but he had actually *killed* that girl in cold blood. Not only that, he had *eaten* her . . . sort of. It was simply too awful for her to take in. She was being held prisoner by some kind of alien who drank blood.

Goose bumps skittered down her back and she pulled the blanket up to her shoulders, suddenly shivering.

Joham came downstairs after a moment, and Bella shrank back against the headboard of her bed. Joham noticed the movement, and he moved over to sit next to her, reaching out to stroke her hair.

Bella curled into a tight ball, and she wasn't able to stifle the terrified sob that broke from her throat. Cold hands closed over her shoulders, dragging her closer to the monster, and he held her in what she guessed was supposed to be a comforting embrace.

"There, there, little dove," he murmured, patting her cheek with the hand that had snapped a girl's neck only minutes ago. "You don't have to be afraid . . ." He trailed off, and his hand moved to her hair, gripping it and pulling her head back sharply. "Unless you've also soiled your body with those filthy chemicals."

"No!" she gasped, wincing from pain and from the fetid smell of blood on his breath. "I've never—I've never taken any kind of birth control."

"No, of course not." He released her hair and his touch turned affectionate again. "Not my sweet little Bella. You would never do anything so vile, would you?"

She shook her head, relieved that he didn't seem interested in going for her throat. After a couple of minutes he released her and knelt on the floor, reaching under Yesenia's bed and rubbing her arm gently. He spoke to her in Spanish, and when he received a negative response from her he rose, looking satisfied.

"Such good girls," he said, more to himself than anyone else, then strode out the back door after Serena.

Serena collected urine samples from Bella and Yesenia each morning. When there were ten tally marks scratched into the wall above Bella's bed, she began using the samples to test for pregnancy as well as hormone levels.

When there were fourteen tally marks on the wall, Bella thought of her mother. She and Phil would be coming home today, and they would find the house empty. There would be no sign of Bella anywhere. There would be confusion, then concern, then panic, as her mother tried to find out where she was. Bella wondered how long it would take her to start calling Charlie, or the police, or local hospitals, and whether they would ever find Renée's abandoned car. She wondered how long it would be before they gave up the search.

When there were fifteen tally marks on the wall, Serena told Joham that he should start trying with Yesenia again. She also turned a cold smile on Bella.

"And this one is at peak hormone production," she said with barely-veiled malice. "You might want to spend a little *extra* time with her."

That was the signal for three days of absolute hell for Bella. During the daytime, when he was at the house, Joham sought her out every two or three hours, dragging her upstairs and pinning her to the bed. He was eager and enthusiastic when he took her, which translated to deeper bruising, aching joints, and raw, tender skin. He was merciless with her, no matter how she begged him, no matter how much she complained he was hurting her. He simply told her the reward would be worth the pain and continued with his rough treatment of her.

When there were twenty-two tally marks on the wall, Joham brought home a new girl. She was another blonde, younger than the last one had been, closer to Bella's age. Serena had come around to Joham's way of thinking in that matter, after the last girl. Younger girls were less likely to be on birth control, she surmised, and now she approved of his selections.

Bella didn't have to explain what was happening this time. Joham sat with the distressed girl, holding her and stroking her hair, heedless of her shuddering sobs. He explained what he wanted of her, just as he had for Bella, sending her into hysterics as she begged to be let go.

Bella turned away and cried silently.

The morning Bella scratched her twenty-third tally mark into the wall, something went wrong. After finishing with Bella and Yesenia, Joham had taken the new girl upstairs for her turn. Her screams had been loud and violent to start with, but they got worse and worse—and then suddenly stopped. A few minutes later, Joham appeared downstairs, carrying her limp body over his shoulder. He strode across the room, his face a stormy mask, and disappeared out the back door.

Bella never saw the girl again.

When there were twenty-eight tally marks on the wall, Serena called Joham into the kitchen after testing the urine samples she had collected that morning.

"Success!" she trilled, holding up one of the home tests she had brought with her. "Bella is pregnant!"

Bella's stomach lurched, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to keep from throwing up.

Joham laughed happily and caught his daughter up in an excited hug before turning to Bella. "My sweet, precious girl," he said, beaming at her. "I can't tell you how proud I am of you." He moved to sit on her bed, gathering her up into his arms. Bella allowed it, partly because she knew fighting him wouldn't get her anywhere, and partly because the chill of his body was a welcome relief against the oppressive desert heat.

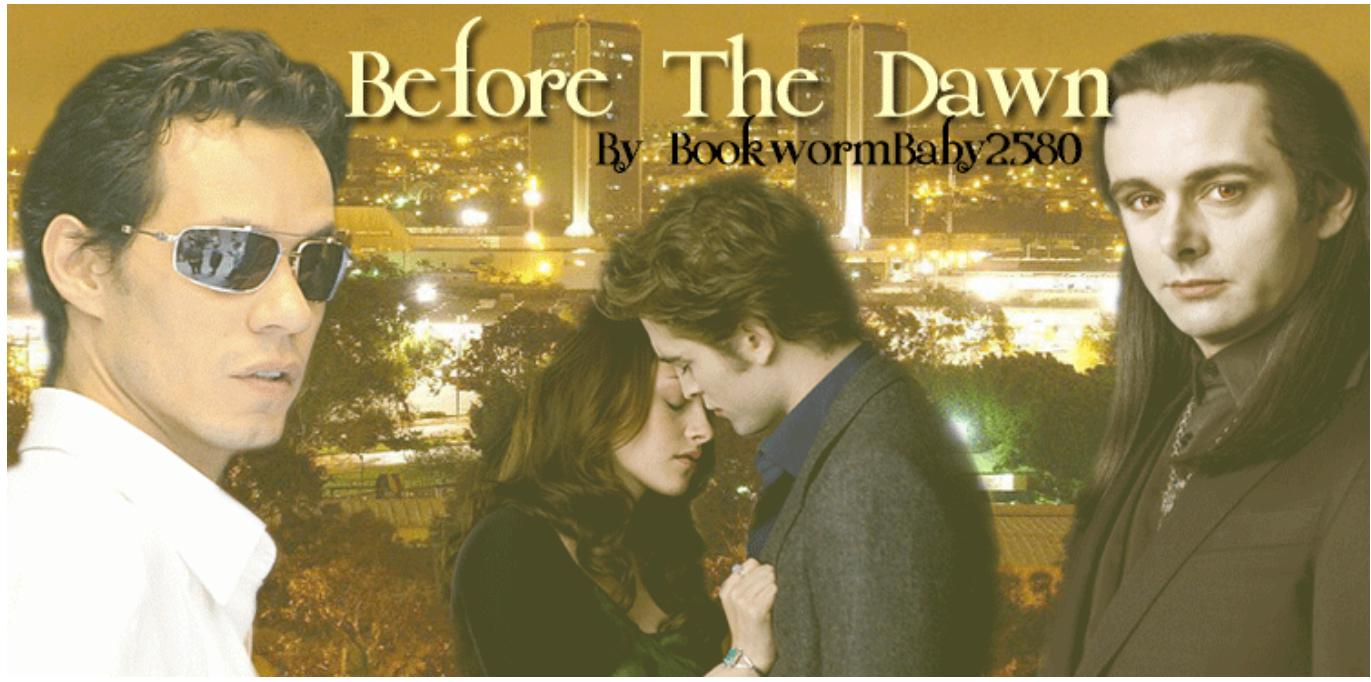
Serena snorted. "Proud of her? She didn't have to do anything but lie there, did she?"

"Hush, Serena," Joham admonished. "This girl is doing us a great service. She deserves your compassion." He stroked Bella's cheek adoringly. "My sweet, brave girl. Such a little jewel."

Bella shuddered as the news sank in, and her eyes welled up with tears. She didn't want his compassion, and she didn't want his child. She didn't want to die. A sob escaped her throat, and then another one, and then she was crying hard as Joham held her and murmured comforting words. There was no comfort to be had, though. In less than nine months, she would die. She was never going to see her parents again.

I'm sorry, Mom, she thought, staring over Joham's shoulder and out into the blue cloudless sky. I'm sorry, Charlie. I never should have stopped in Tijuana. I'm so sorry.

Death and the Maiden



Bella woke to the sound of the front door opening and she turned away from it, curling into a ball. She prayed that Joham would leave her alone today, that he wouldn't hover over her constantly the way he had the last few days. Once Serena had announced Bella's pregnancy he had hardly left her side, and Bella wanted a little peace.

But, of course, she couldn't be that lucky. Joham made his way directly to her bed and settled behind her, setting several shopping bags on the bed.

"Wake up, little Bella," he murmured. "I've brought you something." He urged Bella into a sitting position and then started unloading the shopping bags into her lap.

Bella stared in shock at the pile, wondering if she were hallucinating. "You . . . you brought me books?"

"That's right." He seemed very pleased with himself. "I want you to read them to our son."

For a moment, Bella wasn't quite sure she had heard him correctly. Was he expecting her to live through the pregnancy after all? He had been so clear and unapologetic about the fact that she wouldn't . . .

"Go ahead," he urged. "Choose one."

She blinked at him. "Right now? You want me to read to it before it's even born?"

"Of course. His brain will be developing as quickly as the rest of his body. I want him educated properly from the very beginning."

Serena snorted, appearing at the top of the stairs. "I've seen nothing to indicate that prenatal linguistic development is possible," she said disdainfully.

Joham arched an eyebrow. "Have you tried?"

She pursed her lips and flounced down the stairs and into the kitchen, not bothering to answer his question.

Joham turned back to Bella, stroking her cheek indulgently. "What would you like for breakfast, my pet?"

She stared at him in confusion. He had never asked her about her food preferences before.

"What?"

"You may have whatever you like. Just say the word, and Serena will make sure you get it."

Serena slammed a frying pan on the stove, her stormy expression making it quite clear that she didn't appreciate her new role as short order cook.

"Oh, um . . . anything's fine."

"Nonsense, my dear. Your cravings will be the best indicator of the nutrients our son needs. What are you in the mood for?"

Bella avoided Serena's scowl. "Um . . . eggs?" She really did want them—badly—and it didn't seem like too much to ask from Serena.

Joham beamed at her. "Eggs it is. Now, why don't you pick out a book?"

She sifted through the volumes in front of her. *Caesar: Life of a Colossus, Annals of Imperial Rome, His Excellency: George Washington, The Habsburg Monarchy, Edward IV, Caligula, Peter the Great: His Life and World . . .* Joham obviously had singular tastes in literature. Not that it mattered. Bella was so desperate for something to focus her mind on that she would have been happy to read a cereal box.

She was flipping open *Alexander the Great* when the smell of frying butter reached her. Her stomach churned violently and she clapped a hand over her mouth to keep herself from throwing up.

Joham raised his eyebrows. "Is something wrong?"

Bella didn't dare open her mouth to answer. Thankfully, Serena saved her the trouble.

"Morning sickness," she said with a smirk.

Joham reached up and broke the padlock on Bella's collar, then quickly unfastened it.

Bella bolted for the bathroom, not bothering to wonder at Joham's strength. She fell to her knees and vomited into the toilet, her whole body clenching and shuddering with the effort. She retched and gagged long after her stomach was empty, but she couldn't seem to quell the nausea.

When the nausea finally eased, she slumped down on the floor of the bathroom. Joham was there within seconds, kneeling beside her and pulling her into his arms. He held a soda cracker to her lips, and she accepted it, too exhausted to resist even though eating was the last thing she wanted to do. They spent several minutes on the floor, Joham feeding her bits of cracker while she slowly regained her equilibrium.

"Feeling better?" he asked her.

She gave a shaky nod and allowed him to help her to her feet. He guided her back to her cot and eased her down onto it.

"I don't want you to let yourself get hungry," he said. "It's very important that you keep your strength up. Serena, dear, set up a table here by Bella's bed and make sure she has plenty to eat at all times."

Serena didn't acknowledge him, but Joham seemed unconcerned. He settled next to Bella and picked up the book that she had abandoned.

"Now, you just relax. I'll read to the child for a little while."

Bella did as he asked as he began the book, letting herself get lost in the narrative, desperately grateful for a distraction from the horror that her life had become. She gobbled down the plate of scrambled eggs that Serena brought her, noting vaguely that they seemed a little overcooked. They didn't quite satisfy her craving, and Joham ordered Serena to make her more when he noticed her trying to spear the last tiny pieces of egg on the tines of her fork. The second plate helped, and after finishing it off, Bella was able to ignore the nagging want in her stomach, the desire for . . . for *something*, though she wasn't quite sure what. She set the plate aside on the end table that Serena had dragged over to her cot and settled back, listening to Joham read.

Her hand drifted absently over her stomach, and she gave a start as she felt the solid swell in her lower abdomen. Her eyes widened and she prodded it gently. It felt like a large rock had been wedged in among her organs. Bella didn't know much about pregnancy, but she hadn't expected the baby bump to be so *hard*.

Joham noticed her distraction and set the book aside, smiling radiantly.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" He stroked her stomach, and then tugged up the hem of her gown to bare the slight protrusion. Bella flushed in embarrassment, but she knew better than to resist him. She pressed her lips together as his cold fingers caressed her skin.

"Just a moment, little angel," he whispered. He darted away, once again revealing his frightening speed, and returned with a bottle of lotion. He drizzled it over her stomach and started rubbing it into her skin, slowly and methodically.

"Our little miracle," he murmured, his eyes and hands roaming over her abdomen. "There's nothing as wondrous or as awe-inspiring as the creation of new life." He rolled onto his side, and leaned down to nuzzle her neck, breathing in deeply as his lips traced her artery.

Bella shuddered, wishing she had the nerve to push him away. She had hoped that he would leave her alone, now that she was pregnant—a hope that had been strengthened over the last few days when he hadn't taken her upstairs to his room. But his hand was sliding up her stomach, slipping beneath her shift and caressing her breast, and she was starting to worry that he wouldn't even show her the courtesy of taking her to a private place this time. He licked and sucked at her throat as he fondled her nipple.

"So tempting," he whispered against her skin. "Everything about you calls to me. Your body, your blood . . ." He moaned again. "Oh, how I long to taste your blood."

"If you want that kid, you're going to have to wait a couple of weeks," Serena said brusquely from the kitchen.

Bella looked at her, her eyes going wide in alarm. "Weeks?"

"That's right," Joham murmured, taking her by the chin and turning her face back to his so he could press a soft kiss to her lips. "That's the beauty of keeping my girls with me throughout their pregnancies. There's no waste. Once your child is born and no longer requires your body to sustain him, I'll have the privilege of drinking your sweet blood."

Bella's stomach rolled, but Joham didn't seem to notice. He was back to nuzzling her neck again, his tongue flicking out to caress her skin.

"But—but weeks? I only just got pregnant. It will be months . . ."

Joham chuckled softly. "My children grow much faster than human children," he said, sounding amused. "You're quite lucky. A human pregnancy lasts for months on end, but from conception to birth, our son will only take four or five weeks to grow."

Serena strode toward the bed, tossing her glossy hair over her shoulder, her haughty gaze meeting Bella's frightened one. "And you're already a little over two weeks along. It won't be long now." She patted Bella's head and then turned on her heel and sauntered back into the kitchen.

Tears sprang to Bella's eyes and she gasped for breath that suddenly wouldn't come. Weeks. She only had weeks to live, and she had been counting on months. The end of her life was racing toward her, and there was nothing she could do to stop it. A desperate sob escaped her throat, and Joham wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his cold body.

"Hush, child," he said, his voice stern. "There's no sense in working yourself into a fit. Serena, bring Bella some water and leave a pitcher of it beside her bed."

Serena did as she was told, saying nothing but smiling smugly.

It was at that point that Bella felt the jolt in her stomach—not one born of fear or horror this time, but one entirely independent of her. She stared down at her still-exposed torso, a sense of horror and revulsion rising inside of her. She hadn't hated very many things in her life, but at that moment she began to hate the *thing* that had taken root inside of her. It had never been welcome. It had been forced upon her from the start, and now it was taking over her body, the only thing that was even her own anymore, and it was killing her.

Joham ran his hand back down to Bella's stomach just as the fetus gave another lurch. His face lit up with delight as he pressed his cold hand more firmly against her skin.

"Did you feel that?" he asked, his eyes shining. "Our son is saying hello."

Bella looked away, unable to abide the thought of sharing in this farce of a family bonding moment. Joham bent over her stomach, cooing at the child inside and pressing kisses over the hard bump, but it only made her despise the little hell-spawn more. She didn't want to carry this monster's child. She didn't want to create something that he loved. She hated him more than she had ever hated anything—him *and* the demon he was forcing her to carry.

If Joham noticed the shift in her mood, he didn't acknowledge it. He continued to fawn over the fetus until Serena cleared her throat pointedly from the kitchen.

"Good news, father," she said, examining the object she was holding. "Yesenia is pregnant."

A dazzling smile lit Joham's face, and he left Bella's bed, turning his attentions on her companion. He settled beside the girl and pulled her into his arms, murmuring to her in Spanish. Yesenia didn't react. She just stared at the ceiling, looking resigned.

Bella turned away from them and her gaze landed on Serena, who was giving her a scornful smile.

"I hope you didn't have your heart set on being his favorite forever," she said.

Bella curled into a ball, tugging her blanket up over her shoulders. She didn't want to be Joham's favorite. She just wanted to be left alone.

Joham went out that night and returned with two girls, both with glossy black hair and brown skin who looked so alike that Bella guessed they must be sisters. They walked in beside him of their own volition, but started to panic when they saw the room full of cots and the chains that tethered Bella and Yesenia to their beds. They shrieked and fought as Joham dragged them to their beds, and Bella turned away. She already knew what was going to happen. The moment Joham had singled them out, those girls had been doomed. Bella didn't want to wonder how many weeks they had left to live . . . if they even lasted that long.

The crying and screaming continued as Joham first took one, then the other, up the stairs to his room. Bella wrapped her pillow around her head and tried to block out the noise.

She didn't get much sleep that night. The new girls chattered shrilly at Yesenia in Spanish, and every time she offered a dull response, her words seemed to send the girls into fresh hysterics. They sobbed and screamed until Bella had a headache, and until Serena stalked down the stairs and lectured them so viciously that they didn't dare speak in more than a whisper after she was done. They still snifflled and clutched one another's hands, though, and Bella stared determinedly out the window, trying not to pay them any mind. Seeing their efforts to comfort one another only made her feel more isolated.

It was while she was trying not to look at her new companions that she caught sight of a dark figure creeping along the side of the house, his body moving in a prowling crouch that made him look more animal than human. Bella drew in a sharp breath of surprise, and the man's gaze snapped up to meet hers. His eyes held hers for just a moment, narrowing in what might have been malice or warning, and then he spun around and darted away, his thick black braid swinging behind him.

"Bella?" Joham appeared at the top of the stairs looking concerned, and Bella realized that he must have heard her reaction to the man outside. "Are you all right?"

Maybe it was due to the fantasies of rescue from a handsome stranger that she had harbored, but she felt a sudden, irrational need to protect the man outside. "I'm fine," she said quickly. "The baby . . . it already kicks pretty hard."

Joham came down the stairs, a warm smile on his face. "He's active this morning, is he?"

He settled next to Bella on her bed and pressed his hand to her stomach. Bella was grateful when the fetus gave a determined kick against Joham's hand, lending credibility to her lie.

She wanted desperately to look out the window again and search for the stranger who was creeping around the house. But she didn't want to give him away, so she focused on Joham instead.

"What would you like for breakfast?" he asked.

"Um . . . eggs?" That was practically all she had eaten the day before, and they were the only thing that took the edge off of the constant nagging hunger. They weren't quite enough, though. She wanted something else, something . . . warm to drink, maybe? "Coffee . . ." she mumbled to herself, but that wasn't it. Coffee didn't sound at all appetizing.

"I'm afraid I can't give you coffee," Joham said. "It's not good for the development of our son. But Serena will make you some cocoa."

Bella nodded absently, though cocoa didn't sound all that appealing, either. She blamed the constant hunger and dissatisfaction on the pregnancy. Joham had said it would be taxing, after all. And the weeks of constant inactivity hadn't helped. The lack of exercise left her feeling weak and listless, and it was rare for her even to stand and pace the length of her bed anymore, as she had so often in her first weeks. She was simply too tired.

The day passed slowly. Bella spent a lot of time reading her new books quietly to the fetus the way Joham had instructed, but the constant whimpering and sniffling from the new girls was tiresome. She wished Joham would give *them* books, if only to shut them up. Yesenia, at least, was quiet, even if she did bring her own set of problems.

Yesenia's cravings weren't satisfied by eggs the way Bella's were. Yesenia wanted chicken, and the smell of it cooking made Bella's stomach roil. She had been freed from her collar for the better part of the previous day because of her fierce and constant nausea. She was forever darting to the bathroom and expelling the contents of her stomach, only to have Joham direct Serena to make her more food. He was determined that she not be undernourished.

He probably had good reason to fear. Bella could tell that she had lost weight in the time that she had been here. Her arms and legs were thinner and distinctly weaker, and on the rare occasions that she looked in the mirror, she thought her face looked gaunt and haggard.

She tried not to look in the mirror.

As the sun was setting that evening, Joham sat down at Bella's bedside and stroked her cheek. "You're lonely," he murmured, his eyes sympathetic. "You're the only one who doesn't speak Spanish."

Bella *wasn't* lonely, and she was glad she had an excuse not to converse with the girls, who would be dead not long after she would. She kept that to herself, however, and just stared blankly at Joham.

"Tonight I'm going to go north again, and I'll see if I can't bring back a friend for you."

Bella fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"Such a noble little thing, to bear your burdens without complaint." He leaned down and kissed her gently, his cold lips moving persuasively over hers. Bella stayed still and unresponsive. It was the only way she knew how to deal with things anymore. There was simply no fight left in her, and nothing left to fight for.

Joham re-attached her collar and patted her head before rising and crossing the room to the front door. He pulled it open and then froze, his eyes going wide.

"Nahuel," he hissed.

Serena, who was in the kitchen cleaning up, looked up in alarm. "What?"

"He was here. I can smell him."

Serena ran toward the door, and both of them rushed outside. Bella saw them pass by the window beside her, examining the ground, and then the two of them took off running, sprinting across the twilit desert.

She heard the rattle of chain behind her and turned to see Yesenia stretching for a view of the window. The girl hadn't fared any better than Bella had. Her once-shiny hair was now dry and limp, and her eyes were dull and lifeless. They took on a determined glint as she peered out the window, though, and Bella watched with mild curiosity as she grabbed the chain that held her and looped it around the metal headboard, leaving her with only a foot or two of slack.

Bella couldn't figure out what she was up to until she pushed her collar down to the base of her throat and wound the chain around her neck.

Bella's eyes widened. "What are you doing?" she demanded, a chill creeping up her spine.

Yesenia pulled hard on the chain, testing its give around the metal headboard. It held firm. She turned her eyes to meet Bella's gaze for just a moment, and then she rolled off the bed.

The chain pulled taut at the edge of the bed, holding Yesenia's head above the mattress while the rest of her body tumbled to the floor. Bella stared in horror as her face reddened darker and darker, until it was more purple than red. She didn't want to watch but she couldn't look away. She couldn't see most of Yesenia's body, but she could hear when it started to twitch and jerk against the floor. Bella kept waiting for the girl to give up, to push herself back onto the low bed and take that much-needed breath. She had to. She couldn't just . . . she couldn't just *die*. She only had a few weeks left. How could she just throw them away?

A desperate sob escaped Bella's throat as she watched the girl's eyes bug and her tongue loll out. "Stop it!" she yelled. "Stop it! You can't die!"

The girl's only response was a violent twitch of the chain.

The sisters were screaming now, clutching each other and babbling in Spanish, but Bella hardly noticed them. She couldn't tear her eyes away from Yesenia, from the very image of death. She wanted nothing more than to look away, and then to run, to get as far away from the macabre scene as possible. But her eyes stayed riveted on Yesenia's face as little red bursts blossomed in her eyes and her lips turned blue.

It was the most horrific thing she had ever seen. There were times when she had wondered if death might not be preferable to what she was suffering with Joham, but now she knew it wasn't. Death was monstrous, dreadful . . . worse than anything she could imagine. Tears coursed down her cheeks and her chest convulsed with frantic sobs.

"Don't die," she gasped again and again. "Don't die, please don't die."

As the minutes passed, Yesenia's convulsions slowed to the occasional twitch, and then even those finally stopped. Bella watched her intently, desperate for some sign of movement, for some indication that she wasn't *dead*, but she searched in vain. She huddled against the headboard of her bed, her hands fisted in her hair.

Bella didn't know how long she stared at Yesenia, at the chain crushing her throat and keeping her from falling, at the black mask of death that shrouded her features, but eventually she was distracted by the return of Joham and Serena. Joham let out a distressed cry and darted to Yesenia's side, unwinding the chain from around her neck and easing her to the floor.

"What happened?" he demanded.

Bella couldn't answer. She just stared at the bed that now blocked her view of Yesenia, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Joham said something in Spanish that sent the new girls into hysterics again, and the frustration on his face made it clear that they weren't giving him the answers he wanted.

"I think it's obvious what happened," Serena said, stalking into the kitchen. "It's a pity it wasn't the plain one who killed herself." She tossed Bella a scornful glance. "Anyway, you shouldn't waste the blood. If we drain her now it will probably still be tolerable—enough for your girl, anyway."

Joham growled quietly as he lifted Yesenia's body into his arms. He was clearly furious over the situation, but the person he wanted to take his anger out on was already dead. He stomped into the kitchen and dropped her onto the floor behind the island.

Bella couldn't see what they were doing, but she decided that was probably best when Joham emerged with a large glass of thick, dark liquid.

"Drink it quickly," he said, holding it out toward Bella. "It will coagulate before long."

Bella stared at the glass in horror. Her stomach rumbled, and she was appalled to discover that it wasn't from nausea, but *hunger*. She could smell the blood, and she *wanted* it. She clapped her hands over her mouth and shook her head rapidly.

"I'm not in the mood for this, girl. Drink it and be grateful for it."

Bella knew she was provoking his anger by refusing his order, but this was too much. She had been kidnapped, raped, imprisoned, collared like an animal, objectified, impregnated, terrorized with the promise of death, and she had just watched a girl die—a girl who had killed herself because she was suffering exactly what Bella was. She couldn't, on top of all that, submit to the barbaric practice of drinking blood, no matter how angry it made Joham when she refused.

She just couldn't.

"Serena!" Joham snapped. He set the glass on the table by Bella's bed and grabbed her wrists. He dragged her forward and then turned her around, wrenching her hands behind her back and holding them with one hand. He used the other to grab her jaw and brace it against his shoulder, and he shoved two fingers into her mouth to hold it open.

Serena smiled darkly as she sauntered forward. "You're going to have to get used to this, princess," she said, taking the glass from the table and kneeling in front of Bella. "The baby is going to need blood."

She writhed and fought, trying to break away from Joham's iron grip, but it was useless. Serena put a hand to her chest to hold her down, and then tipped the glass and started drizzling the contents into her mouth.

The taste of it shocked her. She knew the bitter, rusty flavor. She knew that it was supposed to taste bad to her, that the mere sight of blood used to unnerve her so much that she would get light-headed. So she was unprepared for just how *good* it tasted. Instinct kicked in, and she immediately swallowed a couple of mouthfuls before she could collect herself enough to recognize what she was doing. Her shock over her own callousness was enough to make her choke and spit out the blood that Serena was still pouring into her mouth.

Joham gave her a jarring slap that sent pain lancing through her jaw. "If you waste another drop," he hissed in her ear, "I'll break each of your fingers, one by one. Do you understand me?"

She couldn't answer. She knew it was pointless to try and resist Joham, but she couldn't banish the thought that this blood was from *Yesenia*, the same girl who had been lying beside her for weeks. The girl who was so much like her, who had been doomed to the same fate and had simply claimed it early. When Serena held the cup to Bella's lips again, she jerked her head away.

She didn't even have time to register that Joham's fingers had closed around her pinky before she heard a sharp snap, and pain shot up her arm. She screamed, trying desperately to writhe out of his grasp, but he held her with bruising force.

"Shall I do another," he growled, "or are you going to behave yourself?"

Bella gave in. She didn't have the strength to fight him, she knew that. It had been irrational even to try. She sagged against him and didn't bother trying to fight when Serena tipped the glass over her mouth again. She drank and drank until she was desperate for air and wondered if Serena was trying to drown her in blood. She swallowed down the thick, clumpy liquid, trying hard not to enjoy it, until Serena finally pulled back and let her take a breath.

"Take the glass," Joham said, releasing her hands.

She took it with her left hand as she tucked her throbbing right hand against her body.

"Drink."

She obeyed, gulping down the contents of the glass as quickly as possible.

"More?" Serena asked Bella with a cold smile.

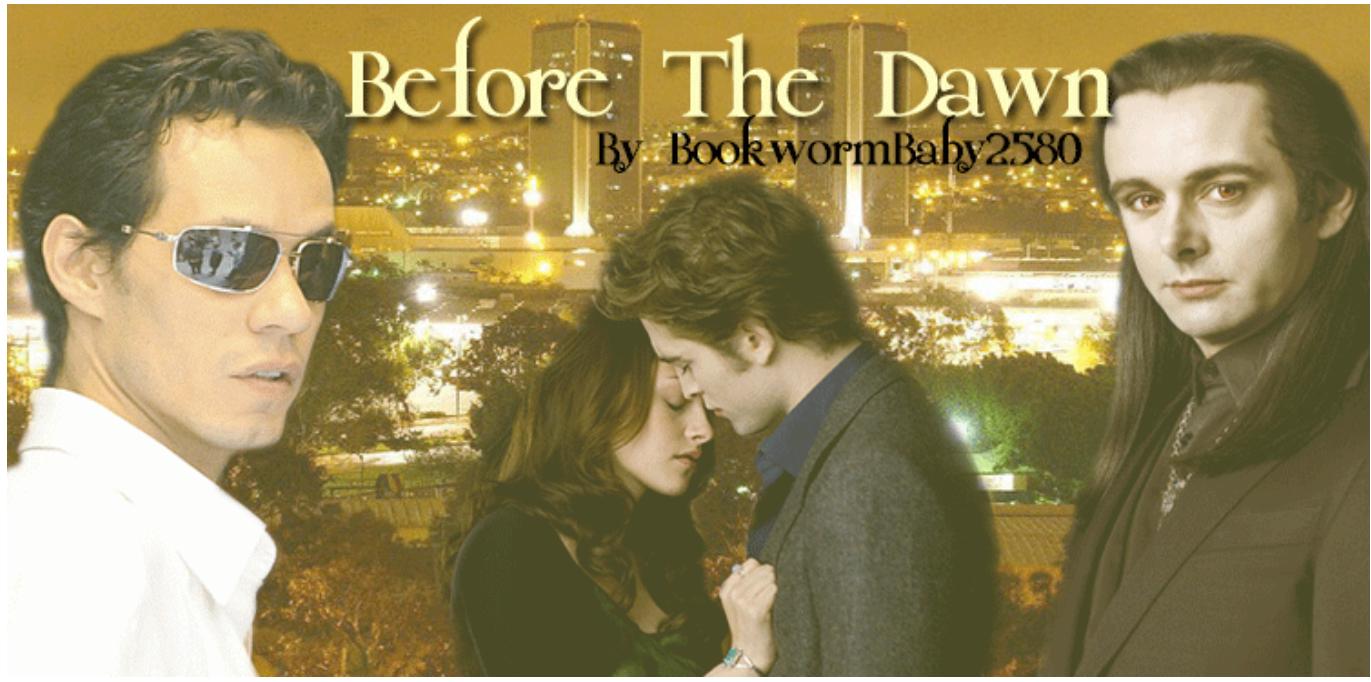
"That's enough for now," Joham answered for her. He took the glass and moved into the kitchen, then hoisted Yesenia's body up off of the floor and carried her out the back door.

Bella wiped at the mess of blood and tears on her face with the sleeve of her hospital gown. She was shaking all over, and despite the heat of the evening she couldn't seem to get warm. She wrapped her blanket tightly around her and huddled down on her cot, trying to stifle the sobs that wouldn't seem to stop coming. She wanted to be numb again, wanted to stop remembering Yesenia's face and the taste of her blood. And for the first time, she understood why the girl had done what she had done. What was the sense in living anymore if every day was worse than the last? What was the point in holding out till the end?

Bella fingered the chain that fastened to her collar and thought about wrapping it around her neck, cutting off her air the way Yesenia had.

But she didn't do it. She couldn't. Maybe she didn't have months left, but she had a couple of weeks, and she simply wasn't ready to die.

Travail



If Bella had thought she was miserable before, it was nothing compared to the next two weeks. Yesenia's death seemed to have opened the gates of hell in the little desert house.

She was in constant pain. It started with the broken finger, which she had done her best to splint by tying it to the one next to it with strips of plastic torn from a cracker sleeve. But it didn't stop there. The thing growing inside of her was getting stronger by the hour. Its kicks left Bella in agony, and though the morning sickness had passed quickly, she frequently found herself retching into the trash can beside her bed simply because of the pain.

She was no longer allowed to be unchained for more than a few minutes at a time, nor was she bound by the throat anymore. The day after Yesenia had strangled herself, Bella's collar was replaced with an ankle cuff and an extremely short chain attached the foot of the bed. Bella was surprised how aggravating it was to have such a restrictive tether, even with how little she moved.

And she tried to move as little as possible. She was insatiably hungry, and it didn't help that she vomited up everything she ate almost as soon as she swallowed it. The hunger left her weak and listless, and the slightest exertion exhausted her. And on top of that, every time she rolled over, the little demon inside of her punished her by writhing and kicking, leaving her already-battered body freshly bruised.

The first time she'd felt a rib crack, she had begged Joham to take her to a doctor. Joham, however, was less indulgent with her now than he had previously been. Yesenia's death had left him deeply mistrustful of Bella, and though he still sat with her and read to the rapidly expanding bulge in her stomach, he wasn't as anxious as he had once been to see to her comfort.

It wasn't only Yesenia's death that had soured Joham's mood. Since that night, he and Serena had been arguing furiously and constantly. His loyal, dutiful daughter had finally put her foot down. Joham had ordered her to track down Nahuel—who Bella assumed was the stranger she had seen lurking outside the window. Serena had flatly refused, though, and no amount of cajoling would change her mind.

Joham was livid. That she had defied him was bad enough, but defying him over something he obviously wanted badly seemed to be more than he could tolerate. He stormed around the house in a temper all day every day, and Bella was intensely grateful that her visits to his bedroom were a thing of the past. One of the new girls was badly bruised, and had a wrist that was swollen and purple. The other girl had disappeared altogether.

The last moments of Bella's life were ticking away in a haze of pain and acrimony, but the worst part was still the blood.

Joham wasn't kind enough to drain it into a glass for her anymore. Every night he would go out, and would return the following morning with some new victim—not young girls, this time, but unwashed people in ragged clothes who Bella suspected were homeless. He lured them back with the promise of a meal, and would drag them to Bella's bedside, strangle them until they passed out, and then cut their wrists and force Bella to drink as much blood as she could stomach.

Every single morning Bella watched them choke and struggle for breath. Every single morning she relived Yesenia's death.

The first time had been the worst, and in fact, had nearly killed her. Horrified by the reminder of Yesenia and revolted by the blood, Bella had tried to refuse. Her struggles had gotten blood everywhere, and in her distraction she hadn't noticed the deterioration of Joham's self control until he snapped.

He had gone for the homeless victim first, dragging him back by the hair and ripping savagely into his throat. That didn't seem to be enough for Joham, however, and as soon as the blood flow ebbed, he turned his attention on Bella. His eyes wild with hunger, he lunged at her, yanked her head back, and sank his teeth into her neck.

That was the point that Serena had decided to intervene. She hauled Joham off of Bella and dragged him outside, then returned and took his place, sucking at Bella's throat. Bella had thought she was going to die then, but Serena stopped a moment later and deftly bandaged the wound.

"You'll live," she said, her voice flat and pitiless. "Luckily, venom doesn't spread very quickly."

Bella had gaped at her, clutching the bandage over her throbbing, burning throat.

Since then she had participated in the murder of twelve people, and had gotten much better at making a clean job of it. But she had never managed to grow numb to the horror of drinking a man's blood, of watching him die.

Still, she had always managed to keep from throwing up the blood. Somehow, it just settled easier in her stomach than other food did.

Bella bit back a moan that wanted to escape as another brutal cramp seized her. They had started the previous afternoon and were growing steadily worse, but Bella refused to think about what that meant for her. Instead, she focused on the pain, trying to will it away.

The tightness in her stomach slowly drifted, settling in her lower back and sending her muscles into a spasm. For a moment she considered rolling from her side to her back to see if that would ease the pain, but ultimately she decided against it. As long as she stayed still, the fetus would usually remain relatively inactive, but rolling over would risk another kick to her broken ribs.

She preferred the muscle spasms.

A door slammed somewhere upstairs, and Bella heard the sound of splintering wood.

"No," she heard Serena snap in answer to a question that hadn't reached Bella's ears.

"Serena!"

"The answer is no, and that's final. I'm not running all over the western hemisphere searching for someone who doesn't want to be found."

"I want him!"

"Why?" she was storming down the stairs now, with Joham following close behind. "What's so special about him? What could he possibly contribute to your little project?"

"He's my son. Taking his place at my side is his destiny—his birthright."

Serena whirled at the bottom of the stairs. "*His* birthright? What about *my* birthright? *I'm* your firstborn, *I'm* the one who has always come when you called, *I'm* the one who was raised by you and who raised two of your other children. It's *my* birthright!"

"Serena, you're being absurd. Of course I value your contributions, but Nahuel is my son."

"So what? He doesn't have anything that I don't have."

Another cramp seized Bella's body as Joham fixed Serena with a challenging stare.

"No? How about venom?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, her lips pursing defensively. "That's completely irrelevant."

"Is it? You find the ability to grant immortality irrelevant? You think it unimportant that he can raise a mere human to the status of a god?"

Serena's glare turned lethal. Joham had clearly struck a nerve. "Fine," she hissed, her lips pulling back to bare her teeth. "See if you can get *him* to cater to you the way I have . . . because I'm through." She turned on her heel and stalked out the door, slamming it behind her.

Joham started after her, but stopped and looked back at Bella and the other girl. He let out a feral growl when a car engine started outside, and after deliberating for a brief moment he darted into the kitchen and produced a coil of rope from one of the drawers. He carried it to Bella's bed and pushed her onto her back.

"This is for your protection, little dove," he said softly as he quickly snapped two lengths of rope free from the coil and tied her hands to the headboard of her bed. "We can't risk losing you the way we lost Yesenia, now, can we?"

Bella bit her lip hard to keep from crying out as the weight shifted in her aching body and the fetus landed a hard kick on her pelvis. Tears sprang to her eyes, but she choked back the whimper that wanted to escape as another cramp tightened her stomach.

Joham didn't seem to notice her distress. He gave her belly an affectionate pat and then moved across the room, presumably to tie the other girl down as well. She heard him murmur a few words in Spanish, and then he was out the door, leaving Bella and the stranger alone.

Bella waited until he had time to get well away from the house, and then allowed herself an agonized sob. The thing inside of her was twisting and stretching, and she felt something pop somewhere in the vicinity of her ribs. She couldn't pinpoint exactly where the new pain was coming from, though. It was all blurred together, a mass of misery that possessed her entire body.

She held herself as still as possible and waited for the fetus to settle down, but the minutes ticked by and it wasn't cooperating. It kicked and writhed in its confined space, only becoming more active, pummeling her body more viciously than ever.

"Please stop," Bella whispered through her tears. "Please—"

Another cramp seized her, so painful that it had her arching off of the bed. She tried to stifle her scream—more out of habit than anything—but a keening wail escaped anyway. She tugged at her bindings, wanting desperately to roll into a ball and clutch her stomach, to try and rub away the pain that had been steadily increasing for more than twenty-four hours.

When the cramp finally passed, she sagged back onto the mattress and turned her eyes to the window beside her bed. "I'm sorry, Mom," she whispered, staring out into the fading light of the evening. "I'm sorry, Charlie."

It had become a mantra, something she said over and over again, hoping that if she repeated it enough, her parents might somehow hear her. But her voice took on a resigned, fatalistic tone this time. She had to acknowledge that her cramps weren't just cramps, that the foreign thing jerking inside her and causing her such pain was ready to come out.

She wondered how long it would take, and then she wondered if Joham would be back in time to see the thing born. She certainly couldn't do anything to assist it into the world or to care for it after the birth. Not with her hands tied the way they were. Maybe it wouldn't survive. Maybe Joham would return to find both her and his alien offspring dead.

At least she wouldn't be around to witness the fallout from *that*.

Long minutes ticked by. Cramps came and went. When Bella's thoughts weren't occupied with pain, she called to mind memories of her former life, entertained daydreams of doing things she'd never gotten to do, and she cried. Tears of pain mixed with tears of regret as she thought of opportunities lost, of dreams unrealized, of life unlived.

And then something changed. The increasingly frequent cramps became tighter, more vicious, squeezing so hard she nearly blacked out. She couldn't lie still anymore, not with that kind of pain gripping her. She screamed and convulsed, tugging at the ropes around her wrists and the chain at her ankle. Her one free foot braced hard against the mattress, digging in as she writhed and moaned.

This was it. She was dying. She knew it, but she could barely acknowledge it through the pain. It dragged on and on, torturing her, searing her body. The agony seemed to slow time, turning seconds to minutes and minutes to hours. She couldn't stop crying, couldn't stop screaming as she thrashed wildly on the bed, desperate for relief.

And then she heard the sickening, wet, ripping sound.

Bella had thought she had hit her pain threshold, that anything more than what she was already feeling would barely be noticeable. But with that tearing sound the pain skyrocketed. She screamed loudly and shrilly, staring in horror at her stomach and trying to see through the black spots that were blossoming in her vision. There was another agonizing tear, and then another, and then thick, red blood began spreading over her stomach, staining her hospital gown.

Her body shuddered and convulsed, but she couldn't look away. Something horribly wrong was happening beneath her gown. A lump was pushing up beneath the bloody cloth, swelling out of her torn body, in a way altogether unnatural. Bella had been waiting for the thing to emerge between her legs, to be born the way a baby was supposed to be born. But it wasn't. The lump moved, grew bigger, and Bella gagged and choked as she realized that the little monster was literally tearing its way out of her body.

She screamed until her throat was raw, though whether it was more from pain or from terror, she had no idea. More ripping followed, more blood spread out around her, and then the fabric of her gown was being yanked and shredded until a small, bloody hand emerged.

Somewhere in the back of Bella's mind, behind the haze of tears and dread, she recognized that the hand looked normal. It was a tiny baby hand, with tiny baby fingers that she could imagine clutching her finger as she cooed over how precious it was.

There was more tearing, both from her body and from the gown, more screaming from her, and then another hand emerged, covered in gore. The gown was rent further, and after a hard kick to her spine, the bloody little creature appeared, crawling straight out of her body.

It looked . . . like a baby. This horrific little monster that had just literally torn her apart was masquerading as something innocent and sweet. And that only made it worse. The little thing looked at her with eyes far too alert for a baby's, and then it smiled, its cherubic face flashing a row of tiny, perfect baby teeth that were tinted pink with blood.

Bella wanted to scream harder than ever, wanted to vocalize the horror of what she was seeing, but she could feel her strength ebbing, draining out of her as the blood pooled around her.

And then the little demon lurched forward and sank its tiny teeth into her. They tore through the gown and cut into the flesh that stretched taut over her ribs, and a fierce burning erupted in her body. The pain was worse than the tearing of her flesh had been, and it spread, radiating outward, reminding her of the bite that Joham had left on her neck.

But there was no one to pull this blood-caked monster off of her. It sat up and giggled, its chiming laugh blending with Bella's screams, and then it twisted itself around and started lapping at the blood that smeared her now-deflated stomach. More burning seared her wound, and she wanted desperately to get the little thing off of her, to stop it from causing her so much pain.

She was already dying. Wasn't that enough?

More blackness clouded her eyes. Through the haze she could see the little creature licking at the blood, stopping for a moment to gnaw at its umbilical cord, and just before she sank into the black hole where there was nothing but torture and horror, she vaguely noted its anatomy.

Joham had gotten his son after all.

Bella was burning. Something must have happened, some accident that had set fire to the little desert house. She could feel the flames licking at her, feel her skin bubbling and melting beneath the unforgiving heat. It was deeper than that, too. Her muscles, her organs, even her bones were burning. Her throat was raw and parched, but she couldn't stop screaming.

She wanted to die.

After week upon miserable week of clinging to her life, she had finally reached the end of her endurance. This pain was too much to bear. If she was going to burn to death, she wished she could just *die* already and be done with it.

Behind the thick wall of pain and desperation, she was vaguely aware of her surroundings. The demon who looked like a baby seemed to have sated itself on her blood and was now still, curled up on her chest. She half wondered if the little thing was dead already, consumed by the flames that were killing her. She hoped it was. She hoped that Joham would come back and burn to death, too.

As if drawn by her thoughts, she heard his voice, distant and broken through the haze. Serena's voice answered him, and then the heavy weight was lifted from her chest.

"...the boy...venom...*remarkable*."

His voice was calm, wondering even, and Bella couldn't understand how he could be so unconcerned about the fire. Shouldn't he be trying to put it out? Shouldn't his voice betray at least a little bit of anxiety?

Serena said something that Bella couldn't hear over her own screams, the woman's voice holding nothing but her usual condescending scorn. Joham sounded slightly closer when he answered.

"...such a pretty little thing...grown rather fond of her...might be useful..."

And then cold arms were lifting her off of her bed, and she rolled against the icy body, desperate for respite from the burning, blistering fire. There was movement, and something dry and cottony was being shoved into her mouth, muting her screams. But it didn't matter. All that mattered was the paltry relief offered by the cold body that held her.

Cold water flowed over her, and though welcome, it wasn't enough to douse the flames. And then she was lying back, the cool body spread on top of her, pressing her down, pushing inside of her...she didn't care. She would take any relief from the scorching heat, however slight.

Time had no meaning. A minute, an hour, she couldn't tell the difference. She was trapped in eternal, endless flame.

She must have died, she realized. The little demon had killed her, just as Joham said it would, and now she was being punished for her sins. The time she had gossiped about Brittany Tolbert at school, the arguments she'd had with her mother about attending the latest church service...and of course, the stop she had made in Tijuana when she had promised that she would go straight home. She was paying for her transgressions now. She deserved this. She had earned her place in hell.

When the cold body disappeared it was even worse. She wanted to chase it, bring it back, make it ease her pain, but all she could do was writhe and scream into the cloth in her mouth.

It seemed to Bella as though she had been burning for an eternity when the flames started to recede. She felt it first in her toes, the cooling, the chill, the complete and utter relief. She wanted to live in her toes. She tried to focus on them and feel nothing else. Her fingertips followed, and after that she started to feel the fire pull back, a hair's breadth at a time. But with the lessening of area came an increase in intensity. The fire burned impossibly hotter, drawing back farther and farther. Her heart rate spiked to an impossible speed . . .

And then it was gone.

She had no heartbeat. She had no heat. Everything was silent and cold.

She opened her eyes to a world entirely different than the one she had existed in when she closed them.

Bella couldn't shake the disorientation. Everything was familiar, but different. The world was sharper, clearer. She recognized the room she had lived in for the last two months, but she wasn't sure how she could have missed all the little details, the nicks in the various surfaces, the imperfections in the paint on the walls. She hadn't even noticed the ragged crookedness of the tally marks she herself had scratched into the wall above her bed.

And she hadn't noticed that *scent*. The room smelled like . . . like . . .

Heaven.

It made her throat burn with thirst. She *wanted* whatever it was she was smelling.

Joham had told her it was the scent of human, of the three people he had brought here to sate her thirst when she woke up, of the nameless girl who had shared her misery for weeks, but had since been sacrificed to the hunger of the monster Bella had birthed.

She didn't like to think about the people she had killed. She didn't like to think about the terrified expressions they had worn when she lunged for their throats, or the sheer pleasure she had taken from the flavor of the warm blood and the smooth way it slid down her throat.

But the clincher, the thing that had left her reeling, was the word. That word that Joham had used. When the last person had dropped dead at her feet, when she had clutched her throat in horror at what she had done, and gasped out her desperate question.

"What did you do to me?"

He had smiled and calmly explained to her that she was like him, now. She was a . . .

No.

It was impossible. Everything about her life over the last several weeks was impossible, but this . . . this was *impossible*. She couldn't believe it; not after seeing him drink blood, not after drinking blood herself. He claimed to be one of *those*, and worse, he claimed that she was, too.

But she wasn't. She couldn't be, because *they* didn't exist. They were the stuff of horror movies and campfire stories. They weren't real.

And even if they were, they would be . . . different. Shrouded in darkness, locked in coffins during the day, lurking in the shadows at night. They didn't dance in night clubs in Tijuana. They didn't pace restlessly in little houses in Mexico while waiting for sunset . . .

She shook off that train of thought, refusing to honor the ridiculous lie with any more of her attention. Joham was delusional. He was a super-strong, blood-drinking . . . alien.

Which was just as ridiculous.

She wanted her mother. Her mother would . . . well, actually, her mother would probably believe it. She wanted Charlie. He would ground her again. He could always explain away the scary things in the world. The creaking she heard at night wasn't a monster creeping toward her bedroom, it was just the old house settling. The scratches at the window that she had been convinced were caused by a witch's fingernails were just the branches of the tree.

Charlie could explain this. Charlie could fix it.

She needed her father.

"Are you ready?" Joham's hands caressed her shoulders through the thin cotton of her fresh hospital gown, and his lips pressed gently to her neck. He didn't feel cold anymore. He felt like her, exactly the same.

She shuddered. She didn't want to be the same as him.

"There's nothing to worry about," he said, misinterpreting her reaction. His arms slipped around her waist, pulling her body back against his chest. "I promise you, our son won't smell the same as the humans. He has blood, but there's enough vampire in him that he won't provoke your thirst."

Bella wasn't worried about the devil-spawn. She would probably be doing the world a service if she killed it.

"Come," Joham urged. "He's eager to meet you."

Bella allowed herself to be led across the room where she had been held prisoner for so long. The chains that had once restrained her now looked laughably delicate, and she eyed them as she walked by her bed, wanting to shatter every link. But she didn't. Joham expected her to follow him outside into the fading daylight, to where their son was being kept by Serena—until she was able to get control of herself, Joham had told her.

Bella didn't want to see the vicious little thing, but she also didn't want to anger Joham, so she followed him outside.

Serena was seated in a chair on a little covered patio, her expression remote and unfriendly as she dangled a rattle in front of the smiling baby. Bella stared at the child, not quite believing what she was seeing. It was the same boy, she knew. He had the same dark eyes that had looked into hers as he had crawled out of her body, the same black curls that had been matted with blood, the same small, even teeth that had bitten her. But he was older. Much, much older. She wondered if Joham had lied to her when he had told her that she had only been incapacitated for three days.

But then, the child had grown at an alarming rate before his birth, so why wouldn't he continue after? Anyway, he seemed to have gained weeks in a matter of days.

"Bella, I'd like you to meet Alexander," Joham said proudly, squeezing her shoulders.

The boy looked up at her and graced her with a dazzling smile, his chubby arms raising in a clear request to be picked up. When Bella made no move to take him, Joham scooped him up and held him out to her.

"Just be very gentle," he instructed. "You're much stronger than you used to be."

The boy looked so . . . harmless. Sweet, even, with his arms stretching toward her, begging for her attention. His teeth and his oddly-alert eyes were the only indications that he wasn't a perfectly normal child. She reached out and took him, acting more on instinct than choice, and drew him to her chest. He immediately snuggled against her, his little hands clutching at her shift as he tucked his face into the crook of her neck.

"Alexander," she whispered softly.

"That's right." Joham beamed at her. "After Alexander the Great, the first book you chose to read to him."

Her throat felt thick, and she swallowed hard. She was holding her son. It was incredible.

And terrifying. She was holding a son she had been forced to bear by a man she hated. She didn't know what to do with him. A part of her wanted to love him, to protect him . . . but another part of her wanted to get rid of him.

His scent surrounded her, and she thought it must be the most wonderful thing she had ever smelled. Better than the scent of humans, though it didn't cause the same violent reactions in her. She lowered her face to his glossy curls and breathed deeply.

She had a son. She was sixteen years old, and she had a son.

Charlie was going to lose it.

"Alexander is the reason you're alive, you know," Joham said. "After witnessing Serena's birth, I never imagined it would be possible for any of my girls to survive it. But Alexander has venom where Serena did not. He bit you, and then he used his venom to seal your wounds. The boy is remarkably clever."

This was more information Bella didn't know what to do with. This harmless-looking boy was responsible for both her death and her subsequent rebirth. So what was he? Angel or demon? Monster or miracle?

She needed Charlie. Charlie could tell her. Charlie could untangle the knot of confusion in her head. Except, even now that she wasn't dying, she still didn't know if she would ever see him again. She needed him more than she ever had in her life, but . . .

But . . . what? Joham wouldn't let her go? There were no chains that could hold her now. She was strong—as strong as he was, or at least close. Strong enough to at least stand a chance.

It was a risk. There was a real possibility that trying to escape him would only make him angry, that even her new strength wouldn't be enough to overpower him, and he would punish her for the attempt. After all, Serena had tried to leave him, too, and here she was.

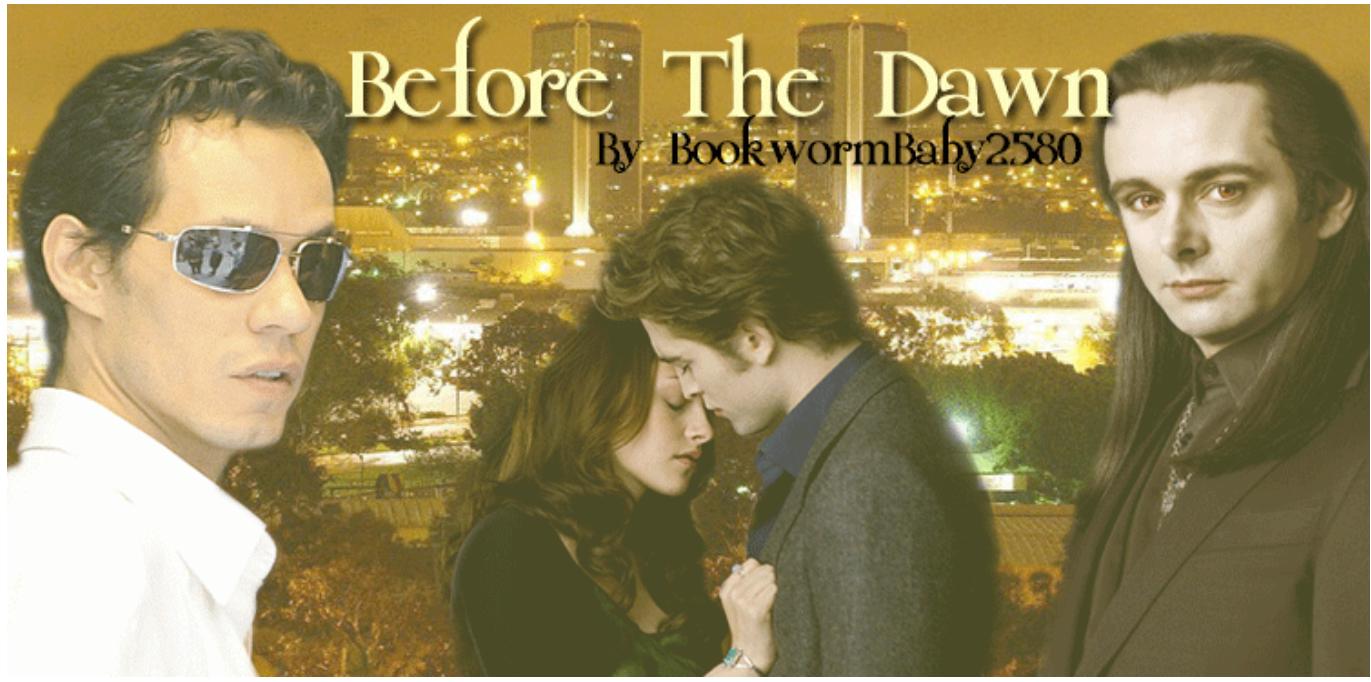
But Bella was stronger than Serena. She could tell just by looking at her, just by smelling her. Serena was half-human. She could bleed. She was vulnerable.

And Bella needed her father more than she had ever needed anything in her life.

She shifted Alexander in her arms and then held him out to Joham again. She was careful with him, making sure that Joham had a good grip and wouldn't drop him.

And then she ran.

Riptide



7. Riptide

Bella was elated at first by how *fast* she could run. For a fraction of a second, she was sure that no person alive could ever catch her. But then Joham started after her, his feet pounding into the sand that hers had just left, and she remembered all the times he had casually demonstrated his own speed. Terror gripped her, and she pushed herself to the limit, pouring all of her strength into the pumping of her arms and legs. Her strides were quicker, but shorter, and a feeling of dread tightened in her stomach. She had acted impulsively, without thinking things through, and now she was going to regret it.

But it quickly became clear that, even with Joham's more imposing physicality, he wasn't keeping up with her. His footfalls grew marginally quieter behind her with each passing second. She was, quite literally, leaving him in her dust. She nearly cheered when he slowed and turned back, but a few moments later she heard the rumble of a car engine starting.

Bella knew that the car couldn't drive across the sandy desert terrain, though, so she altered her path and angled herself away from the road. She couldn't lose it altogether, since she had no idea where she was and that road was the only path she knew back to Tijuana. If she made it back there, she was confident that she could find her way home.

Bella wondered how long it would take to get there at this speed . . . and that was when the real fear settled in her stomach. Her impulsiveness, her lack of planning, had sent her running into the desert with no supplies. She had no water, no food, no means to buy them, and no idea how far she was from civilization.

Her panicked mind immediately began trying to figure the distance. She was pretty sure Joham hadn't driven for more than an hour on the open highway when he had brought her here. In fact, she suspected that it had been less than that. Of course, it had been at an insane speed . . . but she was *running* at an insane speed, too. She was covering an awful lot of ground this way.

She doubted she could keep it up for any respectable amount of time, though. Bella had never been particularly athletic, and she was sure that the adrenaline currently sustaining her would wear off soon. So these early minutes were essential. She had to cover as much ground as possible now, while her body was still able to manage it, so that when she got tired she would be close enough to the city that she could finish her trek in the cool of the night, before the sun rose and the desert heat sapped her strength.

When she heard Joham's car slow and turn back, she got a burst of elation that she used to her advantage. More adrenaline, she mused in the back of her mind. It would take her that much farther.

Minutes passed, and the fatigue didn't come. Bella was thrilled by the distance she was covering. She tried to gauge how far she had run, but she had no frame of reference. She had never run anywhere near this fast before. If only the road had mile markers, she would have an idea of how fast she was going, and how long her strength might hold out. She picked out landmarks in the distance and tried to guess how far they were from her, counting steps and seconds simultaneously —until something happened to completely distract her from her mental calculations.

She heard it first, the rumble of a car engine behind her and far to her right, mingling with the repetitive baseline of the music from the radio. And then the scent hit her hard, slamming into her like a blow to the stomach, leaving her gasping for breath. And every breath brought back the scent, so familiar, so horrible, so . . . necessary.

Before Bella even had time to think, she was running toward the road. The rusty old car was making its way toward her, the driver hanging his arm out the window, his black mustache twitching as he sang absently along with the radio. If he noticed the pale figure running toward him, he made no indication of it. Bella didn't care whether he noticed her or not. She made a calculated leap that propelled her out of the sand and through the open window of the car, barreling into the man and flinging him into the passenger seat. He didn't even have time to cry out in surprise before her teeth were plunging into his neck, freeing the delicious blood and flooding her mouth with sweet ambrosia.

The car swerving off the road meant nothing to her. She paid no attention as it careened into the sand and quickly became mired down in the soft earth. Her only thought was of the warm blood, of how it eased the persistent burning in her throat. She sucked until nothing more would come, until all traces of blood had been drawn out through his throat, and then she sat back against the car door and sighed contentedly.

As her mind cleared of the hungry haze, though, her contentment turned to revulsion. She had just killed a man, and not at Joham's command. This time she had done it herself, willingly and happily, and she couldn't blame him for it. She was a murderer now. She could claim no qualifiers, no excuses. She was a monster.

Like Joham.

Bella shoved the car door open behind her and staggered out, bolting away from the car. She was running toward Tijuana again, but more importantly, she was running *away* from what she had just done.

She didn't want to be a monster. She didn't want to be what Joham had made her. She wanted to be the little girl who was bad at ballet, the teenager who avoided school dances so as not to put herself in the emergency room. She didn't want to be this strong, powerful creature who never got tired and

who could jump through car windows from yards away and hit her mark perfectly. Not if it meant she was like him. Not if it meant she killed people.

As the night darkened around her, the glow of her destination on the horizon became more prominent. Bella ran toward the lights, but as she covered the distance she started to sense it, to *feel* the streets teeming with people . . . warm, deliciously-scented people, and the frenzied desire started to rise in her again. It disgusted her that she wanted blood so badly, and she caught her breath and held it, afraid of being taken over by her thirst again. It was ridiculous to think she could go very long without breathing in, and yet . . . she could. Just as she had never needed to rest while running, she never needed to replenish her oxygen supply. It was strange and unnatural, but Bella took it as a gift. If she had to be this *creature*, at least there were small compensations.

It might have worked, this plan to avoid her thirst by refusing to breathe, except she looked too closely at a car in the distance. She saw the woman behind the wheel, noticed the flutter of her pulse at her neck, and it was nearly her undoing. Bella skidded to a halt and squeezed her eyes shut, holding herself perfectly still and trying to force her mind to think of other things.

Charlie. She needed Charlie. He knew how to fix things.

She stood there, still and unbreathing, until she was sure she had rallied her self control, and then she turned south. She wouldn't go through the city. It was too dangerous. She would go around it and then follow the coast northward until she reached familiar ground. Maybe once she was in California she could call Charlie to come get her. She thought of the vacations she had taken with him there, the summers that she had refused to spend in Forks. He could find her in California. She would wait for him on one of the beaches that they had visited.

She didn't know how she was going to call him when she could barely get near a city without wanting to slaughter its inhabitants, but she left that problem for another time. She would assess what she had to work with when she got there.

She counted her steps to distract herself from thoughts of what she was avoiding. She kept her distance from cars and the most populated areas, holding her breath whenever she had to get closer to people than she preferred in order to get past them. She had to go a lot farther south than she had originally expected in order to find a clear path to the coast, but at the speed she was traveling, she wasn't too worried.

The temptation to break her resolve and sate her blood craving was enormous, though, and when she finally caught sight of the coast up ahead, she ran to it as though it were salvation itself. She didn't stop at the beach, but plowed into the water and buried herself in the rolling waves.

She couldn't give in to temptation underwater. The extra barrier between herself and the ever-present scent of blood made her feel safer.

She spent a few minutes treading water, keeping herself submerged, before she decided that this was the way she needed to be traveling. There would be no issues with border patrol this way, and no accidents with people who might stray across her path.

It solved another problem as well. Bella was conscious of the path she was leaving in the sand. Each groove that her bare feet left behind was laden heavily with her scent. Joham may have been slower than she was, but with some persistence he could still trace her path over land. In the water, however, she would no longer be leaving a trail. Whatever essence she left behind was swept away by the tumult of the ocean's current.

The water was her haven, in more ways than one.

So she started to swim. The fluid slid around her, thick and cool, pulling at her sodden hospital gown. She loved it. She loved the weight of it, the density, the buoyancy, the safety and freedom that it offered her.

She swam for the rest of the night, keeping one eye on the moon as it arced over the sky above her. She kept expecting to grow hungry, particularly with the amount of energy she was expending. She would have to eat, wouldn't she? But as the night wore on she started to realize that she didn't feel hungry. It seemed that food, like rest and oxygen, was unnecessary.

Apparently, all she really *needed* was blood.

She squashed that thought at the burn that flared up in the back of her throat, turning her thoughts instead to how far she had come. She had been swimming for hours, but never having had this kind of speed before, she had no idea what kind of progress she could be making.

She was going to have to surface and look around. The idea of leaving the protective cocoon of water made her shudder, but she didn't know how else to orient herself. She tried to come up with an excuse to put it off, but the eastern sky was starting to lighten, and she knew she should do it before the beaches started to fill up with swimmers and sunbathers.

So after steeling her resolve, she pushed herself to the surface of the water and broke into the open air. She turned to face the open ocean first, taking in a few deep breaths of the salty wind that blew in from the water, and then turned toward the coastline.

It didn't take long for her eyes to pick out a familiar landmark, several miles to the south. Roller coaster tracks rose into the air, looping and winding around a wooden pier, and in the center a towering Ferris wheel rose above them all.

Santa Monica's Pacific Park—Bella would know it anywhere. This was where Charlie had brought her the first summer she had refused to visit him in Forks. Deep regret tightened her chest and she hugged her arms around her chest, letting herself sink below the waves again. She couldn't believe how badly she had behaved. She should have realized that those visits weren't about Forks. They were about *him*, spending time with him, building their relationship. But because she had disliked the sleepy little Washington town, she had sacrificed half of the time they could have had together every year in favor of a sunnier vacation.

Bella felt like slime. She had taken him for granted, disregarded his feelings, and now she was expecting him to be there when she needed him. And he would be. He always was, regardless of her selfishness or her petulance. He would even forgive her the bad decision that had brought about such disastrous consequences, because that was what he did. Charlie would always be her anchor.

She wouldn't take him for granted this time, she promised herself. She would show him the appreciation he deserved.

Her resolve spurred her on, and she started swimming northward, faster than ever. She didn't need to call him. At the speed she was moving, she could probably make it to Forks in less time than it would take him to drive down from there. It was better than trying to find a phone in the midst of the warm, deliciously scented bodies on shore.

It wasn't long before the water was disturbed by swimmers, their voices muted but still oh-so tempting. Bella swam further out into the ocean, putting plenty of distance between her and the veins that fluttered tantalizingly in submerged ankles and knees. The last thing she wanted to be responsible for was a beachside massacre.

There was more marine life this far from shore, but Bella couldn't help but notice that the fish gave her a wide berth. She didn't blame them. She was repulsed by herself. If she could, she would take pains to avoid herself, too. That thought was depressing, though, and Bella tried to distract herself by running through the plots of some of her favorite books in minute detail. Part of her mind kept tabs on how far she was from the beach while another scanned the water for obstacles she needed to avoid, and she settled into a relatively contented routine.

Every now and then, she surfaced to check on her progress. She recognized the Golden Gate Bridge, the redwoods in northern California, the dense Oregon forests, the mouth of the Columbia River that marked the divide between Oregon and Washington. It was nearing sunrise of her third morning in the water when she passed North Bay, and she drifted to the surface and started swimming through the waves. It took longer, but it was nice to be able to breathe while she moved, and she welcomed the ability to draw in the humid air. It wasn't long before she spotted what she was after—the familiar variegated sands of First Beach.

Bella was so close she could feel anticipation tingling in her fingertips. If she followed the highway from La Push for maybe fifteen miles, it would take her home to Charlie. Fifteen miles was nothing compared to how far she had come. She would be there in no time.

And yet, she was reluctant to get out of the water. It was safe in here, an effective buffer from the rest of the world. But Forks wasn't a coastal city, and if she ever wanted to see her father she was going to have to travel overland eventually. She would just have to keep to the trees and follow the highway from as great a distance as she could.

She swam to the beach and darted out of the water, rushing into the protective canopy of the trees before the sunlight could catch her. It wasn't fear of burning up that forced her urgency—she knew what happened to Joham in the sunlight, and it wasn't anything so gratifyingly destructive. Joham simply sparkled in the light, and Bella didn't want to see the same thing happen to her. She didn't want to be reminded that she was like him now.

The trees didn't filter out the light as effectively as the water had, though, and she had to try very hard not to notice the refracted light that occasionally scattered across the nearby foliage.

It felt good to breathe again, but something about the scent near the coast bothered her. She wasn't sure what she was smelling, but the heavy, rank odor reminded her of wet dog. It had been years since she had been to First Beach, but she didn't remember it being so sour. The farther she ran, though, the lighter the scent got, until finally she couldn't smell it anymore.

She was on her guard against the other scents nearby, terrified that she would have another incident like the one in Mexico. Any time she heard a car approaching on the highway, she held her breath and ducked deeper into the trees, determined to resist temptation.

It worked. But as she drew closer and closer to Forks, she realized that she wasn't going to be able to keep it up. If she was going to enter the city and find her father, she couldn't avoid seeing people forever.

A horrible thought struck her and sent her skidding to a halt. What if Charlie's scent overwhelmed her the way the other man's had? What if she lost control of herself and killed her father? The idea sent her into a panic. Her breath came in shallow gasps and she crouched down in a ball on the forest floor, trying to dispel the thought. She couldn't hurt Charlie. She needed him. But how could she see him without losing control of herself?

She was so close she could hardly stand to stay still, but now she was afraid she wouldn't be able to go home after all.

What was she supposed to do, though? Spend the rest of her life swimming around in the ocean? Ridiculous. Go back to Joham? Intolerable.

The image of the child she had left behind floated to the surface of her memory, his sweet face dimpled and smiling as he reached for her. Guilt crashed down on her, crushing and brutal, as she thought of what his life would be like in the care of his monstrous father.

He was her child. She had a responsibility to him. But what could she have done? Joham obviously cared a lot more for the boy than he had for her. He might have been willing to let her escape him, but he never would have let his son go so easily. And Bella couldn't have traveled as quickly or efficiently with a baby to care for—a half human baby who might have needed to breathe or eat.

She didn't want him. She had never wanted him. She forced the guilt back, telling herself she wasn't responsible for the care of the little demon who had nearly killed her.

She almost believed it.

She stood and started running again, needing the motion to distract her from her thoughts and help her focus on what to do next. She reached the outskirts of the city and veered left, circling around it instead of entering the populated area. She struggled for a solution, but none presented itself, and before she knew it she had circled the city three times.

She knew she had to at least *try* to see Charlie. Otherwise she would have come all this way for nothing. Maybe she should try entering the city and passing close to a stranger to see if she could stand the proximity before getting anywhere near her father's house.

She swallowed against the burn in the back of her throat, not trusting herself against the desperate desire to drink. She wondered if she should sate her thirst before approaching a populated area. The idea of killing someone in cold blood sickened her, but it was better than risking Charlie.

And there was certainly no shortage of opportunity. Bella slowed as she approached the highway again. It wasn't a busy road but every few minutes a car would pass by, presenting her with an easy catch. It was the best idea she could come up with, so she scaled the nearest tree to get a better view and perched on a sturdy branch.

The first car that came along was a little blue Volkswagen hatchback. A blond woman sat behind the wheel, talking on her cell phone headset, her pulse throbbing invitingly in her throat. Bella crouched down and prepared to spring, until she noticed the baby in the back seat, chewing on the ear of a ratty teddy bear.

She froze and pulled back, shaking her head. She wasn't going to kill a child. She'd have to take the next one.

The next car, though, carried a family of four, and the one after that a man and two children. Bella didn't waver in her resolve. She was enough of a monster already. She didn't have to become something even worse.

Finally, a rusted pickup truck rumbled her way, with two older Native American men occupying the cab. It was exactly what she was looking for. She tightened her muscles again, preparing to pounce at just the right moment—

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Bella started so violently that she nearly fell out of the tree. She spun around, wide-eyed, to find the source of the low, lazy voice.

Behind her, in a tree less than ten feet away, a tall, lanky blond man sat on a limb with his back against the trunk, one leg swinging casually over the side. His face and arms were covered in crescent-shaped scars that could only be bite marks, and the sight of them evoked a sense of danger so strong that it sent Bella into a panic. She scrambled behind the trunk of the tree she was in, as though the laughably fragile wood could protect her from something like him.

Because she knew immediately what he was. She recognized the hard, pale skin, the glint of sunlight where it filtered through the trees and flashed off of his arm. He was one of *them*, and she knew instinctively that those scars marked him as a particularly lethal one.

"Their kind bites back," the man said with a crooked smirk, nodding toward the passing truck.
"Best not to rile them up."

Bella peered around the trunk of the tree at him as his black eyes swept over her face.

He let out a low whistle. "You're a young one, aren't you? Where's your sire?"

Bella tried to edge farther behind the trunk while still keeping her gaze fixed on the terrifying man in front of her. She wondered if she could outrun him the way she had outrun Joham. It wasn't that far to the ocean; she could lose him there.

"Relax, little one, I'm not here to hurt you." He hopped down from his tree and strolled through the bracken, his movements leonine and almost predatory despite his relaxed stride. He quickly climbed the tree where she perched, swinging up through the branches with practiced ease. He lit on the branch next to her and she pressed herself back against the trunk, her muscles tightening, ready to fight or to run.

"I'm Jasper," he said, holding his hand out to her.

She eyed it warily, but didn't have the nerve to take it. Everything about this man screamed *danger*, and she didn't want to let him get a grip on her.

"Talkative little thing, aren't you?" He smiled, his black eyes playful, and Bella could almost have believed that he was harmless . . . if not for the scars.

His face grew serious, and he gave her a sympathetic look. "Look at those eyes. You can't be more than a week or two from the change, and here you are, without a sire, nobody to tell you what a bad idea it is to hunt in someone else's territory."

His words sounded almost like a threat, and Bella tried to press herself closer to the trunk.

"Relax," he said again, taking a small step toward her. "You just need a little coaching. Why don't you come meet the head of my coven?"

Coven. The word filled her mind with images of witches chanting spells as they circled a bubbling cauldron. What exactly *was* this man, anyway?

He smiled wryly. "Family. We're much more like a family. Come on. There are things we need to talk about, and you'll be more comfortable with Carlisle than you are with me." He caught her hand and held it tightly when she tried to pull away, and his tone turned commanding. "This isn't a choice, little one. You're in our territory, and you have to understand the rules. Whether you want to stick around is up to you, but you need to know what you're up against here." He jerked his chin to indicate that he was going to jump, and Bella followed him out of the tree.

He released her hand once they were on the ground and turned to face her. "Follow me—and stay close. I know you'd rather take off but that would be a bad idea." He gave her a stern look and then turned and started to run.

Bella followed. She was too scared to do anything else. Her instincts told her that threats from someone who looked the way he did were not to be taken lightly.

They ran through the trees for a couple of miles, their pace much gentler than the one Bella had maintained during her travels, and this time she allowed herself to really take in the scents around her. There was a lot of information in the various smells, but as they ran she noticed that several of the sweeter perfumes in the air grew thicker as they neared their destination. She could pick out seven distinct essences that filled the woods, some stronger than others, and her anxiety flared. What was she getting herself into?

Jasper shot her another warning glance and she followed obediently, praying that he wasn't leading her into danger.

Before long they entered a large clearing, inhabited by a stately three-story house and a trio of towering oak trees. Jasper slowed to a walk and strode across the grass, glancing back at Bella when she stopped short at the tree line.

"Coming?"

She swallowed hard, staring at the house, suddenly worried that there would be people inside. She had managed to avoid them so far, but she doubted she would be able to resist the scent of blood in an enclosed space. She didn't want Jasper getting angry with her for killing part of his family.

"You'll be all right. No one is going to hurt you." He waited for her to catch up with him and then headed across the grass again, mounting the eight steps to the porch in three quick strides. He pushed the door open and held it for her, wordlessly inviting her in.

She started to follow, but stopped on the threshold when she saw a mountain of a man descending a spiral staircase to the left of the door. He was huge, all long limbs and bulging muscle, and he glanced at the two of them and flashed Jasper a wide smile.

"You pick up a stray?"

"Something like that. Kid, this is Emmett."

"Hey." He crossed the floor and held out one massive paw. Bella shied away from him, but she figured she couldn't get in much deeper than she was now, so she swallowed hard and forced herself to grasp his hand.

"You got a name other than 'kid'?"

She just stared at him. She didn't want to tell him her name. What if word got around to Charlie where she was? *What* she was?

"She doesn't talk much," Jasper said. "Where's Carlisle?"

"Down at the river. Edward was being a little emo bitch, so the old man thought it might do him some good to get out of the house for a while."

Jasper gestured to the living room as he headed toward the back wall of the house, which was made entirely of glass. "Make yourself comfortable." He slid open a full-length window and gave a sharp whistle. "Carlisle! I need to have a word with you. Mind coming back for a minute?"

Bella heard a soft, "I'll be right there," drift back through the window, and Jasper turned back to her.

"Come on, little one. Take a seat."

She followed trepidatiously as he guided her into the living room, her eyes darting around and taking in the furniture. Chairs, a couch, a coffee table—all pretty normal, but for several large cardboard boxes stacked against one wall. There were no visible hospital beds with chains and collars, and she took that as a good sign.

Jasper flopped down in an armchair and Emmett followed suit, sprawling out on the couch with his long limbs dangling off either end. Bella found a corner and sank to the floor, tugging the hospital gown down over her thighs.

A moment later, a blond man wearing swimming trunks sauntered through the window that Jasper had left open. His hair and trunks were wet and dripping, and glittering droplets of water dotted his skin. He raised his eyebrows when he spotted Bella in the corner, and a warm smile lit up his face.

"Well, hello there. Jasper, introduce me to our guest."

"I would if I could. I found her out by La Push Road, fixing to make a snack out of a couple of boys from the reservation. She was alone, no coven, no sire, and she can't be more than a week or two from the change."

"You poor thing," the newest man breathed, sinking to his knees in front of her. "I was abandoned myself, when I was a newborn, so I know how overwhelming it can be."

Bella hugged herself and pressed back into the corner.

"I'm Carlisle Cullen," he continued, "and I guess you've met my boys, Emmett and Jasper."

Bella glanced between Carlisle and Jasper, unable to determine which was the greater threat. Carlisle was closer, encroaching on her space, but Jasper was just so . . . *terrifying*.

Carlisle followed her gaze and then turned back to her, smiling as though they were sharing a private joke. "Don't mind him. He always gets a little cranky when his wife is away."

Bella didn't respond, and she thought Carlisle looked a little disappointed when his joke fell flat. He grew serious, his expression troubled.

"Will you tell me your name?"

She stared at him, weighing her options. She didn't particularly want to tell him her name, but she didn't want him to become impatient or angry, either. She deliberated for a moment and finally decided to remain silent.

"Do you know who bit you?" he asked. "Was it someone nearby, or have you traveled a ways?"

When his questions once again went unanswered, he reached out and ran his thumb gently over the scar that Joham had left on Bella's neck when he had lost control while force-feeding her blood.

"It's pretty clean," he murmured, almost to himself, "though that doesn't necessarily mean the intent was to change and not kill." His hand drifted down to the sleeve of her hospital gown and his brow furrowed as he fingered it.

He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then shook off his musings. "We have a few things to discuss, but they can wait. I imagine you would like to get cleaned up."

He rose and offered Bella his hand, and she stared at it suspiciously.

"I promise I won't bite," he said with a warm smile. "I'll show you to a bathroom upstairs where you can shower, and we'll see if we can find some clothes for you to change into."

Bella didn't take his hand, but she did push herself to her feet, and she followed him across the room to the spiral staircase. He led her up to the third floor, and then down a hallway and through a door into a huge bedroom.

Bella froze in the doorway, staring at the large, four-poster bed in horror. He had said he was taking her to a bathroom, not a bedroom. Panic rose in her chest and she fell back a step, but Carlisle didn't seem to notice.

"We'll see if we can find something from my wife's closet for you," he was saying as he disappeared through another door. "I don't think anything will fit you very well—you're much closer to Alice's size, really—but I suppose we'll have to make do for now."

He emerged from the closet carrying a floral sun dress that belted at the waist. "This shouldn't be too difficult to alter. There are pins in the bathroom if you need to shorten the straps, and—" he stopped and gave her a puzzled look. "Are you all right?"

She drew in a steady breath and took the dress from him, not wanting to draw too much attention to herself.

Carlisle took her elbow and steered her toward yet another door. "The bathroom is just through here. The extra towels are on this shelf, and you can use any of the products in the shower. If there's anything else you need, please let me know."

He waited for a moment, as if hoping for a response, but then nodded and left, closing the door behind him.

Bella stared after him, stunned. It had been so long since she had been left alone to shower that she had expected him to stay. The fact that he had respected her privacy left her feeling slightly off-balance, though very, very grateful. She laid the dress on the bathroom counter, daring to hope that these vampires wouldn't be entirely like Joham.

Voices from the floor below interrupted her musings.

"She smells like seawater," Emmett's deep voice rumbled, and Carlisle's answered.

"I know, it concerns me, too. I'd like you two to follow her trail as far as you can, and see if you can discover whether she crossed into Quileute territory. Stay together please—and ask Edward to come inside. I think it's best if no one goes out alone until we find out where we stand."

Bella wrung her hands, wondering what they meant by Quileute territory. Were they talking about La Push? Would they be angry when they found out she had crossed the Reservation to get to Forks? She couldn't imagine why they would be. She had been there dozens of times before, and she had been careful not to disturb anyone today.

She heard footsteps file outside, and then after several long minutes another set of steps entered the house. They moved across hardwood floors and she heard the squeak of a bench before the piano sounded, loud and distracting. She could hear Carlisle's voice and another, talking softly, low enough for their words to be obscured by the piano music.

Bella ground her teeth in frustration. She didn't like being unable to hear what they were talking about, but as long as they were masking their conversation, she figured she might as well get cleaned up. She turned on the water and stepped under the spray, intending to hurry through her ablutions and be out within a couple of minutes.

Once beneath the warm cascade, however, she couldn't bring herself to rush. The water felt so good, and it had been so long since she had been left alone to get clean, that she found herself putting her worries aside and letting herself indulge in the comfort of the heated water and in the clean, soapy scent of the shampoos and body washes. She scrubbed away the salt and grime she had collected during her journey, and when she was finished she allowed herself another few minutes to just enjoy the lovely, relaxing warmth.

Before long, though, her worries caught up with her. The piano music continued downstairs, but the murmur of voices had stopped. Bella couldn't hear any other sounds, and it made her nervous not to know what was happening. She slipped out of the shower and dried off quickly, but was distracted once again when her eyes caught her reflection in the large mirror over the sink.

Over the last two months she had tried to avoid looking in mirrors as much as possible. She had never liked what she saw. Her skin had grown more and more sallow, her cheeks hollow, her hair limp and dry. In the back of her mind, she was expecting to see more of the same. So when her gaze fell on her image in the glass, she gave a jolt of surprise.

The first thing that drew her notice was her eyes. They were bright, vibrant red, not yellow or black like the vampires downstairs, or even deep burgundy like Joham's. A thick fringe of black lashes added to the dramatic effect, and for several seconds she couldn't look away from them.

Eventually, though, the rest of her face demanded her attention, and she was stunned by what she saw. The skin of her face had lost the yellow tinge, and though paler than ever, was now healthy and smooth as porcelain. Her cheeks were no longer sunken, but they lacked the baby fat she had carried in them before she had met Joham. The change enhanced her cheekbones and made her look older. Her body was thinner, too, but appealingly so. She no longer looked emaciated, but there was still a sparseness at her wrists and collarbones that made her look delicate, almost fragile. Even her hair had lost the straw-like quality that she had become accustomed to, and now fell in full, healthy curls around her shoulders.

She was amazed. She smoothed her hands over her face, taking in her full, pink lips, her flawless skin, her sharply defined eyebrows. Despite the unsettling red of her eyes, she had never looked more beautiful.

The piano quieted for a moment before a new song began, reminding Bella that she had intended to hurry. The voices remained silent, and her anxiety returned. She tugged on the dress that Carlisle had given her, pinning it at the shoulders to keep it from sagging scandalously low on her body, and then cinched the belt at the waist. It wasn't perfect, but it was a marked improvement over the ragged hospital gown, which she balled up and threw in the trash. She never wanted to see another one of those as long as she lived.

Once she was dressed she eased the bathroom door open as silently as possible and crept out of the bathroom, timing her footfalls so that they would be covered by the piano music. She made her way to the spiral staircase and eased down a few steps, trying to hide herself behind the stairs as much as possible while she peered over the side to the main floor below.

On a raised platform across the room, at a glossy black grand piano, a boy in damp swimming trunks hunched over the keys. She couldn't see his face, but she watched as his slow, melancholy movements coaxed a melody from the instrument. She took in his lean, bare arms and chest, still dotted with droplets of water, and the thick, damp shock of bronze hair on the top of his head. The leader, Carlisle, stood behind him, also still dressed in his swimming trunks, his hand rubbing lightly at the base of the boy's neck.

It was a confusing sight for Bella. The moment was sad and sweet, and revealed a tenderness that she hadn't expected from the monsters she knew them to be. She had learned during her time with Joham that affection could be counterfeited, but somehow this moment between the two of them felt different. Genuine.

She was a little uncomfortable intruding on them.

She was about to make herself known when she heard footsteps running toward the house. She hurriedly pulled herself back, crouching on the stairs, and listened as the front door opened and closed.

"We were right," Emmett announced. "She came straight across the Reservation. The Council won't be happy."

"I'm not worried," came Carlisle's confident reply. "I'll simply explain the circumstances. They're reasonable men, they won't hold it against her."

"I'm more worried that they'll hold it against *us*."

It was Jasper who had spoken that time, and a chill crept up Bella's spine. She didn't like Jasper.

"They'll be fine. My concern lies with the girl. I've never seen anyone quite so skittish, even a newborn."

"It would help if she'd answer a damn question," Jasper muttered.

"Is it possible she doesn't speak English? Maybe she didn't understand what you were asking."

This was spoken in a soft, velvet voice that Bella had only heard murmured beneath the distracting piano music. This must be the new boy, then, the sad, bronze-haired piano player. There was something haunting about his voice, and Bella peered over the side of the steps again, trying to catch a glimpse of his face. His head was turned and she caught his profile, the strong brow and straight nose, the lips tight and pulled into a slight frown.

"I suppose that's possible," Jasper said, "though she seemed like she understood me well enough. I think she's just too scared to talk, though I can't figure out what's got her so worked up."

"Oh, you can't?" Emmett snickered and gave Jasper's cheek a light smack.

"Yeah, yeah, I know what I look like." He batted Emmett's hand away. "I've never scared anybody this bad, though. I'd bet there's more to it."

"You think she's running from something?" the bronze-haired boy asked.

"Maybe. Which could mean trouble for us. I'm starting to wonder if it's a good idea to let her stay here, whether she's willing to accept our terms or not."

"Of course we'll let her stay," Carlisle said, his voice gently reproving. "She's just a girl. We can't leave her on her own."

Bella shivered and hunched her shoulders. Did they really expect her to stay with them? Were they going to give her a choice? Her gaze flicked to the front door, and then back just in time to see Jasper's eyes turn to meet hers, one eyebrow raised.

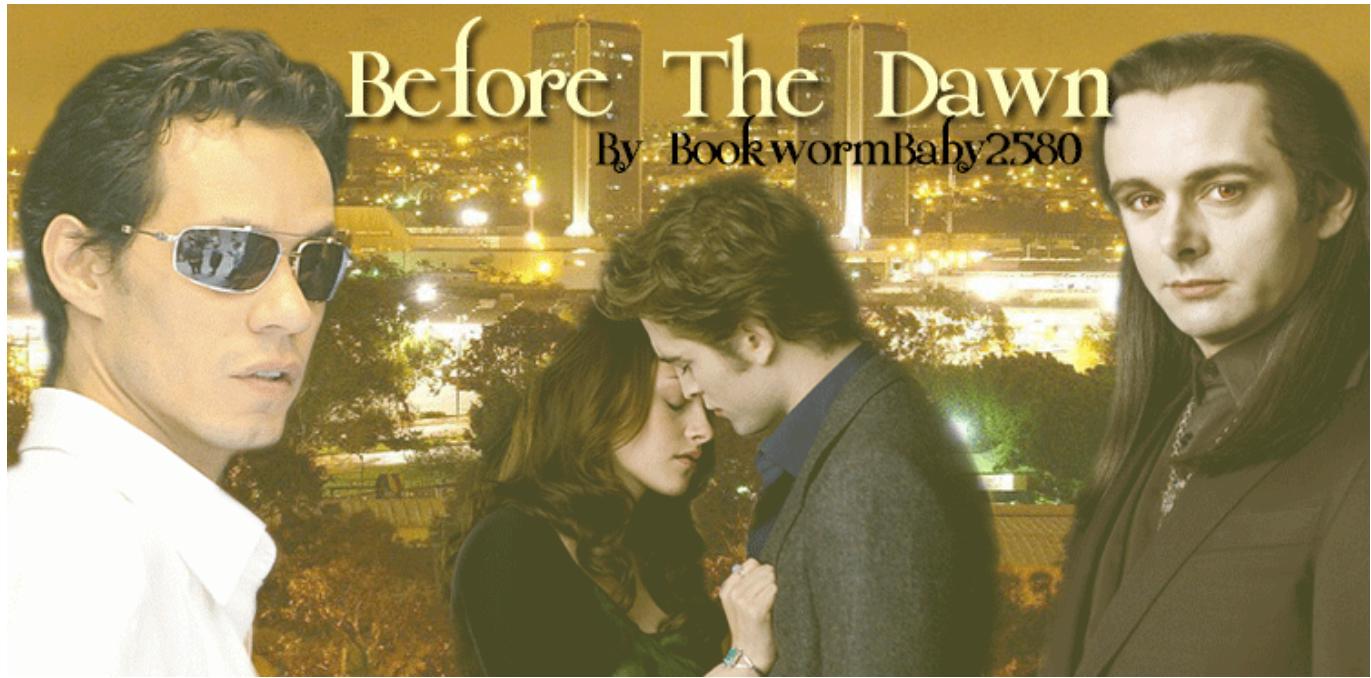
"Why don't you come on down and join us, little one? You can be a part of the conversation, rather than just eavesdropping."

Bella swallowed hard, her breath quickening. Was he angry? He didn't look like he was, really, and neither did the others. Carlisle was smiling warmly at her, beckoning her down the stairs. She didn't want to push her luck, so she slowly climbed to her feet and descended the spiral staircase.

The boy sitting at the piano turned toward Bella, and his eyes widened. He stood, his lips parting as he stared at her in surprise. He looked back at the other men, scanning their faces, before his gaze returned to Bella's.

"Her name is Isabella," he said quietly. "She's Chief Swan's daughter."

Dead Men Telling Tales



Bella gasped and retreated back to the stairs, stumbling up the steps as she stared at him in horror.

Carlisle was giving the boy a puzzled look. "I thought you said you couldn't hear her."

"I can't, but I can hear the chief. She's all he thinks about lately."

"Who changed you?" Jasper demanded, his fierce eyes boring into Bella. "When and where? Is there another vampire near Forks?"

Emmett spoke up in answer. "No, she doesn't live here; the chief's wife ran out on him years ago." He studied Bella's face with renewed interest. "I heard about this, though. Swan's kid went missing a couple of months back. He spent three weeks in Mexico trying to find her."

Bella winced at the thought of her father searching for her, and Carlisle turned a stunned gaze on her.

"Have you come all the way from Mexico? On your own?"

"She's not that old," Jasper murmured to himself.

Bella felt the panic rising, and she instinctively picked out the escape routes. The front door, the windows in the glass . . . *through* the glass, if necessary . . .

"I'm sorry."

It was the bronze-haired boy who spoke, his soft, velvet voice cutting through the confusion of her thoughts. "It was insensitive of me to blurt that out. I was just surprised to see you here."

Bella sank down onto the steps and stared at them through the bars of the railing, overwhelmed by the turn in conversation. Charlie, Mexico . . . these were things that belonged to *her*, not them. They knew things about her that she hadn't given them permission to know.

Carlisle moved toward her again, his expression deceptively compassionate as he lowered himself down to sit on the bottom step.

"I can't imagine how difficult this has all been for you. You've come such a long way."

"I wonder how many corpses she left in her wake," Jasper muttered.

Bella gasped, her eyes flying to his as she scrambled desperately to figure out *how* these people knew so much about her.

Carlisle's eyes shone with sympathy, and he moved up another step. "I understand, Isabella. I know that the thirst for blood is nearly impossible to ignore. It's all right."

His words disgusted her, and suddenly the long weeks of repressed resentment welled up inside of her and overflowed in a gush of anger. "No, it's *not* all right!" she yelled, pushing herself to her feet. "You're sick, horrible . . . *things!* You think just because you're vampires that you can go around hurting whoever you want? It's *wrong!* You can't just kill people!"

The four men stared at her with wide eyes, stunned by her unexpected outburst. The big one, Emmett, was the first to break the silence. He started laughing, a loud, hooting laugh that reverberated around the room.

"I can't believe what I'm hearing!" he cried, and then laughed again, rocking back on his heels with mirth.

It was more than Bella could take. After all of the pain and humiliation she had suffered, to have him standing there laughing at her was too much. A red haze clouded her vision and a snarl erupted from her throat as she launched herself at him, baring her teeth and aiming for his unprotected neck.

He saw her coming just in time to raise an arm in defense, and she sank her teeth into his forearm as her momentum threw him back onto the floor. She heard the cracking and splintering of the hardwood beneath them, but she barely gave it a moment's notice. She was lunging again, trying to get past his defenses, to reach his soft throat.

Emmett swore and threw her off of him, but she landed on her feet and spun toward him again. She noted that Jasper was advancing on her, but he was coming in low, the angle all wrong to cause her any serious injury. She dodged around him and was about to leap at Emmett again when Jasper's hand closed around her ankle. He yanked back hard, sending her sprawling to the floor, and then he was on top of her, pinning her down with a knee in her back while his hands grabbed her arms at the elbows and jerked them behind her.

She writhed beneath him, scrabbling for leverage, but the position left her weakened and she couldn't throw him off.

"Get off of me!" she screamed, panic beginning to overtake her anger. She should never have let him trap her here like this. She should have followed her instincts when she had first seen him and run when there was at least some chance of escaping him. Now, surrounded by enemies, she had no chance. Memories of Joham pinning her to the bed flashed through her mind and she struggled harder, but Jasper held her with apparent ease.

"That's enough, little one," he said, his voice steady and commanding. "Settle yourself down or I'll do it for you."

She growled and snapped at him, making another futile attempt to twist around and get her teeth on some part of him. Another roar of rage escaped her throat, but it slowly died off as a wave of peaceful calm settled over her. Her fear and anger melted away, and for the first time since she had parked outside the bar in Tijuana, she felt warm and safe. She let her head fall to the floor and pressed her cheek against the glossy wood, taking slow, deep breaths.

"That's better," Jasper murmured, his voice soothing. "You just keep yourself nice and relaxed, you hear?"

But the peace and safety she was enjoying started to slip away, and fear rushed in to take its place as she realized her position. She was surrounded by four men—monsters just like Joham—pinned to the floor, with her skirt riding high on her thighs. She whimpered and writhed beneath Jasper, but he only tightened his hold on her.

"Keep it together, Isabella. Show me you can stay calm on your own and I'll let you up."

There was nothing she wanted more than to be free of his hold, so she forced herself to swallow back her fear and take deep, even breaths.

"Good," he murmured. "That's very good. We're going to get up now and go sit down in the living room so we can talk like civilized people. Understand?"

She nodded, trying to fight the urge to struggle, knowing it would be counterproductive.

"Good girl." He eased his weight off of her and stood, pulling her to her feet in front of him without letting go of her arms. She looked up at the four vampires towering over her and suddenly felt very small.

"We're going to go to the living room now," Jasper said, his voice still even and authoritative. "Once you're sitting down I'll let go of you, but I expect you to stay in your seat. We don't want to hurt you, but we'll do what we have to do to protect ourselves."

She nodded again, willing to do anything to get him to let her go. She let him guide her away from the stairs and into the plush sitting room. He steered her to what looked like an antique sofa, the dark wood and embroidered fabric carefully preserved despite its age. Jasper released one arm until she was sitting stiffly in the center of the couch, and then he let her go and settled next to her. Carlisle sat on her other side, and Emmett and Edward selected nearby armchairs.

And then Jasper laughed. It was a short, choked laugh that he had tried to stifle, and Bella whipped her head around to glare at him. He wasn't looking at her, though. He caught Emmett's eye and laughed again, not bothering to restrain it this time.

"That was one of the funniest things I've ever seen," he said.

Edward snickered, and that got Jasper going even more.

"This tiny little thing," he said between more laughter, waving a hand in Bella's direction. "She took you down like you were nothing!"

"Shut up," Emmett muttered, but his response only made Jasper and Edward laugh harder.

"You should have seen your face!" Edward crowed. "And was that a squeal I heard? Or would you call it more of a shriek?"

"I did not shriek! And she caught me off guard—that kid is deceptively strong!"

He rubbed at his forearm irritably, and Bella couldn't help feeling some satisfaction over the marks that her teeth had left in the large man's flesh, even while she regretted doing it.

"You have no idea how bad this stings," he muttered.

Jasper arched an eyebrow. "Oh, *I* have no idea?"

"That's enough," Carlisle said, though it was obvious he was holding back a smile. "Isabella, Emmett didn't mean to upset you the way he did. I'm afraid you mistook his laughter for criticism, when he was really only amused by an unusual coincidence."

Bella pulled her knees to her chest, careful to keep her skirt tucked around her legs. Regardless of the reason for Emmett's amusement, she was more anxious than ever to leave this place. She wished they would just get on with whatever it was they wanted to tell her so that she could go.

"It's quite unusual to meet a vampire who has qualms about killing humans," Carlisle went on. "More particularly, a newborn vampire. So it's surprising to us that you take the moral stance that you do, and no less so because you happen to have stumbled upon a coven with the same beliefs." He smiled kindly at her. "That's what Jasper brought you back here to discuss. We don't allow the hunting of humans in our territory."

She stared at him, not quite daring to believe what she was hearing. "You don't . . . you don't kill people?"

He shook his head.

"How?"

He chuckled softly. "We drink animal blood. It's satisfying, if not particularly enjoyable."

"But how do you . . . when you smell them . . ."

He nodded his understanding. "It's difficult, isn't it? Nearly impossible, in fact, during your first year. But we'll help you learn control if you'd like us to, and I promise you that with time and practice you *can* master your thirst."

She looked around at the men again, suddenly not quite as eager to run. If they really didn't kill people, if they could teach her better control, then maybe she could see Charlie without worrying about hurting him.

But what was their motive? What did they want from her?

"Why would you help me?"

"Because we remember what it was like," Carlisle said gently. "No one should have to face the first year alone."

"There are things you need to know," Jasper added. "Things you'll get yourself killed over if you don't."

"Can I . . ." Bella hesitated, wringing her hands. "I want to see my dad."

Carlisle and Jasper exchanged glances.

"That's a bit complicated," Carlisle answered.

"It's not complicated," Jasper said. "She can't see him."

"Jasper—"

"Don't give her false hope, Carlisle. She's not human anymore. That part of her life is over."

"There's no reason she can't—"

"There are plenty of reasons.

The sound of distant tires turning onto a gravel road drew the attention of the four men, and they all looked toward the front window.

"Edward?" Carlisle said expectantly.

He frowned. "It's a woman, human . . ."

Bella caught her breath.

"She's thinking about you, Carlisle," Edward continued. "Did you tell someone Esme was out of town?"

"Yes, I mentioned it to one of the doctors at the hospital. Why?"

Edward smirked. "She seems to have taken it as an invitation to make her move."

"Oh, dear." Carlisle's brow furrowed. "This is going to be uncomfortable, isn't it?"

"Extremely. She brought champagne and strawberries." He smiled broadly.

Carlisle shook his head in frustration. "Does a wedding ring mean nothing to these women? The disrespect to my wife is appalling."

"She's rehearsing what she'll say to you," Edward said. "Something about a young man dropping by the hospital to leave you a note . . . she figured it must be important so she decided to bring it out to you. Wasn't that thoughtful of her?"

Carlisle rolled his eyes, but Bella had stopped listening to them. Panic was rising inside of her at the thought of being so close to a human, and she pushed herself to her feet.

"I can't—" she said, her throat burning at the memory of the intoxicating scent.

Carlisle stood with her, taking her hand.

"We'll help you, Isabella. You can handle this. The first thing you have to remember is to keep your head. If you force yourself to think logically you can hold your instinctual responses at bay."

It was one of the hardest things that had ever been asked of her. She was just supposed to ignore the urges rising her? It seemed impossible, but Carlisle was still speaking, still guiding her through.

"Ask yourself questions," he was saying. "Even simple ones. What color is the carpet? How many seconds are in thirty-eight years? What is the average number of dust motes per cubic inch in the room?"

It was working. As she directed her mind to find the answers to even these absurdly easy questions, she felt the panic receding, her thoughts becoming clearer.

"Good. Very good." Carlisle watched her intently until she returned his gaze. "I'm going to send you upstairs with Emmett and Jasper—"

"Emmett and Edward," Jasper interrupted. He gave a one-shouldered shrug. "I'm not her favorite person, Carlisle."

"With Emmett and Edward, then," Carlisle said, turning back to Bella. "They're going to keep a tight hold on you for as long as Dr. Kidwell is here, to make sure that there are no accidents."

Bella shook her head quickly. "The river. You said there was a river?"

"Yes, out back a ways." He looked confused.

"I need to go to the river."

"I'm not sure it's a good idea—"

"It's out of human hearing distance," Edward interrupted. "We don't want your colleague noticing anything unusual."

Carlisle debated for a moment and then nodded. "Go quickly. Jasper, grab a bag of sporting equipment. If it looks like we're on our way out the door, perhaps Dr. Kidwell won't stay. I'm going to run upstairs and get dressed."

Emmett and Edward each grabbed one of Bella's wrists, and though she cringed at the unwelcome touch she knew it was safer than going alone. They ran with her, dodging through the trees in the forest until the sparkling ripples of the river appeared. She plunged headlong into the current, pulling free from her surprised companions and diving down into the water, kicking her feet to propel herself to the deepest reaches. At the murky bottom she found a tangle of greenery and clung to it, preventing herself from drifting back to the surface.

Edward and Emmett had hesitated on the bank, but they joined her after only a couple of seconds, each of them anxious to get a secure grip on her again. Bella didn't like it, but she recognized the extra layer of safety they provided and she fought the urge to try and escape them.

The water sounded different here. It was a constant rushing instead of the rhythmic push and pull that she had become accustomed to in the ocean. But the liquid was thick and heavy, and it muffled Carlisle's distant voice as he conversed with his uninvited guest. Bella tried not to think of her, of the steady thrum of her heartbeat or the blood that flowed warm and wet in her veins. She tried not

to think of the blood that Joham had forced her to drink—the thick fluid that had so satisfied her incessant cravings.

She shuddered in revulsion. The taste may not have repulsed her, but the idea of it still did. She buried her face in the tangle of weeds and focused on the distant splashing of river fish.

A hand squeezed her shoulder—large, with long, nimble fingers. Edward's then, and not Emmett's massive paw. She turned her head just a little, peeking at him from under her floating cloud of her hair. He gave her an encouraging smile, and for just a moment all she could think of was the way his eyes crinkled at the corners and the sparkle that lit them even down here in the cloudy water.

She had to remind herself that he knew too much, things he wasn't allowed to know, and she turned away again. Still, he was less intimidating than the massive man on her other side, and she found herself sidling a little closer to him, if only to put some distance between herself and Emmett.

In the distance she heard a laugh, a fluttering, flirtatious giggle from a voice that sounded too old to be giggling flirtatiously. Carlisle answered, and though Bella couldn't make out the specific words, she did notice the odd balance between clipped impatience and forced politeness. There was more trilling laughter, but Bella read disappointment in it this time. The hopeful doctor was discovering that her ploy was a failure, and it wasn't long before her car's engine started again and she was driving off down the gravel road.

Still, the trio waited in the water. It wasn't until her tires reached the pavement of the old highway that Edward and Emmett released their hold and started swimming back to the surface. Bella allowed herself another couple of seconds in the dim safety of the river, but then pushed off of the soft bed and followed the boys out of the water.

"Isabella, that's brilliant!" Edward said as he ruffled his hair, shaking out the water. "How did you come up with that?"

She just shrugged, wading onto the bank. Her dress clung to her body, and she crossed her arms self-consciously over herself.

"Damn," Emmett muttered, whipping off his shirt and wringing it out. "If I'd known you wanted to go *in* the water, I'd have brought a towel."

Edward shifted impatiently from foot to foot as Emmett toed off his sodden shoes and rolled up the cuffs of his jeans. Edward was still wearing his swimming shorts, so the wet clothes weren't the nuisance for him that they were for his companions. Once Emmett had his soggy shoes and socks dangling from his fingers, the three of them set off through the trees again, jogging back to the house at a much less urgent pace.

Carlisle was grumbling irritably to Jasper about Dr. Kidwell when they reached the back porch, sporting jeans and a polo shirt in place of the swimming trunks he had worn before. He and Jasper moved to greet them at the back door with a stack of large, fluffy towels.

Emmett produced a hose from the side of the house and helped them all rinse the dirt from their feet. They each accepted a towel and started drying themselves as well as they could.

"You should have seen Isabella!" Edward told Carlisle excitedly. "She went straight into the water without a second thought, and it was *perfect*. Couldn't smell the scent, couldn't hear the pulse—there was no temptation at all."

Carlisle's face brightened with pride, and he gave her a glowing smile. "How very clever of you! How's your throat? Are you thirsty?"

Bella swallowed against the mild burn. "A little."

"We'll take you out soon and show you how we hunt. But first let's get you some dry clothes." He gestured for her to come into the house, but she hesitated at the glass door. Her dress was still dripping, and she didn't feel as casual about making a mess as the others clearly did.

"It's all right. The floor will dry." Carlisle gave her a teasing smile. "We're going to have to replace it now, anyway."

Bella cringed, regretting her impulsive attack on Emmett, but Edward distracted everyone from the subject by nodding toward the envelope in Carlisle's hand.

"Who's been leaving you messages at the hospital?"

"Oh. I don't know, Dr. Kidwell said someone was there asking to speak to me." He tore open the envelope and slid out a sheet of paper.

Bella peered at it, reading the words as curiously as the others did.

Cullen,

An unfamiliar V. crossed our territory earlier today. If you have any information, please advise.

Uley

Jasper frowned and glanced at Bella. "This kid's going to be trouble," he muttered.

"Nonsense, Jasper. She wasn't aware of the treaty. The Quileutes won't hold that against her."

"It's not what she's done that'll cause problems. It's who she is."

"Come now. The Quileutes are perfectly reasonable men."

"Nobody's reasonable when it comes to family."

Carlisle furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

"Every night when Chief Swan is finished drinking himself stupid at the tavern, do you know who they call to take him home?"

Bella gave a jolt at his words. "What?"

"Billy Black," Jasper said, ignoring her.

Carlisle's eyebrows raised in surprise. "How do you know?"

"What do you mean, drinking?" Bella demanded. She knew her father enjoyed the occasional beer, but a six-pack usually lasted him a month. At least, it had whenever she'd stayed with him.

"I know because I make it my business to know," Jasper said. "When that man comes to Forks, I find out why."

"What's wrong with my dad?"

Carlisle's gaze flicked to Bella, but he addressed Jasper. "Swan and Black are close, then?"

"Very close. And if Black finds out Swan's kid is a vampire, he's going to shoot first and ask questions later. Our best bet is to keep this little one as far away from Forks *and* La Push as possible."

"STOP IGNORING ME!" Bella yelled, her frustration getting the better of her.

Jasper turned to her and arched an eyebrow. "You're going to want to get a handle on that temper of yours, kid."

"Jasper, she's a newborn. You know she can't help it." Carlisle gave her an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry, Isabella, that *was* terribly rude of us. Of course you're anxious to know about your father."

Bella hugged herself protectively and inched away from Jasper. "What's wrong with him?" she asked Carlisle. "Why is he drinking?"

"He doesn't know how to cope," Edward said gently, stepping up behind her. "He hit a dead end trying to find you, and he feels like he's failed you. If he could think of anything to do, he would do it. But he can't, so he drinks."

"Can't I talk to him?" she pleaded, her eyes seeking Carlisle's. She knew asking Jasper was a lost cause, but she thought if Carlisle took her side, she might have a chance.

But Jasper set his jaw and shook his head. "Absolutely not."

Carlisle met his gaze with a pained expression. "You can't imagine what it feels like for a man to lose his child, Jasper. To wonder where she is, if she's hurt, if she needs him. . . ."

He trailed off and looked at Edward, and Bella saw Jasper wince.

"I can't let him go through that," Carlisle concluded. "Not when there's something I can do about it."

And somehow, that was enough to change Jasper's mind. He gave a resigned sigh and shook his head. "Fine. You're right. But you're going to have to come up with some way to present the situation to Black so that he doesn't sic Sam and Jared on us before you can convince him that we didn't change her."

"I can handle Black." He strode into the kitchen and plucked a pen out of a cup by the phone while the rest of them followed after him. He flipped over the note that Dr. Kidwell had brought him and wrote out a reply in neat, elegant script.

Dear Mr. Uley,

We have made the acquaintance of the subject in question. She is in our custody and is being educated on the details of the treaty. There should be no further infractions.

However, there are some unusual circumstances that I would like to discuss with the Council, and Mr. Black in particular. We will be at the boundary line on La Push road at sundown this evening, if

you are available to meet with us then. If not, I look forward to a parley with you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Carlisle Cullen

He looked at Jasper with raised eyebrows, and Jasper nodded his approval.

"I think we should call the girls home from Paris. They should be here in case things get ugly."

"I think you're right," Carlisle agreed.

Jasper plucked the phone from the cradle and dialed it quickly. His call was immediately answered by a cheerful feminine voice that Bella's sharpened ears had no difficulty picking up.

"You've reached Alice and the Cullenettes! Sorry we're not available, Jasper, but if you'll call the hotel, I left a message for you there. I love you, and we'll see you all soon!"

An amused smile pulled at Jasper's lips as he disconnected and dialed a long string of numbers. A different woman answered this time, her voice low and cool.

"BLC Design Hôtel , mon nom est Mireille. Comment puis-je vous aider?"

"This is Jasper Hale. I understand Alice Cullen left a message for me?"

The woman on the line switched effortlessly into lightly-accented English. *"One moment, monsieur. I'll look."* There was a soft rustling sound, and then she spoke again. *"Yes, here we are. Ms. Cullen said to tell you she is sorry she was unable to be there to greet your guest, but she had difficulty finding a flight that suited her particular needs. She will be there by noon tomorrow, however, in plenty of time for Eleazar's visit."*

Carlisle's face brightened. "Eleazar's visiting? How wonderful!"

The woman on the phone wasn't finished, however. *"Ms. Cullen also said to tell you that she sent the boxes to you for a reason, and that you should open them. And—"* she broke off and let out a quiet laugh. *"She says that you should stop being such a grouch."*

Edward and Emmett snickered.

Jasper rolled his eyes at them, but smiled to himself. "Duly noted. Is there anything else?"

"No, monsieur."

"Thank you."

"Good day."

Jasper replaced the phone in the cradle. "I guess we should open those boxes."

Carlisle led the way into the living room, to the row of boxes that Bella had noticed earlier. He used his thumbnail to cut through the tape on the first one, and pulled open the flaps. Inside were stacks of neatly folded clothes, and he lifted out a yellow silk blouse.

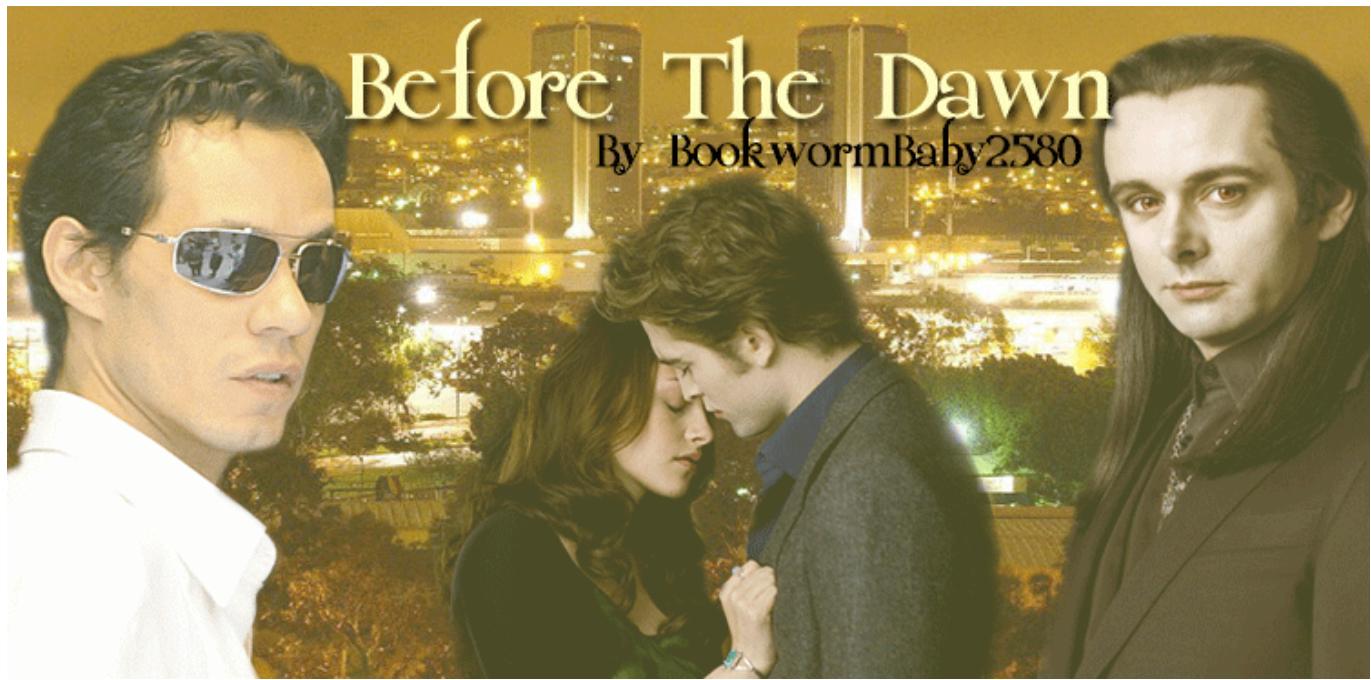
"Clothes," Emmett said dryly. "What a surprise. But why would Alice care if we opened the stuff she bought on her little shopping spree?"

"That's not for her," Edward said, eyeing the blouse in Carlisle's hands. "It's a little too large for Alice, and definitely too small for Esme or Rose. Alice bought clothes for Isabella."

Bella gaped at him, and then at the clothes. "How . . . ?"

Carlisle chuckled. "We'll tell you all about Alice and the rest of the peculiar members of our family, I promise. But first, why don't you take some of these upstairs and get changed? I need to run into town and have a messenger deliver this note to for me, and then we'll have a long conversation about extra-sensory perception and our shape-shifting neighbors to the west."

Little Battles



Bella huddled in a ball in the corner of the couch, her mind spinning from the ludicrous conversation she had just had. Mind-reading, precognition, vampire-killing werewolves . . . there wasn't anything about what she had just heard that didn't sound utterly farcical.

And yet, she believed it. Of course she believed it. This was her life now. When one sparkled in the sunlight, one was inclined to believe a lot of things one might once have considered ridiculous.

She let her fingers trace over the rough seam of the jeans she was wearing—her third change of clothes that day. After soiling Carlisle's wife's dress, she had changed into a pair of soft khaki-colored slacks and a silk blouse. But those had been destroyed when Carlisle had taken Bella out for a hunt to satisfy her nagging thirst and growing restlessness. It had been exhilarating, and though the blood didn't taste anything like what might be called good, Bella drank it down like it was ambrosia. Animal blood was the key to what she wanted—a life free of her murderous impulses and the ability to resist temptation enough that she could see Charlie.

But she had made a mess of herself. By the time she had quenched the burning in her throat, her beautiful new clothes were shredded and spattered with blood.

Emmett had come to the rescue of her dignity. While all of the Cullens had politely averted their eyes, Emmett stripped off the button-down shirt he had worn over his white T-shirt and tossed it to her. She had accepted it gratefully and worn it on the run back to the house, all the while waiting for some recrimination about the destruction of the clothes that had been so kindly offered to her.

She had received none. Instead, Carlisle gave her an understanding smile as he suggested she go up to his room and get changed again.

Thankfully, she wasn't in danger of running out of clothing any time soon. She had barely made a dent in the two large boxes that had been carried up to the bedroom at the top of the stairs, and there were still fourteen more lined up against the wall of the living room. This mysterious Alice seemed to have anticipated her every need, and had filled the boxes with pants, shirts, dresses—all with French labels—and more shoes than she had ever seen in one house. And underwear! It had

been so long since Bella had been allowed to wear underwear that she had nearly burst into tears at the sight of it. The brightly-colored scraps of lace lent her a feeling of security deeper than anything else that the Cullens had offered so far, and she pulled them on with a sense of worshipful reverence that would have made any god jealous.

Of course, the first set of underwear had been ruined with the rest of her clothes during her hunt.

When Bella had dipped into the boxes for the second time, she'd chosen sturdier materials—cotton undergarments, heavy jeans, and a thick, soft sweater. She had left off the shoes, fearing they might hinder her if she needed to make a quick escape, and then headed downstairs to have the conversation that the Cullens kept promising her.

And now she was curled up in a ball on the couch, wondering what in the world had happened to her life.

"And *why* can't Edward read my mind?" she asked Carlisle, not entirely sure she believed it was true.

He spread his hands to show that he didn't have the answer to her question. "Perhaps you have a talent of your own that keeps him out. Mental shields aren't unheard of."

"But Jasper still knows what I'm feeling."

"That's right. Whatever it is that keeps Edward out doesn't seem to affect Jasper."

"And what about you?"

He raised his eyebrows in question.

"What do you do?"

"I have no talent."

"A relatively small number of vampires have special gifts," Jasper added from where he sat on the floor next to the fireplace. "Though it can seem like more of them do because the talented ones are the ones who tend to live longer and earn positions of prominence. Like the Volturi Guard."

Bella shuddered. She had been told all about the Volturi, and despite Carlisle's good-natured reminiscences and Jasper's obvious reverence for them, she was sure she wanted nothing to do with them. She had made it a goal to never attract their attention.

She hugged her stylish-jean-clad knees to her chest and sighed. "When can I see Charlie?"

"Not for a while yet," Carlisle said, giving her an apologetic gaze. "It can take up to a year for you to get your thirst under control. We have to wait until it's safe for him."

"A *year*?" She sat forward, gaping at him. "I can't wait that long!"

"You won't have to." It was Jasper who spoke again, lazy and self-assured.

Carlisle frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

He gave a one-shouldered shrug. "She won't. I'm not sure what's going on in the kid's head, but she is literally afraid of the scent of blood. It's strange, but it's helpful. Her control is excellent."

Bella gaped at him. Had he just offered her a compliment?

"Why are you afraid of blood?" Carlisle asked curiously.

"Why were *you*?" Jasper countered, saving Bella the trouble of answering.

Carlisle chuckled. "Good point."

"You were afraid of blood?" Bella asked him.

"In a manner of speaking. I knew how compelling it was, and I didn't want to lose control and become a murderer."

Bella swallowed hard, remembering the man she had killed in Mexico. "I don't want to, either."

"I'm very pleased to hear that." He smiled at her, and Bella looked away quickly. It was much too easy to get comfortable with him.

"Can I see Charlie, then?"

His smile faltered. "It's still quite early, Isabella."

"You were the one who didn't want to leave him wondering," Emmett smirked from the chair where he was sprawled out, one leg hooked over the back.

"We'll discuss it with Billy Black tonight and see what he thinks."

Jasper frowned. "Are you sure you don't want to postpone your little powwow until tomorrow night, when the girls can be there?"

"I think five is a sufficient number for a friendly discussion."

"And if it doesn't remain friendly?"

"Then we'll leave."

Jasper lolled back against the stone of the fireplace and crossed his ankles in front of him.
"Whatever you say, boss."

"We should go soon," Carlisle said, glancing out the window at the fading light. "Isabella, are you ready?"

"Ready to go see a bunch of humans? Sure."

She regretted her sarcasm as soon as it came out. It wasn't wise to antagonize the coven who had been so patient with her.

But Carlisle only smiled. "It will be easier than you think. The wolves' smell will kill whatever cravings you have."

"You won't. . ." Her throat went dry and she swallowed hard. "You won't let anything happen?"

He reached out and took her hand in his. "I promise. But our precautions may be uncomfortable for you. Jasper and Emmett will have to hold onto you."

She pulled her hand back and hugged her knees tightly. "It's better than . . ."

She trailed off, but Carlisle understood her implication. "It is."

She drew in a deep breath and held it for a moment before exhaling in a rush. "Okay. I'm ready."

They took a car to the meeting point. Bella had never minded driving before, but now it felt unnatural. To cram herself into a flimsy metal box and hold herself still while following the indirect roads at a speed slower than she could run . . . it was all a little bit ridiculous. At least there was no danger of catching her clothes on nearby twigs and ruining them, she reminded herself, and she hunched down between Emmett and Jasper, trying to make herself as small as possible.

Carlisle pulled his Mercedes off of La Push road, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, and cut the engine. He looked expectantly at Edward, who was seated beside him, but the boy just shrugged.

"I don't hear anyone."

"It's not quite sundown," Carlisle responded calmly, and he folded his hands in his lap.

Bella couldn't boast of the same equanimity and neither, it seemed, could the others. Emmett drummed his fingers on the armrest and Jasper's gaze darted around the trees beyond the window, ever alert.

Edward fidgeted, his frown growing deeper with every passing minute. He muttered something about disrespect that Bella didn't quite catch, but Carlisle just gave him a serene smile.

"After all, we didn't give them much notice."

"Still. If they weren't going to come, they could have sent word."

"It's early yet. You must learn not to take these things as a personal affront, Edward."

"And what if a personal affront is exactly what's intended?"

Carlisle gripped the boy's shoulder gently. "The sentiment behind the action is not our concern. We are here with a task, and we will do our best to complete it."

"We don't *have* to consult with them. If they're determined to be uncooperative, they can stay out of our business."

Carlisle's hand moved from the boy's shoulders to the back of his neck, rubbing soothingly. "Patience, Edward. You must learn to act, and not to react. If your decisions are based on the behavior of others, you will always be a slave to another's whim."

"And we're not slaves to their whims now? We don't have to consult with them! This is a courtesy!"

"Calm yourself, son." Carlisle's voice sharpened just a little. "It was my choice to arrange this meeting. Our friend Billy has perspective that I lack, and I requested his presence. It is he who is inconvenienced by the invitation, and it is his choice whether to accept it or decline."

"He could have sent word back with the messenger."

Carlisle folded his hands in his lap again and turned to look out the windshield. "It's early yet."

A few minutes passed in silence, until Jasper shifted in his seat so that Emmett was in his line of sight.

"One little snap of her teeth and you were down for the count," he said with a smirk.

"Oh, shut up."

"It's really sad, Em. She can't weigh more than your forearm—"

Jasper broke off with a grunt when Emmett lunged across Bella and slugged him in the stomach.

"That's enough, boys," Carlisle said with an amused quirk of his lips.

They settled down obediently, and another quiet minute passed before Edward snickered.
"Squealed like a little girl."

Emmett huffed. "You see the kind of grief you've caused me?" he said to Bella.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, shrinking back against the seat.

He jabbed her in the side with his finger. "I owe you a beat-down, girl."

Jasper snorted. "Save yourself the embarrassment. She may be little, but she's still a newborn."

"You underestimate me." Emmett wrapped an arm around Bella's shoulders. "I haven't met a vampire yet that I couldn't out-muscle."

"They're coming."

Edward's quiet announcement brought an end to the conversation, and everyone fell silent again, turning watchful eyes on the windows.

Edward frowned. "Something's happened."

"What do you mean?" Carlisle turned to look at him.

"I don't know. They're not thinking about specifics, but . . . they're . . ."

"What?"

Jasper opened his door a crack and drew in a sharp breath. "Yeah, I feel it. They didn't like us much before, but I've never felt this kind of hostility from them."

"Do you think they're upset over Bella crossing their territory?" Carlisle asked.

"I don't think I care. Let's get out of here."

Carlisle furrowed his brow, considering Jasper's advice. "I'm not sure it would help things if we asked them to meet us and then left."

"It's not going to help to stick around and talk to them, either. Tempers are running high. This meeting comes with an awful lot of risk."

Carlisle's brow smoothed, and he seemed to come to a decision. "I'll count on you to maintain control, then. Keep your door open."

"Yes, sir."

An old red pick-up pulled off of the road a few yards in front of them, and three men hopped out of the back. They all wore cut-off shorts without shirts, and looked to be in their mid-twenties. They formed a line between the two cars, feet planted, arms folded across their chests, and glared at Carlisle's car.

Their scent drifted in through the window, and Bella grimaced. She had wondered earlier why La Push smelled so bad. Now she knew. These men *reeked*.

"Isabella, please stay here with Jasper and Emmett while I speak with our friends," Carlisle said, and he and Edward both slid out of the car and moved to stand in front of it.

Bella leaned forward in her seat, anxious to see what was happening. She saw the door of the truck open, and she immediately recognized the man who eased himself out from behind the wheel. Billy Black—she had forgotten the name, but seeing his weathered face brought back memories of summertime trips to La Push, playing with his daughters while he and Charlie fished.

He walked up to the line of younger men, wincing slightly with each step, and stopped just behind the right shoulder of the tallest one.

Carlisle glanced at Edward, a troubled frown on his face, before his gaze returned to the older man.

"Mr. Black, are you seeing someone about your diabetes?"

The older man sneered at him. "I didn't come here for medical advice, Cullen."

"You shouldn't ignore it. If there's nerve damage—"

"My health is not your concern. If that's all you brought me here to discuss, we're through."

"No. I'm sorry." Carlisle glanced back at the car. "I'd like to apologize on behalf of the vampire who crossed your land earlier today. She was unaware of our treaty, obviously, and had no intention of upsetting anyone."

"I'm not interested in apologies, either. What do you want?"

Carlisle glanced at Edward again, but the got to the point. "This vampire . . . she came here because she has some familiarity with the area. She's a local girl—or she once was."

Bella watched the expressions of the younger men darken, and Billy's teeth clenched. "A local girl has been changed? Are you trying to tell me that the treaty has been broken?"

"No." Carlisle's answer was firm. "We haven't violated our agreement, nor do we intend to. But the girl came here looking for her father, and . . . well, I'm considering arranging a meeting between them."

Billy shrugged indifferently. "This doesn't sound like my concern."

"No, technically, it's not. I've only asked to discuss it with you because you're better acquainted with her father than I am. I'd like your opinion on whether he can handle hearing the truth, or if he's better off not knowing."

Billy raised one eyebrow, but remained silent.

Carlisle drew in a deep breath and let it out. "She's Charlie Swan's daughter."

Billy reacted as though he had been punched in the stomach. His breath left his lungs in a rush and he stumbled back a step. One of the younger men hurried to support him, but Billy waved him away.

"Charlie's daughter," he said, struggling to regain his composure. "She's a vampire?"

Carlisle nodded solemnly.

"She's just a little girl!"

"Which is why she came looking for her father. I believe it would lend her some stability if she could talk with him, but I don't want to do anything that would upset the chief."

"I want to see her," Billy said, his voice hard.

"Of course." Carlisle looked back over his shoulder and Jasper opened the door.

"Come on, little one. Time to make your debut."

They slid out of the car, with Emmett following after, both men holding tightly to Bella's upper arms, keeping her under control. They were helping, she reminded herself over and over again.

They moved to stand beside Carlisle, the La Push stench becoming stronger with every step forward. The Cullens had been right about that, at least. The scent of Billy's blood wasn't at all appealing when mingled with the repulsive odor coming from the other men.

"Isabella," Billy whispered, his eyes welling up with tears. "You've grown."

She tried to force a smile, but it came out more as a grimace.

Billy stiffened his spine, his jaw clenching. "There's some risk involved with her seeing Charlie?"

Carlisle nodded. "She's young. Her craving for blood is still strong. But we'll take precautions, and I believe we can keep Chief Swan safe."

"No."

It wasn't Billy who spoke this time, but the man standing just in front of him. The tallest and most imposing of the three, he would have made an intimidating sight even without the hatred that twisted his face.

Carlisle glanced at Jasper. "You have an objection, Sam?"

"Yes, I have an objection. That girl is dead. The moment she was bitten she ceased to exist in this world, and you're not going to put the citizens of Forks at risk because she wants her daddy."

Billy stepped forward, moving up next to Sam. "Normally, I would agree with you. But Charlie doesn't know she's dead, and it's the not knowing that's killing him."

"That's not our problem."

"Sam—"

"People go missing. That's just the way it is."

Billy sighed heavily. "This isn't our decision to make. If the Cullens want to reveal their secret, that's up to them."

"And what about *our* secret? If he learns about them, what's to stop him from learning about us?"

"Maybe he should. It wouldn't hurt to have an ally at the Forks Police Department."

"And what if he tells other people?"

"That's a concern of mine as well," Carlisle said. "Can Chief Swan be discreet?"

Billy regarded Carlisle and Sam carefully, and then nodded. "He can. The greater difficulty will be in convincing him that you're telling him the truth."

"And what about her mother?" Sam demanded. "Grandparents? Aunts? Uncles? How many people do we have to tell?"

"Nobody else," Bella interrupted quietly, and every head swivelled toward her.

She kept her eyes down, staring at her bare toes as they curled against the carpet of pine needles beneath her feet. "Renée can't keep a secret. She can't know. I just want to see my dad."

"Tough." Sam crossed his arms over his chest and glowered at her.

"Sam—"

"No, Billy!" Sam rounded on him, his temper flaring. "It's bad enough that these *vermin* have come here and infested our land. They don't get to start changing the rules now." He gave Bella a disgusted look. "She can stay, as long as she's kept under control. But if Charlie finds out what she is, I'll consider the treaty broken."

Billy bristled. "It's not your decision alone."

"I'm the head of this pack—"

"The pack, but not the tribe." He regarded Sam coolly. "We'll take it up with the Council. Cullen, we'll be in touch."

He turned and limped back to his truck, easing himself into the cab. Sam glowered after him, anger simmering behind his eyes, and then he spun around and stalked off in another direction. He barked

an order at the other two, and they fell into step behind him. As they disappeared into the trees and the old red truck pulled away, Emmett blew out a breath.

"What the hell was that?"

"Sam imprinted."

Edward was staring after him into the trees, looking sad.

"What?" Carlisle asked. "That's wonderful!"

Edward shook his head. "The woman he imprinted on isn't his girlfriend."

"Oh." Carlisle's smile fell. "I see."

"And he blames us," Emmett guessed.

Edward nodded. "We've forced him to become a liar, with all the secrets that have to be kept. And now, because of the wolf gene that we activated, we've forced him to betray someone he loves."

Bella wrapped her arms around herself, feeling chilled. Her chances of seeing her father seemed to be shrinking—at least, they were if she intended to do what the Cullens and Sam told her to do. She didn't want to make trouble for anyone, but she had come all the way from Mexico to see Charlie, and she wasn't going to let anyone stop her.

"Hey," Jasper snapped, his hand tightening on her arm. "Check your attitude, kid. You'll do as you're told."

Her temper flared, and she yanked her arms free of both his and Emmett's grasp. "He's *my* dad! I don't need your permission to see him!"

Jasper's lips curled back from his teeth, and he emitted a low snarl. "You're in our territory, little girl. You need our permission to *breathe*."

"Jasper," Carlisle said reprovingly. He placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled him back a few steps, moving forward to take his place. "Isabella, I know the politics are inconvenient—"

"I don't *care* about your politics! It shouldn't have to be such a big production for me to talk to my own father!"

Carlisle rubbed his forehead wearily, and Bella heard him mutter "Newborns," under his breath.

"Stop that!" she yelled. "I'm not a baby, and I'm sick of you treating me like one!"

"I'm sorry," he said contritely. "You're right, you deserve our respect." He slid a hand behind her back, drawing her closer, and a surge of panic shot through her. She jerked away from him and stumbled backward, staring at him in horror. She had started to trust him, she realized, even though she had known from the start what he was. But there was no way she was going to allow history to repeat itself. Not as long as there was anything she could do about it. She spun around without another word and bolted.

She heard Jasper curse behind her, and the others gave chase. Bella was just a little bit faster, though, and she knew it. She put all of her strength into pumping her arms and legs, focused only

on out-distancing the threat behind her. She was doing it. They were falling farther behind.

But then the sound of splintering wood reached her ears, and a tree limb slammed into the back of her knees. The force of it sent her sprawling, and then a heavy body slammed into her, crushing her into the bracken. It lifted long enough to flip her onto her back, but then her hands were pinned to the ground above her head and Jasper was straddling her.

It was Joham all over again. Bella screamed and fought, and when that didn't work her screams morphed into dry, racking sobs, and she begged.

"Stop! Please stop! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll do whatever you want. Please let me go. I'm sorry!"

She was shocked when he actually did. His weight lifted off of her and he crawled backward, crouching at her feet. She started to scramble away, but his hand shot out and grabbed her ankle, dragging her back.

"Don't run," he ordered, but his voice was softer than it had been before.

Bella yanked her ankle out of his grasp, but she did what he asked and stayed where she was. She curled into a ball and stared up at the vampires surrounding her.

Carlisle started forward, but Edward stopped him with a hand on his chest. "Let me. Jasper, move."

Jasper didn't argue, and Edward took his place, settling down cross-legged on the forest floor a couple of feet away from Bella.

"Hey." He gave her a crooked smile, his eyes warm and friendly.

Bella just stared at him.

"So, here's the thing. The people around here? They're our friends. And because you're a . . . a new vampire, you're naturally impulsive. That makes it hard to temper your reactions to stimuli and make clear-headed decisions. Right?"

Once again, Bella remained silent.

"So . . . well, we're a little concerned about what would happen if you went off on your own. Plus, now Carlisle has vouched for you with the Tribe, and that means they'll hold us responsible if you have any . . . lapses in judgment. So it would really mean a lot to us if you would stick with us and try to work this out."

Bella looked around at the others, all tremendously threatening in one way or another, and then her gaze returned to Edward.

"I know it's not a small request. It takes a lot of trust for you to stay here with us, and we want to be worthy of that trust. So do you think maybe we could try to work out a deal?"

Bella hugged her knees closer to her chest, regarding him with suspicion.

"It seems like you're not really comfortable having us in your personal space, is that right? And you'd rather we didn't touch you, at least most of the time?"

She nodded.

"But there are times when you would give us permission? Like when we're trying to make sure you don't hurt anyone?"

She looked around at the others again, wondering if he was leading her into some kind of trap.

"Here's what I suggest. If you stay with us willingly, then we'll give you plenty of space. This whole thing?" He gestured to Jasper, and then the destroyed bracken on the ground between them. "This won't happen again. The only way we'll touch you is if we believe you pose a danger to someone else."

Bella was trying to find the trickery in his words, but she couldn't seem to spot any. His earnest eyes helped to ease her concerns, and she nodded reluctantly.

"And just so you know, Carlisle has no intention of taking no for an answer on this thing with your dad. If the Council sides with Sam, he'll come up with something to bargain with so they'll change their minds."

Bella's eyes widened in surprise, and she looked up at Carlisle. He gave her a small smile and nodded.

"There's always a way."

"Does that sound like a fair deal?" Edward asked.

Bella dropped her gaze and nodded. Patience wasn't an easy thing for her to rally, but she was in no position to argue.

Edward smiled. "Good. I think this will work out just fine."

"Isabella, I'm sorry," Jasper said quietly. "I didn't mean to scare you like that."

She eyed his scarred face and shuddered. She didn't believe his apology for a second, but sincerity didn't matter to her as long as he would abide by Edward's deal.

"I'm going to walk home," Edward said. "Do you want to come with me?"

She furrowed her brow and glanced back toward the car.

"We can drive back if you want, but it's close quarters in the car. I thought you might prefer to get a little air."

She nodded hesitantly.

Edward answered with a broad smile and looked over his shoulder at the others as he climbed to his feet. "We'll see you guys at home."

"Are you sure you can handle her?" Jasper asked. "You don't have your usual advantage."

Edward's smile never wavered. "I don't need an advantage. We made a deal."

Jasper gave him a long, hard look, but then shrugged. "See you at home."

"Don't wait up. We may decide not to hurry."

"Edward . . ." Carlisle looked back and forth between the two of them, anxiety etched on his face.

"Relax, Carlisle. It's time we started trusting each other, don't you think? After all, judging by the number of boxes Alice sent home, it looks like Isabella is going to be with us for a little while."

He relented and forced a smile. "You're right. But you won't be more than a couple of hours, will you?"

Edward grinned. "No, father. We'll be home by curfew."

Carlisle chuckled and shook his head, then turned and headed back to his car with the others.

"Ready to go?" Edward asked.

Bella nodded and pushed herself to her feet, falling into step with Edward as he set a leisurely pace back toward the house.

"Enjoy this," he told her with a grin. "This is the least supervision you're going to have for a while."

Bella plucked a pine cone off of a tree as she passed, glowering at it as she crushed it into tiny bits. She wanted to tell him that she didn't need supervision, but given her reaction to blood . . . she really did.

Edward shrugged ruefully. "Sorry. I know it sucks; we all went through it. But I promise, your impulse control *will* get better."

"I can't wait a year," she said, her throat feeling tight at the mere idea of it."

Edward gave her a grim frown. "Neither can the Chief, and everyone knows it. I have a feeling this is going to happen sooner rather than later."

Once again, Bella searched his face, trying to judge whether he was telling the truth. "Really?"

"Really. Carlisle doesn't want to put it off, and neither does Billy. Sam's got his tail in a knot right now, but he's a good-hearted man. He won't let your dad keep hurting when he has the power to stop it."

Bella didn't answer, and they fell into a comfortable silence. They wandered through the trees for a few more minutes before Edward spoke again.

"Listen, I hope you won't hold the whole hugging thing against Carlisle. He didn't mean anything by it."

Bella didn't answer, so he went on.

"He's just kind of a physical guy. He doesn't always know what words to say, so he communicates with touch."

She shrugged and looked away.

"Jasper's not so bad either, if you can believe it. He just gets cranky when Alice is away. Well, that, and he hasn't hunted in a while."

"Sure," Bella muttered. "He's just cranky."

Edward laughed and kicked a rock at his feet. "Okay, you're right, it's not just that. Jasper is . . . well, yeah, he's scary. He was turned in order to help fight in a vampire army. A lot of violence, a lot of death . . . and it hardened him."

Once again, Bella remained silence.

"Still, with all he's seen, he's not as scary as he wants you to think he is. I mean, he *is* scary, but he's also one of the warmest people I've ever met."

She shot him a skeptical look, and he laughed.

"No, I mean it, he really is. He just doesn't want you to see it yet."

"Why not?"

"He's working a strategy." He winked at her. "Being the daughter of a police chief, you should recognize this one: good cop, bad cop. He's trying to be extra threatening so you'll be more likely to trust the person who comes to your defense."

"So who's the good cop?"

"Usually? Carlisle." Edward shrugged. "He doesn't even know it, most of the time. He's just naturally a good guy, so Jasper uses that to his advantage."

"Usually?"

Edward grinned. "Yeah, well, you're kind of a thorn in his side. You're not taking to Carlisle quite as well as Jasper would have liked. So now, I'm the good cop."

She snorted. "Way to go, rookie. Your strategy doesn't work if you reveal it."

"Yeah, well, that's the difference between Jasper and me. I don't think we should be trying to scare you, I think we should be trying to make you feel safe."

"So you can lull me into a false sense of security?"

"No."

He stopped walking, and Bella slowed and turned back to look at him.

"Because everybody deserves to feel safe. And it seems like maybe you haven't had that in a while."

Bella dropped her gaze, her hands twisting in front of her.

Edward took a step toward her, careful to keep a couple of feet between them. "Isabella, what happened? Where have you been for the last two months?"

The memories caught her off guard, wrenching her stomach painfully. She doubled over and spun away from Edward, trying to hide her weakness, hating that he could see it.

"Isabella? Are you all right?"

She tried to shake off his concern but she couldn't even make herself stand upright. She braced her hands on her knees, forcing herself to take long, slow breaths. Images flashed in front of her eyes: Joham affixing a collar around her throat; Serena's condescending glare; Yesenia's face, swollen and discolored as she strangled to death; the bloody little creature smiling at her after he had clawed his way out of her stomach . . .

And that same little creature, clean and bright-eyed, reaching for her.

Her son.

"Hey." Edward had moved around her and was now crouching in front of her, peering up at her face. "I didn't mean to upset you. You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to."

She shook her head, physically unable to form words to answer him.

"Okay." He straightened up and started walking again. "The change wasn't particularly pleasant for me, either. I was dying of influenza, and Carlisle was my doctor."

He wasn't looking at her, just wandering slowly back toward the house, and Bella appreciated the moment he was giving her to collect herself. She took several deep breaths and then followed after him, letting him distract her with his story about waking up to a constant barrage of mental voices and the devastating news that his parents were dead.

"I've forgotten a lot about them," he told her, his voice touched with sadness. "If it weren't for Carlisle's memories, I'm afraid I'd even have forgotten what they looked like. Human memories . . . they're slippery. They fade away, unless you work hard to fix them in your mind."

Bella hoped he was right. There were things she wanted very badly to forget. But the memory of Alexander's warm body cuddled against her chest wasn't from her human years, and it wasn't going to fade with time. That memory was hers for good.

"There are good things, too, though," Edward said. "I mean, the mind-reading can come in handy, annoying as it is. And being this strong and this fast is just really *fun*."

She didn't answer him, but met his gaze to show him that he had her attention.

"There's not very much we can't do. Have you ever wanted to climb Mount Everest?"

Her eyes widened. "Have you done that?"

He gave a self-satisfied nod. "Views don't get more incredible than that. Plus, with our enhanced vision, we can see *everything*."

She let out a laugh and shook her head. "Sounds amazing."

"It is, Isabella. You would love it."

"Bella," she said, shoving her hands into her pockets.

He raised a querying eyebrow.

"I like Bella."

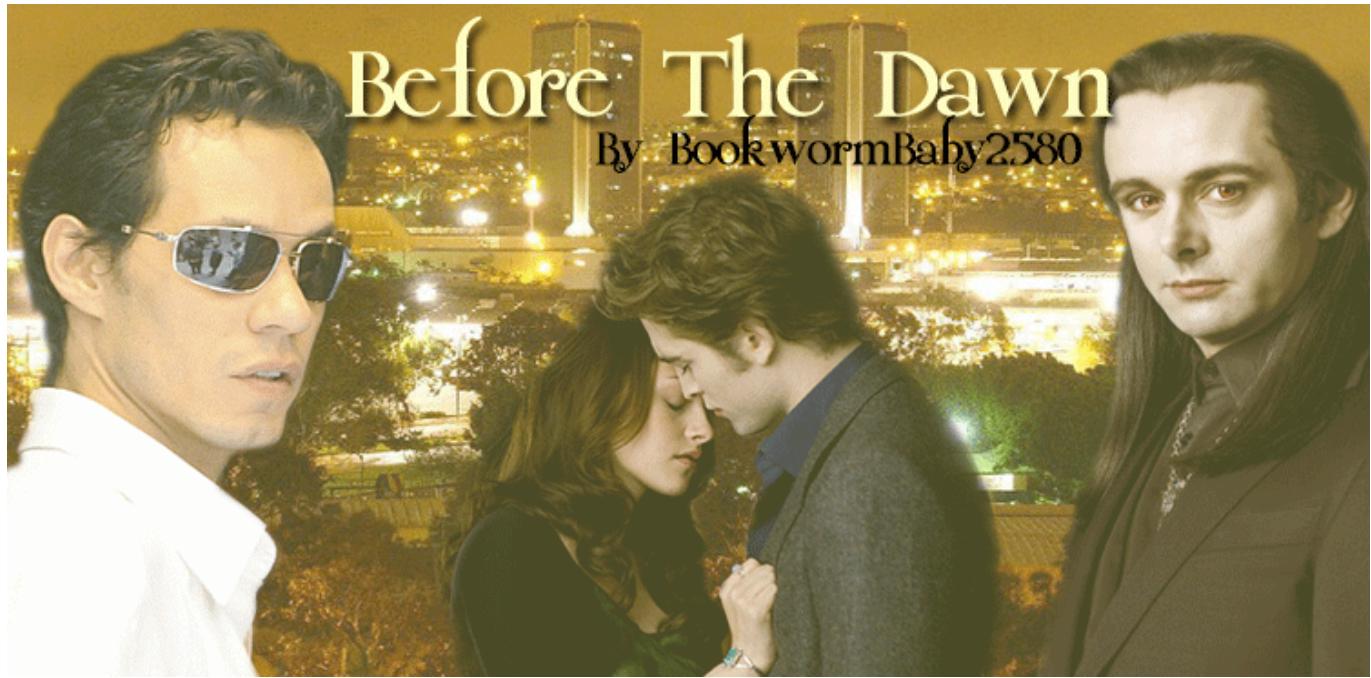
He smiled. "That's pretty. I like it too."

They walked quietly next to each other for a minute more, the silence feeling more companionable than it had before. Then, out of the corner of her eye, Bella saw Edward stoop down and pluck a pine cone off the forest floor. He threw it at her, and though she could have caught it if she had wanted to, she was so perplexed by his actions that she simply let it bounce off of her shoulder and fall to the ground. She looked up into Edward's grinning face, frowning quizzically.

He gave her a wide grin and said, "Tag, you're it," before turning and darting off through the trees.

Bella stared after him for a moment, blinking in surprise. But not for very long. After all, he was getting quite the head start on her, and everyone knew that being "it" was an intolerable condition. She snatched up the pine cone and took off after him, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth as she raced to close the distance between them.

Harbinger



Before The Dawn

By BookwormBaby2580

Bella and Edward didn't go home right away. When they got close enough to the house to hear the murmured conversations inside, Edward surrendered the game of tag to Bella and climbed up into a tree. He settled down on a limb, leaning back against the thick trunk and kicking his legs out in front of him.

Bella followed suit, scaling a tree nearby and perching on a limb level with Edward's.

"Shouldn't we go in?" she asked, eyeing the house through the trees.

"We can if you want to."

"Doesn't Carlisle . . ."

"Carlisle just wants reassurance that we didn't kill each other on the way home. He can hear us. He's satisfied."

Bella smiled and got more comfortable on her limb. "So . . ." she began. "Vampires? And werewolves? And apparently shape-shifting wolves that are different from actual werewolves?"

Edward shrugged. "Who knew, huh?"

"What about fairies?" she asked. "Are they real?"

He laughed out loud. "No. Well, not that I know of. But then, most of the world's fauna is smart enough to try and avoid our kind, so maybe I've just never come across one."

"What about witches?"

"Oh, yeah, absolutely."

"Really?"

"Sure. Voodoo, the Occult, various other ancient magicks . . . believe me, they're real. They've gone out of style in our lifetime, but that's probably a good thing. They're not something to play around with."

"Hm." Bella thought for a moment. "Aliens?"

He grinned. "I've never had any close encounters myself, but I've never been to Roswell."

Bella giggled. "I have. My mom went through a kick where she was sure that celestial beings had come to earth to enlighten those who were open-minded enough to receive them."

"Hmmm . . ." He tilted his head back and stared up at the cloudy sky. "I wonder how alien blood would taste."

She giggled again.

They stayed outside for half an hour longer, talking about nothing in particular, until Edward glanced toward the house.

"Carlisle wants us to go inside," he said, sliding gracefully off of his limb and dropping to the ground. He waited for Bella to join him and then headed toward the house.

When they got inside, Bella's eyes immediately searched out Jasper. He was sprawled on his stomach on the living room floor with a chess board in front of him. Emmett was opposite him, and Bella heard Carlisle's footsteps on the stairs. He had changed clothes, she noticed as he descended the steps, and was now knotting a necktie over a fresh Oxford shirt. He smiled at both of them, but addressed his remarks to Edward.

"While I'm at work, I'd like you to move your personal effects from your bedroom to my office."

There was a confused beat, and then Edward's mouth popped open. "Oh, come on! Are you serious?"

"You can box up my books if you'd like to use the shelves, but please leave Esme's things where they are."

"Why is it always *my* room?" he demanded.

Jasper gave a snort of laughter. "You have the best view."

"Ha, ha," Edward muttered.

"The others have a greater need for privacy," Carlisle said. He hadn't broken stride in the wake of Edward's indignance, and was now picking up a brief case from beside the door. He turned back and met Edward's gaze. "I'm sorry. I know it's inconvenient, but it's clear that Isabella needs the space more than you do right now."

"What?" Her eyes grew wide in alarm, and she looked back and forth between Edward and Carlisle, only just catching the implication. "No! I don't want—I mean, I don't—"

"It's okay," Edward said, heaving a sigh. "He's right, you do need it. Come on, I'll show you your new room."

Bella followed him, still protesting, but he waved away her concerns.

"Really," he said, reaching the top floor and turning toward a closed door. "It's practically tradition, now. Someone new shows up and I surrender my bedroom."

"I don't want you to have to do that."

He stopped at the door and turned, giving her an easy smile. "Don't worry about it. It will only be for few days. I'm sure Esme will do a quick remodel when she gets home and fix me up a new space."

"What, just like that?"

He laughed as he pushed through the door. "She's always working on some remodeling project or another. Can't you tell? There's no way a house this old was built with five bathrooms and a gourmet kitchen."

Bella nodded in response, but she was staring around the room that they had just entered. One wall was entirely glass, just like the first floor, and another was completely covered with shelves. CDs filled most of them, though the bottom one was crammed with vinyl records.

"You like music," she observed.

He smiled at his collection. "I'm rather fond of it."

"What's your favorite?"

"It changes with my mood." He moved to a stereo resting on a shelf among the CDs and pressed a button on a small MP3 player on top of it. A song began playing, a little heavy on the bass for Bella's tastes, but she was surprised to realize she recognized it.

"Phil used to play this all the time."

"Phil?"

She caught her breath and turned away quickly. She hadn't meant to let anything personal slip.

"Bella?" Edward moved around in front of her, stooping down to try and see her eyes. He smiled crookedly, his dimple making an appearance. "Old boyfriend?"

She shook her head, not completely sure why she felt this compulsion to keep everything to herself. Edward had been perfectly nice, and after all, she had already told him a little bit about her mother.

"My mom's boyfriend," she said. "Or I guess, her husband now."

"Your mom just got married?"

She nodded. "That's, um . . . that's why I was in Mexico."

She waited for him to push for more information, but he just straightened and smiled. "I'll bet it was beautiful. We don't often get down to the sunnier parts of the country, what with the conspicuous sparkling."

Bella let herself grin in response, relieved to feel the atmosphere lighten again.

"Come on. We should probably clear some of Carlisle's shelves before we start hauling CDs in there." He led her back down the stairs to the second floor and strode into a room that Bella thought must be the most beautiful space she had ever seen. The solid desk was dark mahogany, the chairs leather, and three of the walls sported built-in shelves that were filled with musty, fragrant, beautiful books. Just off of the main office was a nook containing a tall drafting desk spread with sketches.

Bella drew in a deep breath, inhaling in the scent of paper and ink that she had loved all her life. She let it out and moved to stand in front of one set of shelves, letting her fingers hover over the spines, afraid to actually touch them.

The collection was eclectic. Some of the books were new, but some looked ancient. There were half a dozen languages just on this one shelf, and the English titles referenced physics, philosophy, politics, art, mathematics, physiology, astronomy . . .

Edward chuckled at her reaction. "I take it you like to read?"

Bella jerked her hand back, having once again revealed more of herself than she had intended. "Um. Yeah." She ducked her head, staring at the dirt and pine needles that clung to her sweater. Yet another ruined shirt.

"Come here." Edward led her out of the room again, an eager smile on his face. "Carlisle is a little bit particular about his personal collection, but the rest of us aren't."

Bella followed him up to the third floor again, and he led her through a doorway into a room that must have taken up half of the floor. The walls were lined with computers, printers, photocopiers, and various similar items that Bella didn't recognize, but in the middle were several long bookshelves that stood about chest high. The shelf on one end only held a handful of books, but the rest were full, sporting just as varied a collection as the shelves in Carlisle's study, only heavily interspersed with fiction. There were classics, contemporary novels, even a small grouping of paperback romances, and they all looked well-thumbed.

"This is the family collection," Edward said. "Help yourself. We all do."

"Are you sure?" She looked timidly at the long shelves, her fingers itching to start pulling books from them.

"Yeah, but be sure to grab the ones you want to read and stash them in your room. We may not have these ones much longer."

She started and looked longingly back at the books. "Why not?"

That last shelf won't stay empty for long, and once we fill it we'll get rid of the lot."

Bella gave him a puzzled look, and he explained further.

"We're constantly buying books. We all pick up whatever piques our interest, and when we're done with them we put them in here to share with the rest of the family. But if we'd kept all the books we'd ever bought, we wouldn't have room to breathe in this house. Once we run out of shelf space, we donate them all to a charity and start filling the shelves again."

"I want to read them all," Bella whispered, her eyes riveted on the books.

Edward smiled down at her. "You can do that if you want to. We'll hang onto them for a little longer."

"Oh—no. It's fine, I don't want to inconvenience you."

He just laughed and turned back toward the stairs. "Grab an armful and take them to your room. I'm going to track down some boxes so we can start packing up Carlisle's study."

Bella was still a little unsure about helping herself to the books, but the pull was too strong to resist. After a long hesitation, she snatched up the first ten that sat on the shelf nearest her and ran back to Edward's room, leaving them on the floor next to his leather sofa.

The evening passed pleasantly. She spent it with Edward, carefully tucking Carlisle's books away, and then moving Edward's CDs and clothes to Carlisle's study. Edward sometimes hummed or sang along with his music—also an eclectic mix, apparently on shuffle—and sometimes chatted idly with Bella as they worked. She opened up a little more about her mother, telling Edward about some of the crazier things the two of them had done together.

Edward, in turn, told Bella about his vampire family. He described extreme versions of popular sports, trips they had taken together, and the way they had all come together to create a family of misfit vampires who had risen above their baser natures.

"Are there others who drink animal blood?" Bella asked, when Edward had said something that implied that there were.

"A few. You'll meet one tomorrow; Alice said Eleazar is visiting. He's an old friend of Carlisle's from his Volturi days."

Bella stiffened. "He's part of the Volturi?"

"Not anymore. When he met his wife, he decided he wanted to leave. She doesn't have the stomach for the violence she saw in Volterra."

Bella turned that information over in her mind as she collected a stack of CDs and carried them into Carlisle's study.

They weren't in any hurry and they were frequently distracted, stopping often to trade stories or fiddle with Edward's iPod. Progress was sporadic. By the time they had moved Edward's CD collection and clothes to the emptied shelves and stored all of Carlisle's books in his bedroom, the sun was peeking over the eastern horizon.

Edward pilfered some hangers from Alice's closet, and the two of them carried the boxes of Bella's clothes upstairs. They started hanging up the contents, but with each new soft, fashionable article of clothing Bella's unease grew.

"What's wrong?" Edward asked, arranging a gauzy dress on a hanger.

Bella shrugged, gesturing to all of the clothes. "I don't need all of this."

He laughed. "And you think I do? Did you *see* how much we carried out of here?"

"Why, then? Why have so many clothes?"

He gave her a small smile, an unexpected softness in his eyes. "You just have to understand Alice." He hung up the dress and reached for another. "The others . . . I don't think they get it. I think they know that Alice loves fashion, and that she loves having plenty of money to spend on it. We all know that she buys us beautiful things as a token of affection, but I'm not sure the rest of them understand just how important those things are to her."

"And you do?"

He grinned. "I can see into her mind, remember?"

"Ah. Right."

"She doesn't remember anything of her human life," he said. "At least, nothing substantive. But every now and then, she gets a tiny flash. She's seen a dingy plaster wall, a rickety cot with a dirty mattress and a lice-infested blanket, a tiny barred window. It's always just a quick glimpse, like a flash of light in the darkness. And the way she feels when she gets them . . . the sadness, the longing . . ."

Bella furrowed her brow. "What does that have to do with clothes?"

"I can't be sure, obviously," he said, folding a pair of jeans over a hanger. "But can you imagine a young girl, imprisoned in such a horrible place? Can you guess how badly she must have wanted something pretty? An embroidered counterpane, a fashionable dress . . . these are things Alice was obviously denied. Now she can have them."

"And she wants everyone else to have them, too?"

His soft smile returned. "It's something that makes her feel cared for. So yes, she wants to share that with the rest of us."

Bella reached into the box at her feet and pulled out gray silk blouse embellished with pearls at the collar and sleeves. It was one of the most beautiful things she had ever seen, and in contrast to the hospital gowns she had worn for two months, it was truly exquisite.

"That's very thoughtful of her," she whispered.

Edward gave her an approving nod. "I'm glad you agree."

After making sure Bella was settled in her room, Edward left her to her own devices and headed downstairs. A few moments later, a soft, light piano melody drifted up to her, and she smiled to herself as she listened.

She knew she should clean up and change clothes. The rest of the family would be home soon, and she assumed she would be expected to meet them at some point. She definitely didn't want to present herself to Alice wearing any of the clothes she had destroyed that day. But the books she

had piled next to the couch were begging for her attention, and she decided that it couldn't hurt to read just a few pages.

A few pages went by in seconds, though, and stretched into a few chapters, and before she knew it she had read six books. In less than a half hour. Suddenly, it didn't seem so difficult to read the entire collection of books in the library before the Cullens were ready to get rid of them. She breezed through the remainder of her stack, and then headed into the en-suite bathroom to clean up.

Edward had cleared out his personal items, but had left her a bottle of shampoo and a bar of soap, and that was all she really needed. It was still a luxury to her to be able to wash whenever she wanted, without being watched.

As tinkling piano music drifted up from downstairs, she slid her fingers down her wet skin to her abdomen and tentatively rubbed over the long scar there. She had felt it, but she hadn't yet allowed herself to look at it. It was a token of the most terrifying moment of her life, and she still didn't know how to feel about the little demon who had nearly killed her. There was a part of her that wanted to deny he existed, and if she didn't look at the scar it was easier to keep on denying.

But denial wasn't stopping the memories, so she took a deep breath and looked down.

It was surprisingly clean. There were no ragged edges, no unknit bulges, just a pale raised line that cut straight across her flat stomach, below her navel. A surgeon couldn't have left such a neat cut. It was strange, she thought, how it hadn't felt so neat at the time.

Her fingers drifted up to her ribs below her left breast and fingered the scar there. According to Joham, this was what had saved her. The venom from the little, unnatural teeth had been the difference between a vampire and a corpse. Had the boy known what he was doing when he had bitten her? Or had he just craved her blood? She could still remember what he looked like, his tiny body slick with gore, sucking at the hemorrhaging wound he had left in her stomach.

She quickly shut off the water and grabbed a towel, drying herself off roughly. She didn't want to think anymore. She needed a distraction—more books, maybe. She dressed quickly in a pair of jeans and a brightly-colored blouse, and then hurried to the library to trade her books for a new set.

She spent most of the morning reading, trying to divert all of her attention away from thoughts of Alexander. She made trip after trip to the bookshelves, returning finished books and gathering new ones, hardly noticing the sunlight that streamed through the window onto her skin and scattered refracted beams around the room.

A little after ten o'clock the clear skies clouded over again, and a half hour later she heard the crunch of tires approaching the house on the long, winding path from the highway. She tensed, but relaxed a little when she recognized the hum of Carlisle's Mercedes. She half-listened as he parked in one of the out-buildings near the house and made his way inside.

"The girls aren't home yet?" she heard him ask. He received no audible answer, but he must have seen something that satisfied him, because he continued. "And Isabella?"

Edward played a little trill on the piano, and then it fell silent. "She's fine," he said. "She's been reading all morning."

"Is she . . ."

Edward chuckled. "She's *fine*, Carlisle. A little less scrutiny might do her some good."

There was a moment of silence, and then Edward chuckled again as Bella heard Carlisle's footsteps on the stairs.

She tensed up, hunching down in the corner of the couch as he approached. She silently prayed that he was heading to his own bedroom, but she knew the truth before he hit the third floor. He paused for a few seconds outside her door, but just when she had started to hope that he might go away, he knocked softly.

She took a shaky breath. "Come in."

Carlisle pushed the door open and hovered in the doorway. "Hello, Isabella."

She forced a smile, reminding herself that he was supposed to be the good cop.

"I see you've discovered the library," he said, glancing toward the stack of books on the floor beside the couch.

"Um . . . is that okay?"

"Of course. I want you to make yourself at home. Have you gotten settled into your room all right?"

She nodded.

"Is there anything you need? Anything I can do to make you more comfortable?"

"No, thank you." She realized that she hadn't thanked him for what she had been given, and hurried to correct that. "I, um . . . I appreciate . . ." She couldn't seem to form words to finish her sentence, but she gestured around the room and hoped that he understood.

"It's nothing. But you'll tell me if you need anything?"

She smiled again, less forced this time, and nodded.

Carlisle looked somehow unsatisfied, and he lingered in the doorway. "Isabella, I want to apologize to you for last night—"

"It's fine," she said quickly, looking away.

But Carlisle didn't let her off the hook. He took a couple of steps into the room, then stopped himself and moved back to the doorway. "Please. It's important to me that I tell you this." He waited for her nod of acquiescence and then continued. "My wife is the most important person in the world to me."

Bella looked up curiously, confused by his apparent non sequitur.

"I love her, Isabella. And my fidelity to her is not something that has ever been, or will ever be, in question. I'm sorry that I made you uncomfortable, not only because I don't want to alarm you, but also because I don't want my position to be unclear. I love my wife, and she is the *only* woman I have any intention of being intimate with."

Bella stared at him, not quite certain how to respond.

"I hope you can take some comfort from that," he said gently. "I know it's not easy for you to trust me, but perhaps you can trust my loyalty to Esme."

She did find it comforting, and she nodded. But she still didn't know what to say, and Carlisle didn't seem to, either. There was a short, awkward silence, which was thankfully interrupted by the sound of another car wending its way toward the house on the gravel drive.

"That will be the girls now," Carlisle said, looking pleased. "Will you come down and meet them?"

She nodded again. "I'll be right there."

He gave her a warm smile and left her alone, pulling the door closed behind him.

Bella let out a breath in relief. It wasn't the easiest conversation she'd ever had, but it could have gone worse.

She stood and moved to the mirror in the bathroom, brushing a hand over her jeans and blouse, making sure there was no damage. She ran a hand through her hair, pleased to see that it had naturally curled into becoming waves that fell in soft cascades around her shoulders. Her eyes were still a disturbing shade of red, but that couldn't be helped. She was as presentable as she was going to get.

She wasn't exactly sure why she was so concerned about looking good to meet these women. She only knew she wanted to make a better impression on them than she had on the rest of the family.

She headed downstairs, where a sense of bright anticipation lingered over the room. The others were getting ready to head outside, and Edward glanced up at her as she hurried down the stairs.

"Hey, Bella," he said with a smile.

Carlisle looked back over his shoulder at Edward, one eyebrow raised, but said nothing.

"Got a good start on the books, huh?" he asked, oblivious to Carlisle's scrutiny.

She smiled bashfully and nodded.

"Still planning to read all of them?"

She hesitated. "Um . . . there was one on . . ." her throat went dry, and her voice dropped to a whisper ". . . on Alexander the Great."

Edward looked surprised. "*The Campaigns of Alexander*? You don't want to read it? It's pretty good."

She shook her head, not meeting his gaze.

"Okay. Bella's not a fan of the Hellenistic histories." He shrugged it off and beckoned for her to follow the others out the front door. He gestured to a spot off to one side of the large porch, indicating that she should stand there, and then planted himself between her and the steps.

Bella's gaze darted back and forth between the approaching red BMW and the four men anticipating its arrival. Carlisle and Emmett were both smiling broadly, but Jasper was the one who

drew her attention. Everything about him seemed to soften as he watched the car approach—his eyes, his stance, even the stern frown that made Bella so anxious. He looked almost friendly.

When the car was still a good thirty yards from the house, the back door flew open and a shape that Bella dimly recognized as human flew out of it and raced toward the house. It barreled into Jasper, and it was only then that Bella could make out a girl with glossy black hair and stylish clothes, her arms and legs wrapping around Jasper as she peppered his face with kisses.

Bella gaped at her. She couldn't understand how this girl could get close to him like that, how she could completely disregard the mass of scars that covered his face and *kiss* him.

Carlisle distracted her by trotting down the steps and meeting the car as it rolled to a stop. He pulled open the front passenger door and drew out a woman with caramel curls that fell to her shoulders. He wrapped his arms around her, and she stretched up on her toes to meet him in a passionate kiss.

While they greeted each other, the driver's door opened and a tall, blonde goddess stepped out. She strode straight up the steps to Emmett and grabbed him by the collar, pulling him down to meet her lips in a short, hard kiss.

"I brought you back a present," she said when she let him go, dragging one manicured finger down his chest.

"Yeah? Where is it?"

Her perfect mouth twisted into a coy smile. "I'm wearing it."

She started toward the door, but the dark-haired girl wrapped around Jasper came up for air and cleared her throat pointedly.

"You don't have time for that. Eleazar is only about ten minutes behind us."

"Hell, we can do a lot in ten minutes," Emmett said with a grin. He swung his wife up into his arms and disappeared through the door.

The dark-haired girl wriggled out of Jasper's arms and strode toward Bella, but stopped even before Edward pressed a restraining hand to her shoulder. She was an inch or two shorter than Bella, and her wrists and collarbones showed a hollow delicacy that reminded Bella of her own. She wondered if this girl, too, had been malnourished when she changed. Considering the information Edward had given her, she figured it was entirely possible.

"Hi, Isabella!" she said brightly, her chipper mood almost enough to mask the gravity in her dark eyes. "It's so nice to finally meet you! I'm Alice, and the hot nymphomaniac upstairs is Rosalie."

"I heard that, you little twit!" Rosalie called down.

"What?" Alice called back innocently. "I said you were hot."

Jasper laughed to himself and moved up behind Alice, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"Um . . . thank you for the clothes," Bella said nervously.

"You're welcome! I hope there are some in there that you like. It was really hard to tell; you're not a very expressive person, are you?"

Bella shrugged apologetically.

"That's Esme," Alice said, pointing to the woman who was being escorted to the porch by Carlisle. Esme hurried up the steps toward Bella, but Edward intercepted her with a hug and an affectionate kiss on the cheek.

"We missed you," he told her.

She smiled at him and smoothed his hair, but when she started toward Bella again he turned her around and gave her a gentle push toward Carlisle. She looked confused, but she allowed herself to be shunted back into her husband's embrace.

"It's so nice to have you here, Isabella," she said. "I hope the boys have made you comfortable."

"I'm afraid we've failed miserably there," Carlisle sighed before Bella could answer. "Honestly, darling, you shouldn't leave me alone. I'm completely hopeless without you."

She laughed sympathetically and nuzzled his neck, and Carlisle let out a contented growl.

"You four go on inside," he said. "I need to kiss my wife some more."

"You're worse than Emmett and Rose," Edward teased as he strode past them. "Come on, Bella. They're going to get embarrassing in a minute."

Bella hurried after him, and as the door closed behind them she heard Esme whisper Carlisle's name in surprise.

"I know," he answered quietly. "He was like this last night, too."

Bella's curiosity was piqued, but her eavesdropping was interrupted by low moans issuing from upstairs. A few seconds later a rhythmic thumping started, and for a moment Bella was transported back in the house in Mexico, chained to her cot as she listened to Joham and one of his other victims in the bedroom upstairs. Her breath caught and her vision swam as panic threatened to engulf her.

"Bella?"

Edward's voice snapped her back, and she realized that she had grabbed his arm hard enough to tear the sleeve of his shirt.

"Are you okay?" he asked, frowning in concern.

She let go of him quickly, falling back a step and mumbling an apology.

He glanced toward the ceiling. "It's uncomfortable, isn't it? I find the best way to deal with it is to drown them out." He ignored the damage to his shirt and headed toward his piano, beckoning for her to follow. Taking his place on the bench, he started pounding out an energetic tune that all but obscured the sounds drifting down from the second floor.

Bella moved closer and eased down onto the floor next to the piano, leaning against one leg so she could feel the vibrations as Edward played.

She tried not to look toward the living room, where Jasper and Alice were wrapped together in one of the armchairs, thoroughly enjoying their reunion.

After a few minutes Carlisle and Esme strode in, and Esme stopped short. She examined the damage that had been done to the hardwood floors and turned to Carlisle, one eyebrow arched in reproach.

"Like I said," he told her, "you really shouldn't leave me alone."

Esme just laughed. "It's fine. I was planning on redoing the main floor anyway. You should have seen the hotel, Carlisle. The entire place was decorated in nothing but white. It was light and airy, while still managing to feel absolutely decadent. I want to recreate it here."

"That sounds beautiful, my love."

Carlisle kissed her again, and Bella looked away. If nothing else, he was backing up his claim that he was wholly invested in his wife. It was reassuring, in a way, but it still made her uncomfortable to see them together.

Their canoodling was soon interrupted, however, by the sound of yet another car turning onto the gravel drive that led to the house. Edward stopped playing, and Carlisle cocked an ear.

"It's the whole family!" he said, sounding delighted. "Alice, you didn't tell us they were all coming."

"You'd never have any surprises in your life if I told you everything."

"Stay here," Edward said softly, drawing Bella's attention back to him. He once again moved between her and the door, setting himself up as a barrier between her and everyone else. Carlisle and Esme both watched him with an air of curious fascination, but he didn't acknowledge them.

The arriving visitors soon demanded their attention, and they moved out onto the porch with Jasper and Alice. Bella heard the car park and a flurry of joyful greetings—most of them from women, she noticed. That made her feel a little better, and her shoulders relaxed minutely.

Emmett and Rosalie came downstairs as the crowd was moving inside from the porch, and more greetings followed. One of the women—a tall, stunning strawberry blond—extracted herself from the melee and made a beeline for Edward. Her lips turned up in a provocative smile as she approached him and threw her arms around him.

"Edward! It's been far too long! Why don't you ever come visit me?"

Edward smiled and greeted her warmly, accepting her enthusiastic embrace.

For just a moment, Bella couldn't breathe. It hadn't occurred to her to consider Edward's relationship status before. While the other men had greeted their wives, her only thought for Edward had been gratitude that he was there to serve as a buffer between her and the others.

But she was thinking about it now. With this beautiful woman clinging to him, threading her fingers through his hair, she couldn't help but think about it. And she didn't like it.

Was this Edward's girlfriend? She couldn't be his wife, or they would live together, surely. Judging by the way she was plastered against him, though, the two of them were obviously close.

Bella scowled at her. She looked too old for Edward. And too tall. And too . . . blonde.

"Edward, your shirt is ripped!" she observed a little too brightly as she trailed a hand down his arm. "I'd be happy to help you remove it, if you'd like."

Edward laughed. "I think I'll keep it on for now. Thanks anyway."

She spotted Bella then and peeled herself away from Edward, giving him a surprised look. "And who's your friend? She's young, isn't she?" She propped a hand on her hip and wagged a finger at Carlisle. "You haven't been playing matchmaker again, have you?"

"Ha!" Carlisle shook his head. "Believe me, Tanya, I've learned my lesson. No, Isabella is a new acquaintance of ours."

"Oh?" Tanya started to push past Edward, but he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back.

Tanya seemed pleased, but she gave Edward a curious look. "Aren't you going to let me say hello?"

"Nope."

Bella sagged in relief, grateful to Edward for running interference, but her relief was short-lived. She caught sight of a distinguished-looking man in the crowd of women, and her breath caught in her throat. She knew she had never seen him before, but his dark hair and heavy eyebrows, juxtaposed with the olive tone of his vampire pallor, reminded her forcefully of Joham.

"Isabella?" Jasper asked, just loud enough that she could hear him over the chatter of voices.

She froze, her eyes shooting fearfully to his, but she saw only concern in his gaze.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded quickly. She didn't want him deciding she needed to be restrained again.

Carlisle watched their exchange closely, but when nothing came of it he made the introductions. "Isabella, these are some dear friends of ours. This is Eleazar, and his wife Carmen." He indicated the man and a dark-haired woman standing with him. "And this is Kate and Irina, and there with Edward is the coven leader, Tanya."

Tanya gave her a fluttering wave, and Bella had to choke back a snarl.

Carlisle invited his guests into the living room and Bella trailed after them, pleased when Edward sat down on the hearth. She settled herself in a nearby corner, but she wished she had stayed a little closer to him when Tanya insinuated herself between them, curling up beneath Edward's arm.

"This is certainly a nice surprise," Carlisle said once they had all gotten settled. "What brings you all down from Alaska?"

"Actually, we were vacationing in New York," Eleazar said, a light Spanish accent coloring his speech. "We intended to stay a few more weeks, but . . ." He exchanged glances with the Carmen,

who was seated beside him on the couch. "We ran into an old friend of yours, Carlisle."

Carlisle was sitting in an armchair opposite his visitor, and he leaned forward in interest. "Oh? Who was it?"

"He called himself Alistair."

Carlisle laughed out loud and rocked back in his chair. "You met Alistair, did you? And how did you find him?"

"Not well, I'm afraid." Eleazar furrowed his brow in confusion. "Am I missing something?"

"I'm not sure Alistair has been well a day in his life. The man has paranoia down to an art."

Bella thought Eleazar looked almost hopeful. "Is he trustworthy?"

"Not very. He doesn't *lie*, exactly, but everything becomes much more sinister in his mind than it really is."

"Perhaps you can help me interpret the truth, then," Eleazar said gravely. His grip tightened on Carmen's hand. "He told me . . . he told me some bad news."

"Oh?"

His gaze locking with Carlisle's. "He said Chelsea is dead."

Carlisle didn't react. For several long seconds he just stared at Eleazar. When he finally spoke, his tremulous whisper betrayed just how much Alistair's news had affected him.

"Perhaps a bit more context?"

Eleazar nodded. "Your friend noticed us because of our eyes."

Bella's gaze flicked to each of the visitors, noting their eye colors. They were all a deep amber, several shades darker than the pale gold she had noticed on Carlisle.

"He asked us if we were acquainted with you," Eleazar continued, "and when we said we were, he told us he was on his way to visit you."

"That seems odd," Carlisle murmured. "He's never sought me out before."

"He didn't seem happy about the trip. But he said he owed you a debt, and he seemed to think that telling you about Chelsea would settle it."

Carlisle tapped the arm of his chair thoughtfully. "It would, if it's true. Is he coming here, then?"

"No. I told him I would carry the message to you, and he seemed quite happy to rid himself of the responsibility."

"Interesting that he trusted you," Carlisle mused. "Did you tell him you knew Chelsea?"

"No. But he got very anxious when he saw that I understood the implications of her death."

"What *are* the implications?" Rosalie asked. She and Emmett were standing behind Carlisle's chair, wrapped together in an intimate embrace.

"Chelsea is indispensable to the Volturi," Eleazar explained. "So much that she is considered nearly equal to the brothers themselves. Her gift bonds them all together. Without her, there's no way so many of them could live peacefully in such close proximity."

"So if she's dead, there's no Volturi?"

Eleazar and Carlisle exchanged grim looks. "That's right."

"Carlisle?" Jasper said. "Do you think it's true?"

He drew in a deep breath, considering the question. "Alistair doesn't fabricate stories from nothing. Eleazar, did he tell you how he got his information?"

"He said he . . . divined it. He claims there was some trouble with a newborn hunting in the city, and Chelsea and Afton went out to take care of it. They didn't come back."

The room fell silent again, but Emmett's voice broke it. "We need to know. Someone has to go to Italy."

"Carmen and I are going," Eleazar said.

Carlisle frowned. "Are you sure you want to do that? It could be dangerous."

Eleazar met his gaze solemnly. "They were my coven for a hundred and fifty years, Carlisle. I'm going."

"Can I charter you a plane?"

"That's not necessary," Alice said quietly.

Everyone turned to where she was perched on Jasper's knee, her dark eyes wide and haunted.

"I'm sorry, Eleazar. When you get there they'll be gone. There's damage in the castle . . . singe marks on the floors and walls . . . I'm so sorry."

Eleazar looked stricken. "Are they all dead? Surely someone—"

"Don't," Jasper said, his voice firm, but quiet. "Don't try to look for them, Alice." He gathered her up in his arms and tucked her against his chest, turning his hard gaze on Eleazar. "This is not her responsibility. If you want to chase them all down, that's on you."

"Of course," he said, his tone and posture deferential. "I'm sorry to have overstepped."

Jasper gave him a nod and then started whispering softly in Alice's ear.

Tanya was paying rapt attention, her fingers playing absently at the hair at the nape of Edward's neck. "This isn't good, Carlisle. With the Volturi gone, certain expectations will fall to the next coven in line."

"And that is?"

"Yours. This is the largest coven I know of. Without someone like Chelsea, seven of our kind living together is nearly impossible."

He shook his head dubiously. "My family enjoys a certain notoriety, but we're not taken very seriously. Our hunting methods make us something of a joke to the others."

"They laugh at the Yellow Eyes, but they recognize talent. And your family has considerable talent."

"She's right," Alice said, twisting around in Jasper's lap. "There haven't been very many definite decisions made, but over the next few weeks we may be receiving some visitors. I couldn't figure out why, at first, because few of them seem to have any particular agenda."

"They'll be feeling things out," Tanya said. "Checking to see if you'll take Aro's place."

"Sam's boys won't be happy about that," Emmett added.

Tanya frowned. "Maybe you should all come join us in Alaska for a while. It won't keep anyone from finding you, but you could avoid a run-in with the dogs."

Bella's head whipped around to stare at Tanya, and then at Carlisle. If they left, what would that mean for her? Would they leave her to do whatever she liked in their former territory? Or would they make her stay with them and take her away from Charlie?

Carlisle didn't miss her panicked expression, and he shook his head. "We can't. At least not yet. Isabella has business here, and I promised her I would help her with it." He glanced around the room. "Of course, I won't stop any of my family from joining you now, if they so choose."

Bella looked at the others. Emmett and Rosalie were shaking their heads, as were Jasper and Alice. Her eyes flicked to Edward, who was sitting next to Tanya, examining the torn sleeve of his shirt.

He *wasn't* shaking his head, and Bella felt a stab of anxiety.

"Edward?" Carlisle said expectantly.

"Hm?" He glanced up. "Oh, I'm with Bella." He leaned around Tanya and winked at her.

"Oh." Tanya withdrew a couple of inches, looking startled, but Edward hooked an arm through hers. She let him pull her back to his side, but she shot Bella a curious look out of the corner of her eye.

Bella hugged her knees. She was grateful Edward wasn't leaving her, but she didn't know what to make of his actions.

"Well," Carlisle said, "I suppose that's settled. We'll stay here for now, but we may take you up on your offer if our situation changes."

"You're always welcome," Tanya told him.

He stood up, bringing Esme with him. "Our girls need a hunt, and it looks like you could all do with one as well. Would you care to join us?"

There were murmurs of assent and the rustle of movement as everyone rose and prepared to leave. Bella stayed where she was, though, her gaze trained on Edward and Tanya, who were leaning close together and conferring in low voices. After a moment Tanya pulled back and laughed gaily.

"Of course!" she said. "It's no skin off *my* nose." She sidled closer to him and nuzzled his neck.

"Don't get *too* excited," Edward told her, tickling her sides. She giggled and fell against him, slapping his hands away.

"You're adorable like this, you know that?"

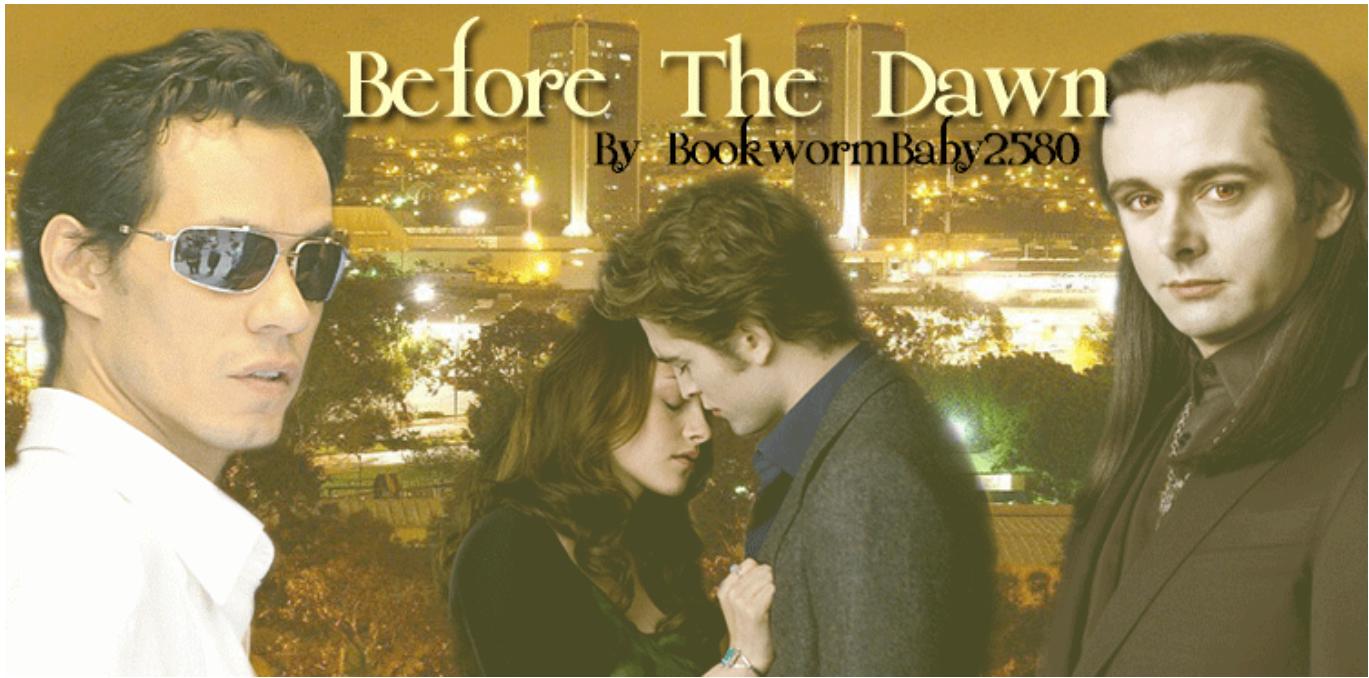
"I'm always adorable." He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "And you're a truly wonderful woman."

"I've been telling you that for decades. Come on." She stood and linked her fingers through his, pulling him to his feet. "Take me hunting, Romeo."

Edward let Tanya lead him toward the back door, but he looked back over his shoulder at Bella. "Are you coming along?"

She nodded and leapt to her feet, hurrying after him. She told herself that she craved the run, that she wanted to get outside and burn off some energy, and that her eagerness to follow had nothing to do with Edward and the strawberry blonde parasite whose hand was currently snaking beneath the hem of his shirt.

Echoes of Another Life



"So, Jasper. How come you're blocking me?"

Jasper shot a smirk over his shoulder at Edward. "None of your business."

The Cullens and their visitors from Denali were strolling back through the woods at a leisurely pace, sated from their hunt. Even Bella had snagged a bitter tasting rabbit, though the burn in her throat hadn't been bothering her very much.

What was really bothering her was the fact that Tanya was riding on Edward's back, her legs wrapped around his waist as he walked along a few yards to Bella's right.

"You've been doing it since Eleazar and the girls got here," Edward said, refusing to drop the subject. "So what is it? Did you develop a crush on Irina that you don't want me to know about?"

"Boy, shut your yap before you get yourself into trouble."

"You think you can take me, tough guy?"

"You want me to prove it to you? Again?"

Tanya kissed Edward's cheek and hopped down off of his back. "I'm getting out of the line of fire." She started to move away, but Edward snagged her hand and pulled her back to him.

"Don't worry about Jasper. He's all talk. He's never won a fight in his life."

Jasper just snorted and turned away, letting the absurdity of Edward's statement stand on its own.

Bella ground her teeth and forced her gaze away from Edward and Tanya, glancing around at the rest of the group. Jasper took the lead, looking as relaxed as Bella had ever seen him, with little

Alice tucked under his arm. Rosalie and Emmett were somewhere off to her left, chasing each other through the trees and stealing playful kisses. Eleazar and Carmen made a much more somber picture at the right of the crowd, arms wrapped around one another and heads bent together in solemn conversation. Carlisle and Esme were a few paces behind Bella, watching Edward and Tanya with perplexed frowns on their faces. Even Kate and Irina were paired together, strolling arm-in-arm beside Edward and Tanya.

Only Bella walked alone, and it made her feel conspicuous and vulnerable.

"So, Bella," Tanya said conversationally. "In all this excitement we've hardly had a chance to get to know you. Tell us about yourself."

Bella cringed as nearly everyone turned to look at her, and she wrapped her arms protectively around her body. She shrugged, hoping something would distract Tanya from her question, but the others simply looked at her, waiting politely.

"There's nothing to tell," she finally mumbled.

"Everyone's got a story. How were you changed?"

She thought again of the night she had nearly died, about the baby crawling out of her, smeared in blood, about the bite and the subsequent burning, and she shuddered.

"She doesn't like to talk about it," Edward said quietly.

"Oh. I'm sorry." Tanya gave Bella a sympathetic look that seemed sincere. "What about before that? Where are you from?"

Bella chafed under the weight of the expectant stares, but she couldn't see how to avoid Tanya's questions without being rude, so she gave a reluctant answer. "Arizona."

Tanya let out a longing groan. "So warm! Did you *love* it there?"

Bella peeked at her out of the corner of her eye, surprised by her reaction. "Yeah. I did."

"I can believe it. I think I've lived too long in Alaska. The desert seems like heaven to me."

This was a safe enough topic to pursue, Bella decided, and she realized that if she wanted to keep the conversation away from less palatable subjects, she should probably keep it going. "I . . . I miss the smell of the creosote."

Tanya laughed. "It's funny, isn't it? The things we associate with home?"

She nodded, allowing a smile.

"You must miss your friends, too."

Bella focused on the ground in front of her again. She didn't miss her friends, really. She'd had a handful of people she spent time with regularly in Phoenix, but she had never managed to form strong bonds with them. "I miss my mom," she admitted.

"I bet you do. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

Tanya shook her head. "That's awfully young to lose your human life. Was it accidental, or did your sire mean to turn you?"

So much for trying to guide the conversation to safe ground. Bella looked away, and her eyes fell on Rosalie, who was nuzzling Emmett's neck. Rosalie suddenly stiffened and shot a confused glance at Jasper, who caught her eye and then dropped a pointed look down at Alice. His gaze met Rosalie's again, and she nodded.

Bella watched the exchange curiously, barely noticing that Tanya was apologizing to her for bringing up her change again. She watched Rosalie clench her fists, and heard several quiet cracking sounds. For a moment she couldn't figure out what had made the noise, but then Rosalie was collecting bits of broken acrylic nails in one hand and shoving them in the pocket of her designer jeans.

"It's fine," Bella mumbled to Tanya, vaguely aware that she was expected to acknowledge the apology. But her eyes shifted between Rosalie and Jasper, wondering what in the world was going on.

For a few seconds nothing happened. Then Rosalie held a hand out in front of her and inspected her ruined nails. She heaved a sigh and shook her head. "One of these days I'm going to learn to hunt without destroying my acrylics. Alice, you'll fix them for me, won't you?"

"Hm?" Alice pulled away from Jasper a little in order to look at Rosalie, but her gaze was distracted and unfocused.

Rosalie fluttered her fingers. "My nails. I ruined them. Will you fix them?"

Alice brightened, and Rosalie suddenly had all of her attention. "Of course I will!"

"Oh, mine too, please," Esme said. "I feel like a change."

"How about you, Bella?" Rosalie asked. "Want Alice to give you a manicure?"

Bella glanced at her hands, eyeing her chewed, ragged nails. She had bitten them down during her time with Joham, and they hadn't grown any since.

"We all wear acrylics," Alice said, following Bella's gaze. "There aren't many vampires who come out of the change without damaged fingernails."

Bella glanced at Edward, who gave her an encouraging nod, and she turned back to Alice. "Um . . . if you don't mind."

"I don't mind at all! I'd love to do it!"

"What about you ladies?" Esme asked, directing her question to Tanya and her sisters. "Will you join us?"

Tanya inclined her head toward Eleazar and Carmen, still engaged in their whispered conversation. "I think we'd better head home."

Esme nodded her understanding.

"Actually," Eleazar said, just loudly enough to be heard, "Carmen and I have decided that we're still going to Italy. Carlisle, can I take you up on your offer to charter a plane?"

"Of course. But Eleazar . . ."

"There's information to be found that Alice can't see," he said, his voice calm and assured. "I can follow scents, ask questions, track down some answers."

"It could be dangerous. There will likely be others there, verifying the truth for themselves."

"I know. But I have to know who's still alive."

Carlisle smiled sadly. "I understand."

Twenty minutes later, they had reached the house and made the arrangements for the chartered flight. Tanya and her sisters would be dropping Carmen and Eleazar off at the airport in Seattle on their way northwest toward home.

"You'll join us if things get too dicey here?" Tanya asked, embracing Carlisle warmly.

"We will. And we'll let you know if we hear anything more." He turned his attention to Eleazar and slipped him a small silver cell phone. "Will you keep us informed?"

"Of course." He accepted the cell phone and tucked it away, and then everyone was hugging, saying their goodbyes and promising to see one another soon.

Bella stood off to the side and watched, feeling awkward. She was just about to disappear upstairs when Tanya pulled away from Edward with a kiss to his cheek and turned to her.

"It was really nice to meet you, Bella. I'm looking forward to getting to know you better."

Bella nodded and mumbled an appropriate response, but Tanya didn't seem finished. She took a step toward her, looking tentative.

"I hope you know how lucky you are," she said, and Bella thought she saw an odd sadness in her eyes. "The Cullens are the kindest, most loving coven I've met in a thousand years. You're very fortunate to have them helping you through your newborn year."

Bella had her doubts but she kept them to herself, and Tanya gave her a resigned smile.

"I know it's hard now, but I hope that eventually you can appreciate what you have."

Thankfully, she didn't wait for an answer. She turned back to the rest of the group, linking her arm through Edward's as she finished her goodbyes. The Cullens all walked their friends back outside to their car, and Bella hovered at the window and watched as they drove away.

She had to wonder if what Tanya said was true. Maybe the Cullens weren't as bad as Bella thought they were. Edward, at least, seemed okay, and Carlisle wasn't too bad. Even Emmett, for all his intimidating size, hadn't done anything threatening—and Bella had attacked him not an hour after meeting him. But he seemed more rankled by his brothers' taunting than by anything Bella had done.

Jasper, though . . .

She had learned from Joham that kindness could be faked, but the scars on Jasper's face were real. He was dangerous. More dangerous than Joham, even, and his opinion clearly held a lot of sway in this strange coven. Bella didn't want to think about the things a man like Jasper must be capable of.

But she was starting to figure him out. Since Alice had arrived home, Jasper had been attentive only to her, catering to her whims and never leaving her side for more than a couple of minutes. During their hunt he had even surrendered his first kill to her. The act had perplexed Bella, who had felt immensely possessive over her little rabbit and wouldn't have dreamed of giving it up without a fight.

Alice was the key. If Bella wanted to get into Jasper's good graces, she would have to befriend Alice.

Which meant she was going to have to readjust her thinking. With Joham and Serena, the way to stay alive was to avoid attracting their attention as much as possible. Silence was safety. Here, it looked like she would have earn her safety through action.

That was harder for her. She had always been shy and withdrawn, which often frustrated her gregarious mother. Bella tried to remember the tips Renée had given her that were supposed to help her make friends. They all seemed to revolve around asking questions and listening, and that was something she could probably handle. If she could think of any questions.

So when Alice headed toward the dining room carrying a cardboard box full of supplies, she forced a smile and joined her and the other girls at the table.

"Newborns first," Alice announced as she settled in a chair next to Bella. "Do you want french tips or polish?"

"Um . . . I don't know, what do you think?"

Alice hummed thoughtfully, tapping her chin. "What about this one?" She fished in the box and pulled out a little bottle of coral pink polish. "It would look really good with your skin tone."

"My skin tone?" she teased before her nerves could get the better of her. "Pasty white?"

Alice giggled. "It matches the color of your lips. It'll look great."

Bella was encouraged. She had scored a laugh. "It's really pretty."

"Hands," Alice said with a self-satisfied smile.

Bella held out her hands and watched as Alice pulled out an alcohol pad and scrubbed her nail beds clean. "So . . . you guys went to Paris?"

"We did! Have you ever been?"

Bella shook her head, seizing her opportunity. "What's it like?"

That was all it took. Alice spent the next half hour telling her all about their trip, with frequent interjections from Rosalie and Esme. Before Bella knew it, Alice was sliding over a long, plastic box with blue glowing light shining from an opening at the front.

"Stick your hands in here. The acrylic needs to set up." She turned to Rosalie, who was dangling her fingertips in a foul-smelling liquid. "Are you next?"

"Do Esme," Rosalie answered. "I'm not done removing the old ones."

Esme took a seat on Alice's free side and held out her hands. "Polish," she told Alice before the little manicurist could ask.

"What color?"

"Red."

"Ooh, Mama's feeling bold," Rosalie said with a grin.

Esme smiled, her eyes sparkling. "I want it to match that dress we picked up in *Guerrisol*."

Rosalie and Alice both giggled knowingly, and Alice gave Bella a conspiratorial wink. "You'll see it soon. It's *amazing*."

"The good doctor won't know what hit him," Rosalie smirked.

Bella glanced toward the living room, where Carlisle and Edward were sitting together on the couch, their eyes locked together in an intense gaze.

"I'm not," Edward muttered. There was a short pause, and then he repeated, "I'm *not*."

Carlisle's frown deepened.

"I know what I'm doing," Edward said, apparently in response to an unspoken thought. He paused again, and then threw up his hands in frustration. "I'm the only one making any progress here! Don't you think you should trust my judgment?"

Carlisle was instantly contrite. "Of course I trust your judgment. But I'm afraid you don't realize . . ."

But what Edward didn't realize, Bella didn't get to hear. Carlisle's voice trailed off into silence as he allowed his thoughts to speak for him again.

Edward blew out a heavy breath. "I know." He closed his eyes, presumably still listening to Carlisle, and then nodded. "I get it."

Bella turned back to the girls, but her mind lingered on the conversation in the living room. It made her nervous to know that they were having a discussion from which she was deliberately excluded. Was it about her? What kind of progress was Edward talking about? She tried to tell herself that she wasn't the only one being excluded, that it could just as well be about one of the other people in the house, but in her gut she knew better.

"What about you, Bella?"

Hearing her name startled her back to attention, and she glanced toward the living room once more before giving Alice a sheepish smile. "Sorry, I wasn't listening."

Rosalie smirked. "I sincerely hope it was Edward you were daydreaming about, because as pretty as the other one is, he's spoken for."

Bella's desire to deflect attention from herself warred with her desire for information, but her curiosity won out. "And . . . Edward's not?" she asked, quietly enough that she hoped he wouldn't hear.

"I *thought* he wasn't, but the way he and Tanya were hanging all over each other . . ."

"Right?" Alice agreed eagerly. "That was so weird. He's never shown any interest in her before."

"Maybe he's just growing into himself," Esme put in, but her worried frown belied her optimistic words.

"You girls know I can hear you gossiping about me, right?"

The ladies tittered with laughter as Edward abandoned his conversation with Carlisle and moved into the dining room. He perched on the edge of the table next to Bella and smiled down at her.

Bella wanted to crawl into a hole and die. She hunched her shoulders, but she couldn't wrap her arms around herself for fear of ruining her unfinished fingernails.

"So put the gossip to rest," Rosalie said. "*What* is the deal with you and Tanya?"

Bella peeked up at Edward and saw him shrug.

"I love Tanya, I always have. You know that."

"Yeah, you love her, but do you *love* her?"

"Are you getting your freak on with the Lady of the Lodge?" Alice asked.

Edward laughed. "There has been no getting on of the freak."

"So what *is* happening?" Rosalie pressed. "And when did it happen? Did she come down while we were in Paris? Alice, did you forget to tell us something?"

"Please. I would never withhold *that* kind of information."

Edward grinned. "I, on the other hand, would. Bella, are you finished doing your thing with these gossipy old biddies?"

"As a matter of fact, she's not," Alice answered for her. "We haven't even put the polish on yet."

"Plus, we're not done talking about you behind your back," Rosalie said. "You might as well march yourself on out of here and let us get to it."

Edward chuckled as he stood. "Don't believe a word they say, Bella. They're vicious liars."

Bella smiled at him as the other girls erupted into giggles. They shooed him away before refocusing on their cosmetic endeavors.

"He's in such a good mood," Esme murmured, her voice tinged with wonder.

"Yeah, I wonder why that could be?"

Bella glanced up at Rosalie and caught her curious stare.

"I saw that smile he gave you," Rosalie said. "Forget Tanya, what's going on with *you* and Edward?"

She shrugged self-consciously. "He's been really nice."

"Sure, he's always nice. In a gloomy, depressive sort of way."

"Oh, don't be so condescending," Alice chided. "Like you wouldn't be moody if you hadn't had Emmett with you for the last seventy years."

Bella shook her head in wonder. "It's hard to imagine you being old enough to have had a golden anniversary."

"There are perks to this life," Rosalie smiled. "You get to grow old together, but you don't have to worry about saggy boobs."

Despite her playful words, though, Bella detected a hint of sadness in Rosalie's tone. She furrowed her brow in curiosity, and Rosalie sighed.

"We lose something too, though, I guess."

"You think?" Esme asked, encouraging her to continue.

"Yeah. Like . . . maybe that's how you know someone really loves you. When you're not beautiful anymore, but he still stays with you."

Alice arched an eyebrow. "I think it's pretty obvious that Emmett really loves you, Rose. Anyone else would have left your bitchy ass by now."

"Alice!" Esme admonished, but the three of them were laughing again and Bella smiled to herself. They way they interacted reminded her of her own relationship with Renée, and that thought went a long way toward making her feel more relaxed. She sat back and listened to their chatter, occasionally inserting a comment or a question, just to keep herself relevant. The point of this, after all, was to endear herself to Alice, and she couldn't do that if she let herself be forgotten.

But the more she talked with Alice and the others, the less difficult her ploy seemed. She found all three women, and Alice in particular, genuinely likable. And filtered through their perspective, she found herself seeing their husbands in a new light. From her place at the table, the men of the house suddenly looked warmer, kinder, a little less threatening and a little more . . .

Human.

They looked like men. Men who had families and contributed to their communities. Men like Charlie and Phil.

And all this time she had assumed they were vampires.

Bella glanced back toward the living room and jolted in surprise when her eyes met Jasper's. One corner of his mouth turned up in a smile, but she looked away from him quickly. Jasper was a

different story. The others might not be so bad, but Jasper wore evidence of his savage nature all over his face. Bella couldn't understand how someone as sweet and fun as Alice could possibly want to have anything to do with him. She wondered for a moment if the tiny woman might be here against her will, but dismissed the idea quickly. It was clear that Alice adored Jasper, unfathomable as her reasons might be.

When they finished with their nails, the girls all wandered back into the living room to join the rest of the family. Bella looked away quickly when Esme settled on Carlisle's lap and started nuzzling his ear, but the room was suddenly full of amorous couples. Jasper was sliding his hands provocatively down Alice's body, and Emmett was wrapped around Rosalie, walking her slowly back toward the stairs.

"You want to get out of here?"

Bella jumped at the soft voice behind her left shoulder. She hadn't heard Edward come up behind her, but she nodded quickly, more than eager to escape the house.

"Grab some books or something," Edward said. "They could be at it a while."

Bella darted around Emmett and Rosalie and raced up to her room, scooping up a handful of books. She started toward the stairs again, but then thought better of it and pushed open the window in the bedroom, hopping out so she wouldn't have any awkward encounters on the stairs.

Edward met her outside with a satchel and let her drop her books inside. He slung it over his shoulder and the two of them started jogging away from the house, putting a comfortable distance between themselves and the romantic activities behind them.

They ran for several miles, and for a while Bella didn't think they had any particular destination in mind. After a few minutes, though, she realized that they were keeping to a path that was heavy with Edward's scent. She looked around curiously, wondering if there was a reason he frequented this part of the forest.

"There's a clearing up ahead," Edward told her, guessing the direction of her thoughts. "It's beautiful. I come here pretty frequently, when the others are . . ." He trailed off and gestured back in the direction of the house.

"They do that a lot?"

"Almost every night."

Bella shuddered, and Edward laughed.

"There's nothing wrong with it. They love each other." He shrugged, his smile turning to a grimace. "It's just a frequent reminder that they all have someone, and I . . . don't."

"What about Tanya?"

Edward slowed to a walk and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah. About that."

Bella braced herself for bad news. She had a feeling she wasn't going to like what he had to say.

"That wasn't what it looked like. And . . . maybe I made it look like that on purpose?" He scratched the back of his head, looking guilty. "I didn't mean for it to be a big deal, but now Carlisle's pissed

at me for being dishonest with you."

She was right. She didn't like it. She stopped short, watching Edward closely as he halted and turned back to her.

"You lied to me?"

"I was trying to make you feel more comfortable."

"By lying?"

"No. I mean . . . I didn't lie *exactly*. But Tanya and me? It wasn't what it looked like."

Bella let out a breath, feeling a loosening in her chest. "It wasn't?"

"No. I love Tanya; she's a good friend. But she's *just* my friend." He turned and started walking again, and Bella followed after. "She flirts shamelessly, and usually I just ignore it, but today I kind of . . . encouraged it, I guess."

"Why would that make me more comfortable?"

Edward slowed to let her catch up, shrugging sheepishly. "I don't know. You relaxed a little when the girls got home. It seemed like you were a little less nervous around the guys—around Carlisle and Emmett, anyway. I didn't want you to be any less comfortable with me, just because I'm not married."

Bella wasn't quite sure how she felt about that. She thought back to how it had rankled her to see Edward being so affectionate with Tanya, and she wondered now if it was because she could tell his actions had been dishonest. It was no wonder she had been anxious to keep him in her sight.

"Are you very angry with me?" Edward asked, his voice apologetic.

She wasn't sure. It made her uncomfortable that he had lied to her. It made her wonder what else he hadn't been honest about.

But then, he was telling her the truth now. And it was somewhat comforting that Carlisle was upset about his dishonesty. Maybe that meant they had been straight with her so far. They certainly *seemed* genuine. They drank animal blood, and they had worked hard to prevent her from hurting anyone. And Carlisle had argued her case for seeing Charlie, despite Jasper's insistence that she shouldn't, and despite the conflict that it created with the Quileutes. If she looked at things objectively, she had to admit that the Cullens had been pretty good to her.

Even Edward's lie hadn't been motivated by malice.

She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I'm not angry, but I don't like that. Don't lie to me to try and make me feel better."

"I won't do it again," he promised. "I really am sorry."

Bella just nodded, not quite able to meet his eye.

They reached the clearing and Edward strode out to the center of it, sprawling out on his stomach in the long grass. Bella sank down beside him a few feet away, admiring the cool colors of the wildflowers, dimmed and purpled in the moonlight.

"It's pretty here," she murmured.

"It's *quiet*. Nobody around for miles. I come here to get everyone else out of my head."

Bella pulled her knees up to her chest, suddenly self-conscious. "I'm sorry if I'm intruding."

Edward laughed and shook his head. "You have no idea how nice it is to have a conversation with you. To not have to hear the mess of half-formed thoughts in your head, to not know what you're going to say before you say it. It's . . . weirdly fascinating."

"Fascinating?" she asked, feeling the tension leave her shoulders. "To be like a normal person?"

"It's been a long time since I've felt normal." He pulled his iPod out of his bag and tucked the ear buds into his ears. "It's a nice change."

Bella had to admit that she could identify with him a little bit. Here in the meadow there was no blood calling to her, making her throat burn with thirst. She didn't have to be a vampire here. She could just be Bella, and Edward could just be Edward. She could read her books and he could listen to his music, and they could put everything else away for a little while.

"You want to listen?" Edward asked, holding one of the ear buds out to her.

She smiled and nodded, scooting down beside him and accepting the little speaker. Her fingers tingled as they brushed against his, and her smile deepened. She selected a book from the bag and Edward withdrew his own, and the two of them settled in for a long, peaceful evening.

It was a little after midnight when they left the clearing and headed for home. Bella was pretty sure that Edward would have liked to spend more time there, but she had been restless and peevish, so Edward had packed their things up and set off through the trees.

It wasn't that she wanted to leave. Bella liked the clearing, and had enjoyed the peace they'd found there. She had been looking forward to a night of reading, but once she had the books open in front of her, she found they weren't the haven that she had imagined they would be.

She had chosen the wrong books.

The first one she tried to read was *Clockwork Orange*, a book she had been intending to read for a long time and had never gotten around to. But she had barely started it when she came across the protagonist's name. Alex.

She had tossed the book aside and gone on to the next one. *Wuthering Heights* was an old favorite, and she was confident that she would enjoy it. But at the first mention of the strange, unwanted boy, she found herself unable to continue. She had started instead on a children's book called *A Higher Power of Lucky*, but when she learned that the protagonist was afraid of being abandoned by her mother, she slammed it shut and shoved it away.

"Are you okay?"

Edward's concern had been kind and genuine, but Bella didn't want it. She didn't deserve it. She had shaken him off sullenly and tried to focus on the music, but it was a lost cause. Her mood was ruined.

They had lingered a few more hours, but Edward had finally given up on Bella being mollified by the peace of their surroundings.

He was quiet on the run back, but as they approached the house he slowed, a smile spreading across his face.

"Come here," he said quietly, altering his course and beckoning for her to follow.

She did, curious as to what he was after. He made a wide circuit to the north, crossing the river beyond the large outbuilding the Cullens used as a garage, and then scaled a tall, bushy pine tree. He beckoned her up after him, and she followed him onto a high limb, hiding among the tree's needles.

"Watch this," Edward said. "You'll get a kick out of it."

Bella looked around, but she didn't see anything. Edward just crouched on the branch, though, waiting patiently, so Bella waited too.

It was only a few seconds later when she heard Alice speak from the house, her voice bright and laughing.

"Jasper, sweetie, you should come downstairs. You're going to have visitors in a couple of minutes."

There was a brief pause before Jasper's surprised answer. "Really?"

"You'd better hurry," Alice giggled.

Bella heard the slam of a drawer and rustling of fabric, and then a few seconds later she saw Jasper appear at the front of the house, making his way northward through the forest. She was surprised how quiet his movements were, his stocking feet finding soft spots in the bracken, his gloved hands gripping low branches as he swung himself over piles of dead pine needles. He spotted Edward and Bella in their tree and smiled widely, holding a finger to his lips.

Edward nodded to him, laughing silently.

Jasper's smile turned predatory as he swung himself up into a tree, obscuring himself in the greenery. He stared forward, eager and anticipatory, and Bella followed his gaze.

At first she didn't see what he was looking at. But soon her ears detected a soft rustling in the undergrowth, and her eyes picked out movement in the trees. Several hundred yards away, two people—no, not people, vampires—were jogging toward them, moving almost as quietly as Jasper had. Their bare feet avoided the dry needles in favor of grass and ferns, seemingly without any effort on their part.

Bella tensed as she took in their appearances. They both had short-cropped hair, so light it looked silvery in the moonlight that filtered through the trees, and their eyes gleamed deep burgundy. The man was tall, right around Jasper's height, with the same lean, corded muscles and prowling run. The girl was tiny, her willowy frame almost boyish under her tight-fitting tunic and leggings.

And they were both scarred—not nearly as badly as Jasper, but in a similar way. Crescent-shaped bite marks glittered iridescently in the low light, peppering their necks and arms, lending an aura of menace to their lithe frames.

Bella curled into a defensive crouch, ready to run if they spotted her. She saw Jasper slip off his socks and gloves and lay them over the tee limb beside him before falling into a crouch himself. His lean muscles bunched in anticipation and his teeth gleamed wickedly behind his smile. He watched the two visitors approach until they were only a few yards in front of him, and then let out an ear-splitting war cry and launched himself off of the branch.

His body slammed into the tall man, throwing him backwards, and the ensuing brawl shocked Bella so badly that she lost her footing and slipped from the branch. She caught herself and hauled herself back up, never taking her eyes from the snarling, snapping, hissing blur before her.

Bella expected the girl to join in, to try and defend her companion, but she just crossed her arms and huffed impatiently, jumping back whenever the men's wrestling match brought them too near.

At one point the stranger threw Jasper off of him, but Jasper tackled him again as he tried to dart away, dragging him back and starting the battle again. For several long minutes the fight continued, until finally Jasper managed to pin the visitor to the ground, face down, one knee grinding into the newcomer's back.

Bella's fingers dug into the bark of the tree as she worried over what would happen next. But the snarls subsided, and suddenly the stranger started laughing.

"Jasper, you son of a bitch," he said in a thick Southern accent. "Get the hell offa me."

Bella gasped when Jasper complied, joining in with his own laughter as he climbed to his feet and offered his hand to the stranger.

"Peter!" he cried in response, pulling the man into an enthusiastic hug. "It's been too long!"

The girl sniffed contemptuously. "Not long enough, if you ask me."

Jasper released Peter and turned to her. "Hey now, Charlotte. You're not still sore at me, are you?"

"Yeah." She arched an eyebrow and appraised him coolly.

"Are you kidding me? That was decades ago."

"You tried to kill me!"

"No, I *intended* to kill you." Jasper flashed her a grin. "If I had tried to kill you, you'd be dead."

She rolled her eyes, but allowed a small smile and stepped into his embrace. "You're a bastard, Jasper Whitlock."

"And you're a pain in the ass, but I put up with you for Peter's sake."

"Ditto."

He pulled back and chucked her under her chin, then threw an arm over Peter's shoulders. "So what brings you two? Just passing through?"

"Came looking for you, actually," Peter replied. "I wondered if you'd heard the rumors."

"About the Volturi?"

Peter frowned. "No, about Maria. What about the Volturi?"

"What about Maria?"

"She's raising another army," Charlotte said. "She's been hard to pin down, but we're pretty sure she has at least fifteen."

Jasper cursed under his breath.

"Come on," Edward said to Bella. He slid off of the tree limb and dropped lightly to the ground. Bella followed him, trailing behind as he strode up to Jasper and his friends.

"Edward," Peter greeted with a nod, but then did a double-take when he saw Bella. He turned back to Jasper, one eyebrow raised. "You have a newborn?"

"Found her wandering around the outskirts of town a couple days ago."

Peter and Charlotte exchanged glances. "Who's her sire?"

"She hasn't said. Kid's skittish as hell."

Peter turned to Bella, his scarred face hard and expectant. "Well?"

Bella sidled closer to Edward, half hiding from Peter's piercing gaze behind his shoulder. His hand found hers, his fingers lacing with her own as his thumb rubbed soothing strokes over her palm.

"What does it matter?" Jasper asked. "She's alone now. Believe me, I've been keeping an eye out."

"Maria's raising an army, and a newborn just happens to show up in your territory?"

"Where did she come from?" Charlotte asked. "Or won't she tell you that, either?"

Jasper's lips pressed into a hard line, his eyes finding Bella again. "Mexico."

Charlotte let out a hiss and Peter growled low in his throat.

"You think Maria sent a spy?" Jasper asked. "Why?"

"Because she's afraid of you," Peter said. "She knows perfectly well that if you raised an army against hers, you would win."

"Sure, but why would she think that might happen? I've never opposed her before."

"I'm still trying to work that out."

Jasper turned to Bella, his eyebrows raised. "Well, kid? How about it? Did Maria send you here?"

She shook her head, sliding farther behind Edward. "I don't know any Maria."

"Is she telling the truth?" Peter asked Jasper.

"Hard to say. Like I said, skittish as hell."

Peter snorted in disgust. "You want a nickel's worth of free advice? Kill her."

A fierce snarl ripped from Edward's throat, and he stepped fully in front of Bella, taking a defensive stance. But Jasper just chuckled, ignoring him completely.

"It's too late for that. She's Carlisle's pet project now. She's looking to explore unconventional dietary options."

"How convenient," Charlotte muttered, crossing her arms over her chest. "She shows up spouting the one line that's guaranteed to get her in good with your coven leader."

"Yeah, well, that part's genuine at least. The kid *really* doesn't like killing humans."

Bella heard the front door of the house close, and a few seconds later Carlisle and Esme appeared, their arms linked together. Carlisle smiled warmly at their visitors, stopping several yards away.

"Peter, Charlotte. It's a pleasure to see you again."

"You too," Peter said with a nod.

"Listen," Carlisle said, a sparkle appearing in his eyes. "I'd take it as a personal favor if you'd refrain from recommending violence against my guests."

"No offense," Peter grinned back. "Just looking out for your welfare."

Carlisle gestured toward the house. "Won't you come inside? It looks like Jasper owes you a change of clothes."

He glanced down at his outfit, torn and dirtied from his brawl with Jasper. "If I know Alice, she's already got something picked out for me."

"It's Versace!" Alice called from inside the house.

Peter laughed and they all followed Carlisle back inside. Peter and Charlotte changed into the fresh clothes Alice offered, and then they all gathered in the living room. The Cullens found seats around the room, but Peter and Charlotte remained standing, placing themselves a few yards from the front door.

Bella stood, too, hovering behind Edward's chair.

"I don't know how you do it," Charlotte muttered to Jasper, fidgeting anxiously. "It doesn't make you feel claustrophobic to be cooped up in here all the time?"

"You get used to it. Cars still bug me, though, especially when I'm not driving."

Charlotte shuddered.

Peter smiled fondly at her. "My girl hasn't much cared for enclosed spaces since we got shut of those old barns Maria used to hole us up in."

"We appreciate you bringing us news of what she's up to," Carlisle said.

"Frankly, I'm less worried about the army she raised than I am about why she raised it. Something must have scared her pretty bad if she's risking another run-in with the Volturi."

"Yeah, speaking of the Volturi . . ." Jasper said.

"What? What are they doing?"

"Nothing. They're gone."

Peter frowned. "What do you mean, gone?"

"I mean, dead. At least some of them. We're not sure which, yet."

Peter stiffened, looking stricken. "Dead," he whispered. "No."

"I know, it's bad."

"That must be why she's mobilizing again. No Volturi, no one to stop her."

"Yeah," Jasper mumbled, a frown furrowing his brow. "Except . . ."

"What?"

"Something's not adding up. Maria has at least fifteen, you say?"

Peter nodded.

"You don't raise an army of fifteen overnight. It takes time, especially since I'm not there to keep them from killing each other."

"You think she has another like you?"

Jasper shook his head. "Are you sure your numbers are right?"

"No, but if anything they're low. Char and I found an abandoned warehouse that looked like one of our old nests. Vampire ash and all."

"We counted thirty-one different scents," Charlotte put in.

"*Thirty-one?*"

"Yeah," Peter agreed, "but like I said, there was a fair pile ash. They didn't all make it out alive."

Bella shuddered. The cavalier way they talked about death—and the death of newborns, in particular—made the skin on the back of her neck prickle.

Jasper was rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "Thirty-one. That would take weeks. Months, even. Carlisle, how old do you suppose Alistair's information is?"

"I can't imagine it's very old. The destruction of the most powerful coven in the world isn't something that will remain a secret for long."

"No, we'd have heard about it pretty soon," Peter agreed. "The nomad grapevine is surprisingly efficient."

"So there's a good chance Maria started raising this army when the Volturi was still intact."

Silence fell over them for a few moments, before Peter asked, "What are you thinking, Jasper?"

He leaned back on the couch, letting his head fall back as he stared off into space. "I'm thinking about that army we fought outside of Monterrey—this was before your time, Charlotte. You remember the one? The leader preferred quality over quantity. There were only a handful of them, but they were big."

"I remember," Peter said. "You had Maria turn that girl for it. Little thing. Couldn't have been more than fourteen years old."

"I needed somebody fresh. Small, unscarred, as nonthreatening as possible."

"Why?" Carlisle asked.

"Bait. I sent her in posing as a spy, but she let them catch sight of her and then ran. She looked like such an easy kill that they sent a couple of their soldiers out after her. Of course she led them right into an ambush."

"It worked twice," Peter said. "And that diminished their numbers enough to make the real battle an easy win."

"I see," Carlisle whispered, his voice full of new understanding.

Peter frowned. "What?"

"The Volturi fell because of a newborn," Jasper told him. "There was one hunting in Volterra. Should have been a ten second job, but Chelsea went out after it and never came back."

Charlotte let out a low whistle.

"Wait," Peter said. "You're saying you think Maria might have borrowed your strategy to take down the Volturi?"

"Take them down, or at least diminish their numbers. If that's the case, she got damn lucky that she snared Chelsea."

"But you think it was *Maria*?"

"I think it's a fair possibility. Did you come across any other armies she might have been guarding against?"

He shook his head.

"Any evidence that she had used her army to secure land or attack an established coven?"

He frowned.

"And you never actually saw Maria's army?"

"No. We tracked them for a ways, but we lost the scent on a wharf just south of Corpus Christi."

"Mm-hm. Peter, if you wanted to transport an army of newborns to Italy, how would you travel?"

"Not by air." His gaze locked with Jasper's and for several long moments they just stared at each other. "Aw, hell," he finally muttered. "Can you imagine the kind of notoriety she could get for raising the army that took down the Volturi?"

Jasper smirked. "Hear that, Carlisle? You may have some competition for Aro's old job."

"Bidding for succession?" Peter asked Carlisle with raised eyebrows.

"No. And if you'd spread the word that we're not interested in the position, I'd be much obliged."

Peter chuckled. "I'll pass that along."

Charlotte was casting impatient glances at the front door, and Peter wrapped an arm around her, hugging her close. "All right, little lamb. We're leaving."

"Can't stay for a while?" Jasper asked, rising.

He shook his head. "This ain't a social call. We're fixing to head south again to see if we can come up with any more information. I just thought you ought to know what was going on."

"Are you sure you want to go back? Maybe you should just steer clear of her until we see how things shake out."

Peter shook his head. "I'm not giving her the advantage of surprise. If she's going to be a threat, I want to know about it."

"Fine, but hold on a minute." Jasper headed into the kitchen and returned a moment later with a silver cell phone that looked just like the one Carlisle had given to Eleazar. He pressed it into Peter's hand, along with a charger. "Hang onto this, and charge it whenever you can. We'll keep each other in the loop."

Peter scrunched up his nose in distaste, but tucked the phone in his pocket. "It's like wearing a leash," he muttered.

"Yeah, I know. But information is going to be valuable for the next little while. It'll be worth the inconvenience. Also." Jasper ducked back into an office behind the stairs and pulled a map out of a drawer in the desk. He returned to where Peter stood and unfolded the map on the back of the couch. "You should be aware of our neighbors. This area right here . . ." he pointed out the borders of La Push on the map. "Give it a wide berth."

"Why? What's over there?"

"Shifters."

Charlotte's jaw dropped. "You're kidding!"

"How many?" Peter asked.

"Three."

He arched an eyebrow at Jasper. "Three? What's the matter, has the animal blood made you soft? You can't handle three little mutants on your own?"

"You want us to take care of that for you?" Charlotte asked, stretching up to pat Jasper on the head.

He batted her hand away. "We've agree to leave each other alone for the time being."

Peter's smile fell and he gave Jasper an incredulous look. "What the hell's gotten into you lately? You've got shifters to the west and a sketchy newborn right here in your house, and you're not going to do anything about either one of them?"

"Don't worry about it. I've got it under control."

"Maybe for now, but you're playing with fire, friend. You're still flammable, you know."

"I'll call you if I get in over my head. For now, steer clear of the Reservation, will you?"

"Jasper, listen to me." Peter gripped his arm, locking eyes with him. "I don't care what you do with the shifters. You could handle ten times that many without even messing up your hair. But Maria? She's a different story. I'm telling you, it's a mistake to keep that kid around."

"That's enough, Peter," Carlisle said calmly.

But he didn't let it go. He turned to Carlisle, his jaw set in grim determination. "I know this sort of thing turns your stomach, but I'll make it real easy. Say the word, and I'll take care of her for you."

Bella didn't even realize Edward was moving until he had shoved Jasper aside and slammed into Peter, sending him sprawling back onto the floor. His feral roar mingled with the sound of splintering wood as the two of them crashed through the hardwood and shattered the joists beneath.

"Damn it, Edward!" Jasper grabbed him around the neck and yanked him off of Peter before he could do any more damage. "Cool it, or I'll turn you loose and let Peter teach you to think before you act."

"That will do, Edward." Carlisle hadn't moved from his position on the couch as he calmly watched the situation unfold in front of him. "I won't be sanctioning any injury to Isabella today. Thank you for your concern, Peter, but we'll give our new friend the benefit of the doubt."

Peter let Charlotte help him to his feet and winked at Alice as he caught the bundle of undamaged clothes she threw him. "Thanks, doll."

"You're welcome. But next time you decide to provoke Edward, let me know in advance so I can save the Versace for after."

Edward reluctantly backed off—at Jasper's forceful urging—and moved to stand beside Bella, hovering protectively over her.

Peter grinned at him. "Next time, pretty boy. If I'm wrong about her, I'll let you kick my ass."

Edward growled at him.

Jasper sighed. "Peter, would you quit poking at him? I swear, you two are as bad as a couple of kids." He led Peter and Charlotte to the front door and opened it for them. "Come on, I'll run with

you a ways."

Once the door closed behind them, Edward ran his fingertips lightly up Bella's arm, drawing her attention back to him.

"Are you all right?" he whispered.

She whirled to face him, her hands curling into fists. "Am I *all right*? Do you *think* I'm all right?"

"I'm sorry. I know that Peter was harsh, but he's really not such a bad guy."

"Are you kidding me? He stood right there in front of me and told you all that you should kill me! If *he's* not such a bad guy, *who is*?"

"Isabella . . ." Carlisle rose, but Bella backed away from him, her hands raised to shield herself from him.

"What? You're going to tell me that you're still trying to help me? That you didn't standthere and laugh like it was some big joke, and then invite him in for a chat?"

"He's an old friend—"

"I don't want that kind of friend," she snapped, stalking toward the door. "I don't want any of this."

Edward bolted after her. "Wait, Bella!" He darted around her and blocked her path to the door. "Please, just wait, don't leave. Can't we talk first?"

The desperate, pleading look in his face made her pause. She didn't want to leave him. Edward was the first friend she'd had in months, and that meant more to her than she wanted to admit.

"Please," he said again. "I don't want you to go."

Her eyes stung with phantom tears. "How can I stay? Jasper thinks I'm a spy from some crazy lady's army."

"That doesn't matter. I told you I wouldn't let anyone hurt you, and I won't."

"He wants to kill me."

"No he doesn't. He never even considered it. In fact, he's a little worried about Peter for suggesting it." When Bella didn't answer, he continued. "Jasper thinks Peter's fear of Maria is making him irrational. He's out there right now trying to talk him out of heading back to Texas."

She crossed her arms in front of herself, hunching her shoulders. "He doesn't like me."

"*I like you.*" The corners of Edward's mouth quirked up, and he held out a hand to her.

Something that felt like relief washed through her at his words, and she placed her hand in his. He pulled her a little closer, smiling down at her, and she let him twine his fingers with hers.

"I won't let anything happen to you," he whispered. "You can trust me."

She couldn't, she knew. But she wanted to. So for just a few minutes she took comfort from his quiet, steady presence, telling herself that he could make everything okay again. She barely noticed when the phone rang or when Carlisle moved to answer it, but she jumped when she heard Billy Black's familiar voice on the other end of the line.

"Cullen," he said, his voice short and cool. "I'm sorry to have to tell you that the Council has denied your request. You are not to tell Charlie anything."

"I see." Carlisle rubbed a hand over his jaw. "I'd like to appeal the decision."

"On what grounds?"

"On the grounds that Charlie is related to one of the council members."

There was a beat of silence. "Oh?"

"Quil Ateara's mother was Charlie Swan's third cousin, twice removed. Their common ancestor was not Quileute, but there is a blood connection. I'd like you to discuss whether that's enough to give him the right to know your tribal histories."

There was a longer silence this time. "Just a moment."

Bella stood rigid in Edward's arms, her gaze fixed on the telephone in Carlisle's hand. She could hear muffled voices on the other end, but nothing clear enough to understand. Finally, Billy's voice returned to the line.

"Cullen? I'll call you back."

The line disconnected before Carlisle could answer, and he placed the phone back in the cradle.

"How did you know that?" Edward asked.

Carlisle looked back over his shoulder at Edward. "This is a rural area with a long history. Everyone is connected. You just have to find the path."

"When will he call back?" Bella asked, staring at the telephone.

"I don't know. He may not even be with the council. It could be days."

But nobody moved. For several long minutes, they all stared at the phone, waiting for it to ring again. Alice joined Bella and Edward near the door, clinging to Edward's arm in anticipation. Esme clasped her hands in front of her, her eyes closed, lips moving soundlessly.

Jasper returned while they were still waiting and stopped in the doorway. He gazed around at the gathered group in bemusement. "What happened?"

"Billy Black called," Carlisle replied.

"And?"

"He's going to call again."

Jasper looked around at them again and then shook his head, mumbling about a watched pot.

The phone rang then, though, startling Bella. Carlisle answered, and Billy's voice again carried through the receiver.

"The Council has reversed the decision. You may tell Charlie anything you like about your kind, but we request that you allow us to tell him about our tribal heritage ourselves."

"Of course. I can't tell you how grateful I am, Mr. Black. Please pass along my thanks."

Billy cleared his throat, and when he spoke again his voice was gentler, less remote. "Carlisle . . . do it soon. Please."

"As soon as it's safe," he promised.

The line went dead again, and Carlisle replaced the phone in the cradle.

"That's that, then," Jasper said, crossing to the back door. "Let's go, Isabella."

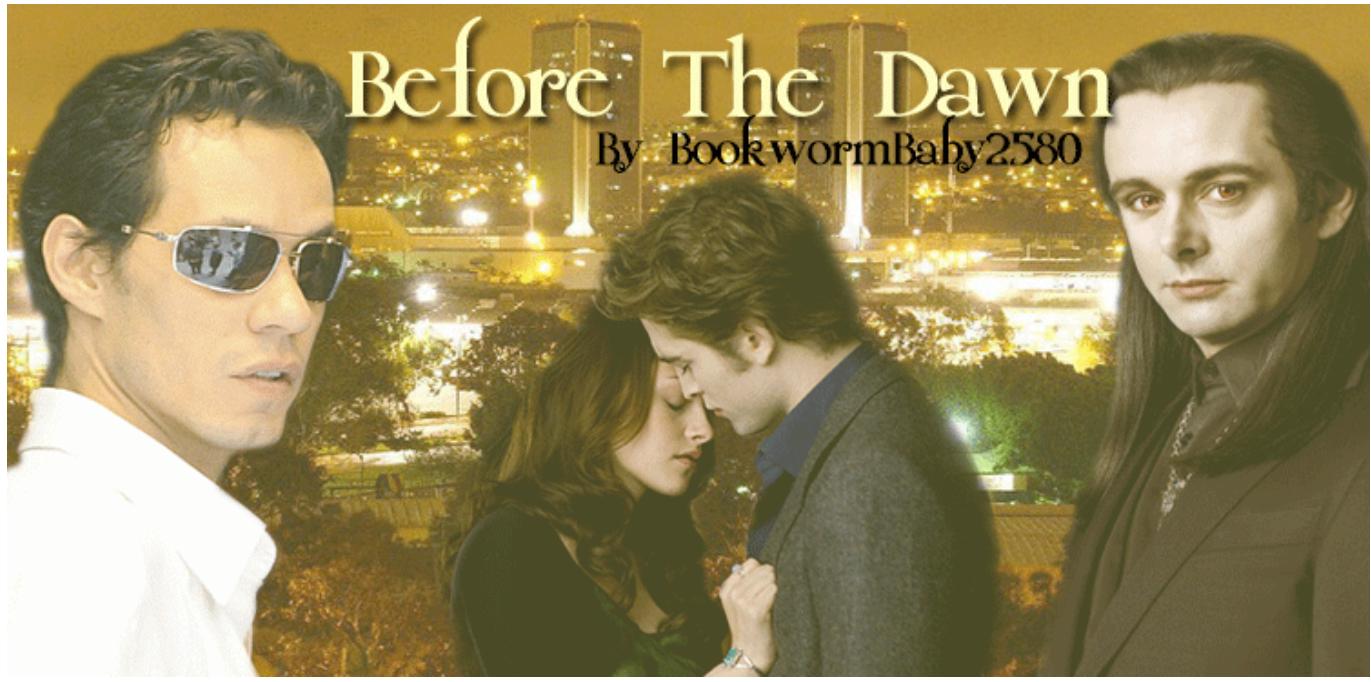
She froze, feeling the panic well up in her again, and her hands gripped Edward's shirt tightly. "Go where?"

"You want to see Charlie without killing him, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Then we've got work to do. We have to get you ready."

Control



Bella stood on the east bank of the Sol Duc River, the rushing water separating her from the Cullens' house. Most of the family had followed Jasper outside, but he'd scribbled a note on a piece of paper and handed it to Rosalie.

"Mind running an errand?" he asked her.

She looked over the note. "No problem. Sealed in a bag, I assume?"

"Please. Oh, hang on." He took back the note and added something to it before handing it back to her. "It's a long shot. Take Carlisle with you and you might have a chance."

Carlisle read the note over her shoulder, and then he and Rosalie leapt back across the river and headed for the garage.

"All right, Isabella, listen up. The first thing I need you to do is go find me a rabbit. But I need you to bring it back alive and unharmed."

She blinked. "Why?"

"It doesn't matter why. I'm your Mr. Miyagi. 'I say, you do, no questions.'"

She blinked again. "Huh?"

"What?" Jasper asked. "Is that outdated already?"

Emmett snickered. "That movie came out before Isabella was even born."

"Just trust him, Bella," Alice said. "Jasper's really good at this."

Bella turned and jogged into the forest, using her ears and nose to detect traces of the little creatures. It wasn't hard; the woods were full of them. Within a few minutes she had closed in on

one and managed to pluck it from the ground just before it darted into its burrow.

The tricky part was not hurting it. It squealed and kicked, and she was tempted to grip it too tightly to keep it from escaping. She doubted she would have been able to do it if she hadn't had some experience with handling delicate creatures.

But she *did* have experience. When Joham had placed Alexander in her arms, her instincts had told her that he required a feather-light touch. Those instincts weren't in play now, but she remembered the delicacy with which she had handled the little boy and she used it on the rabbit. She tucked the little creature against her chest and though it struggled and tried to slip through her arms, she managed to restrain it long enough to run back to where the others waited.

She gripped it by the scruff of the neck and held it out to Jasper.

He stared. "You . . . you got one?"

"Yeah." She took a step closer, still holding it out as it kicked wildly.

Jasper took it by the ears, lifting it from her grasp and peered at it. "Huh," he said. He turned it back and forth, examining it closely. "Huh." He set it down on the ground and let it go, watching it tear off into the trees.

"What did you do that for?" Bella demanded.

"I wanted to make sure it wasn't hurt."

"Of course it wasn't hurt! You said not to hurt it, and I didn't!"

Jasper arched an eyebrow, and Bella quailed under the look he gave her. "Go get another," he said.

Had it been anyone but Jasper asking, she'd have told him to go get it himself. But it *was* Jasper, so she set off to find herself another rabbit. A few minutes later she was back with a soft, wriggling bundle, holding it close so Jasper wouldn't let this one go, too.

He reached for it, but didn't take it from her. This time he grabbed the rabbit's head and gave it a sharp jerk, snapping its neck.

Bella couldn't hold back a snarl. "What are you doing?"

"It's better if it's dead. No need to make it suffer more than it has to."

"Then why did you tell me to bring it back alive?"

"Because I didn't think you could do it."

She dropped the limp animal to the ground. "So you're just messing with me?" she demanded, her voice raising shrilly. "You just want to watch me fail?"

"Check your attitude, kid. This is something you need to be able to do and I thought it would take you a little more practice." He allowed a small smile. "You're a quick study. That's good. Keep it up and you'll be able to see your father in a couple of days."

She sucked in a breath, instantly mollified. "Really?"

"Really. It won't be easy, and you won't be able to stay with him for very long, but you're surprisingly controlled. You'll do all right."

Bella shivered with anticipation. "Okay. What's next?"

"Pick up the rabbit," he said. "I want you to take its foreleg in one hand and break it, but I want you to go slow. Hold it lightly and increase your pressure little by little until it cracks."

Bella followed his instructions, surprised by all of the things she could feel as she squeezed the little paw. The layer of fat crunched and oozed beneath the skin, the capillaries burst, the veins crushed . . . and then finally, the fragile little bone snapped.

"Did you feel all that?" Jasper asked her. He waited for her to nod and then continued. "*All* of that hurts. If you shake a human hand, you can't squeeze *at all*. You can't give someone so much as a pat on the back without doing real damage."

Bella nodded. She already knew this. She remembered all too well the feeling of the tiny, delicate boy in her arms, wrapping his little warm arms around her neck. A pang of regret shot through her and she quickly tamped it down. She didn't have time for it now.

Jasper was watching her curiously. "What's wrong?" he asked her, his voice gentler than she was used to.

"Nothing."

His brows lowered as he looked at her, but he didn't push. "Okay. Now, hold the rabbit by the other foreleg. Don't let it fall, and don't do anything that would injure it if it were alive."

His request was surprisingly difficult. The fur was slick, the body limp and heavy. Bella broke two more legs, but she was finally able to hold it by its back leg without damaging it or dropping it.

Jasper laughed and shook his head in disbelief. "Not bad, kid. Not bad at all. Now shake my hand, and use as light a touch as you would if I were human."

He stuck out his hand and Bella jumped back, hissing softly.

Jasper snorted. "Fine. Not mine. Esme, would you mind?"

Esme had been hovering nearby with the others, watching and occasionally offering encouragement. She stepped forward at Jasper's invitation, smiling sweetly at Bella as she held out her hand.

Bella smiled back in relief and took it, remembering Alexander and the rabbit and applying only the slightest pressure.

"Just a tiny bit lighter," Esme instructed. "You don't have to hold anyone's weight with a handshake."

Bella loosened her fingers a little, and Esme's smile broadened. "That's perfect. Here, do it again for Alice."

Bella shook Alice's hand, and then Edward's, preening under the praise they offered.

"You're doing great, kid," Jasper told her. "A lot better than I expected, in fact. I thought Rosalie would be back by the time you got all that."

"We can jump ahead," Alice said, calling over her shoulder as she jogged back toward the house.

"Yeah, all right. Isabella, I want you to close your eyes, and *no matter* what happens, stay perfectly still."

Bella was confused by the request, but she obeyed. The other things Jasper had asked of her had been at least a little bit challenging. Closing her eyes and staying still, though? It was the most natural thing she had done all day. She would have preferred to have her eyesight, but her other senses made up for it so effectively that she hardly missed it. She knew that Jasper was pacing by the crunch of the pine needles beneath his feet, by the shifting air currents that redirected around him, by the movement of his scent. She heard Alice's light step approaching from the house, heard something that sounded like a plastic garbage bag, felt the shift of the breeze—

And then she was in motion, propelled toward Alice by the need, the *desperation* to have what Alice had. She tackled the small frame and sank her teeth into . . .

Polyester.

Bella spat the offending material on the ground and shook her head, trying to clear away the haze. Jasper was laughing behind her, and she hissed at him.

"*There* she is," he said, still chuckling. "You've got a vampire in there after all."

Bella straightened and looked down at the destroyed cloth in her hands. The limp fabric couldn't fulfill the promise made by the tantalizing scent that clung to it, igniting a fire in Bella's throat.

"What is it?" she asked, confused.

"It's a scarf I bought in Paris," Alice answered. "I haven't washed it yet, so it still smells like all the humans who touched it before me."

Bella swallowed the venom in her mouth, appalled that a simple scarf could elicit such a violent reaction.

"Don't beat yourself up," Jasper said. "That's perfectly natural. I made you rely on your sense of smell, and you did."

But Bella couldn't help feeling like she had failed a test. "I wasn't ready," she said lamely.

"That's how it is. Living this close to humans, you *always* have to be ready. You have to learn to guard against your thirst every second, because there's no telling when a human is going to pop into your path and take you by surprise."

Bella looked back down at the shredded fabric in her hands. "I'm sorry about your new scarf," she mumbled to Alice.

"Please. I bought sixteen of them. I won't even miss it."

"All right, let's try again," Jasper said. "Close your eyes, Isabella. Alice?"

Bella closed her eyes, tensing for the assault.

"You have to breathe. You can't hold your breath the whole time you're with Charlie, and you have to learn to master the urge to attack when you smell a human scent."

Bella hadn't even been aware that she was no longer breathing. She drew in a deep breath, surprised when she couldn't detect anything human in the air. "Where did Alice go?"

"She'll be back. Just breathe."

Bella took a steady breath, and then she was lunging again, tackling Alice to the ground and clawing at a cotton blouse.

The third time through the exercise she managed to stop herself before she reached Alice, and the fourth time she held herself in place, though her entire body trembled with the need to chase, kill, drink. It was nearly impossible to resist, but the desire to see Charlie was stronger than her desire to sate her thirst. She had to see him, and she had to make sure it would be safe for him when she did.

After several more successful tests—and one or two failures—Rosalie returned with Carlisle trailing behind. She was carrying two plastic garbage bags and a carton of eggs.

"Did you get it?" Jasper asked, accepting the egg carton.

"We did," Carlisle answered. "Jared was happy to help."

Jasper plucked an egg out of the carton. "Isabella, catch."

She reached out instinctively to catch it, and she gasped when it smashed and splattered all over her hand.

"Physics lesson," Jasper said. "Do you know what happens when you throw an egg against a brick wall?"

"It breaks," she said between her teeth, shaking slimy egg whites from her hand.

"Right. Do you know what happens when you throw an egg against a sheet hanging from a clothes line?"

Bella frowned, distracted from the gooey mess by his question. "No."

"It doesn't break. Edward, catch."

Jasper lobbed another egg, this time at Edward, who caught it easily.

"A brick wall slows the egg down all at once. There's too much force for the brittle shell, and it smashes. A sheet slows it down over a longer distance. It moves back with the egg, just like Edward moved his hands back when he caught that one. He slowed it down over a longer distance so it wouldn't crush the shell."

Edward tossed the egg back to Jasper, and Bella watched as he demonstrated what he had just told her.

"Humans are soft," Jasper continued. "If they bump into each other, there's no major damage. There's enough give in their bodies that they'll hardly even feel the effects. You, on the other hand, are rigid. If a human trips and falls against you, he's going to get hurt. You have to compensate for that by moving back, cushioning his fall."

He tossed the egg to Bella, and though she tried to imitate his catch, the egg still broke in her hands.

"A little more," he said. "And remember this when you see Charlie. If he tries to give you a hug, you're going to have to move with him so you don't hurt him." He threw another one, and this time Bella managed to judge the egg's velocity a little better. It didn't smash in her hand, but the shell cracked where it hit her palm.

"Another one," she said, tossing it aside.

After a few more minutes of practice, she had gotten the hang of it. She and Jasper tossed the same egg back and forth several times without causing any damage to the shell. When he was satisfied, he passed the eggs back to Rosalie and allowed Bella to rinse her hands in the river.

"You've got a soft touch, kid. I'm impressed. I want to work a little more on your tolerance for scents, though." He took a garbage bag from Rosalie and opened it up.

Bella was immediately flooded with the urge to attack, but the scent brought something else with it, too. Memories washed over her; memories of herself as a little girl, curled up in her father's lap; standing on his feet and clinging to his knees as he danced her around in a circle; hugging him goodnight before being tucked into bed. More recent memories, too, of greeting him in an airport lobby; of clutching his waist as they cruised through the ocean water on a rented jet ski. The memories were so potent that it was a moment before she realized what she was smelling.

Charlie.

Jasper was pulling a green flannel shirt out of the garbage bag, thick with the odors of leather and river water and the musk that always clung to Charlie's skin.

Her throat burned, but she didn't feel the urge to attack the way she had before. Her thirst was tempered by the affection that rose up in her, and she drew another deep breath, savoring the connection to her father.

"Charlie," she breathed, letting the air flow out of her lungs again.

Jasper raised an eyebrow.

For a moment, no one said anything, then Rosalie laughed.

"She makes it look easy!"

Bella shook her head. It wasn't easy at all. Thirst tore at her throat, begging her to drink. But she was in control of her actions, and that was the point.

"Well?" Carlisle asked, stepping up beside Jasper.

Jasper took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I think . . . I don't know, I hate to say it because it seems way too soon, but . . . I think she's ready."

"Alice?"

She shrugged, giving him an apologetic look. "I don't see problems, but these things tend to be last-minute decisions."

"You saw how she handled the shirt," Jasper said.

"Yes," Carlisle agreed, "but Charlie's scent will be stronger."

"She'll also be desensitized." He tossed Charlie's shirt to Bella. "Put that on. I want you to wear it for as long as you can."

Bella shrugged obediently into it and wrapped it around her. The burn in her throat was torture, but the flannel was the only connection she had to Charlie right now, and she needed it desperately.

"Plus, our other little tricks should help out. I think she's as ready as she's going to get."

"Today then?" Carlisle asked, sizing up Bella with his eyes.

"Tonight," Alice corrected. "The clouds aren't cooperating today. We'll have clear skies until sundown."

Carlisle frowned.

"Maybe that's not so bad," Edward said, answering an unspoken thought. "Maybe if you're going to tell him about vampires, it's best to let him have a couple of drinks first."

"You might want to take Emmett along," Alice said. "Charlie won't be all that eager to come with you."

Carlisle nodded. "Tonight, then. Emmett, do you mind?"

"I'm there."

Carlisle clapped a grim hand on Jasper's shoulder, fixing his gaze on Bella again. "We'll leave at a quarter to nine."

The decision made, most of the Cullens turned and headed back toward the house. Edward, though, moved to Bella's side. He had his hands stuffed in his pockets and was grinning broadly.

"I can't believe how well you're doing. Jasper thought it would take at least three or four weeks of work to get you to this point."

She shrugged self-consciously, dropping her gaze.

"I'm proud of you."

She felt him shift closer, and then his fingers were trailing lightly down the inside of her forearm. When they reached her hand, he hesitated just a moment before sliding his fingers between hers.

Bella's breath caught in her throat and she jerked her head up to look at him. He was smiling softly down at her, but his eyes held a question. Was this okay? Did she want to hold his hand?

It startled her to realize that she did. Quite apart from being her ally in the Cullen family, Edward was interesting. She liked being near him, and the indication that he enjoyed her company as well made her feel oddly unsettled inside.

But in a good way.

She squeezed his hand and his smile grew broader.

"Do you want to hunt?" he asked. "It'll help with the burn, and you won't want to be thirsty tonight."

She nodded, but hesitated, looking down at Charlie's shirt. She had ruined so many, and she didn't want to damage this one. She shrugged out of it and laid it over a tree limb, silently promising to follow Jasper's instructions and put it back on as soon as she was finished hunting.

Edward took her hand again, more confidently this time, and the two of them darted off into the trees in search of something to quell the fire in Bella's throat.

Carlisle pulled his car up in front of the Hang-Up Tavern and surveyed the building. With its peeling paint and dingy windows looking out over a cracked and uneven parking lot, it made an unimpressive sight

"You sure you want to do this?" Emmett asked.

Carlisle shook his head, never taking his eyes off of the run-down building.

"So . . . why are we here?"

"It's not my decision. He's Isabella's father." The reminder steadied his resolve and he pushed open the car door. Emmett followed him into the building, and they stood in the doorway for just a moment, their eyes sweeping the room for Charlie.

"There," Emmett said, nodding to a shadowy corner where a morose figure hunched over a half-empty glass.

Carlisle nodded, but headed for the bar instead.

The bartender greeted him with a nod. "Hey, Doc. Emmett. You're a little young to be in here, son."

"We're not staying," Carlisle told him. "I'd like to settle Chief Swan's tab, actually. He's needed elsewhere."

"You mean tonight's tab, or the whole thing?"

"How much is the whole thing?"

He turned to a computer on the corner of the bar and punched something in. "Five hundred and eighty dollars."

Carlisle's eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline. "Jack . . ."

He grimaced.

"Why haven't you cut him off?"

He shrugged helplessly. "I can't. The man lost his daughter, Doc. If anyone has the right to drink himself into oblivion, he does."

"He'll be drinking you into bankruptcy. Here." Carlisle emptied his wallet, tossing four hundred-dollar bills and a handful of ones on the counter.

"No, hey, this isn't your responsibility." Jack tried to push the money back toward Carlisle, but he waved it away.

"I owe the chief a favor," he lied, and then turned and headed toward the corner table.

Charlie glanced up as Carlisle and Emmett approached, giving them a grunt by way of a greeting. He eyed Emmett disapprovingly, but didn't say anything.

"Chief," Carlisle greeted back. "I need to speak with you for a few minutes."

He swirled his drink and lifted it to his lips, draining the amber liquid. "So," he said, rattling the ice impatiently. "Speak."

"Privately, if you don't mind."

Charlie grunted again. "I'm off duty."

"This is a personal matter."

"Well, as you can see," Charlie rattled his ice again, "I'm busy."

Carlisle and Emmett exchanged glances.

"It's about Isabella."

Charlie dragged his gaze up to Carlisle's face, his eyes narrowing. "What the hell could you possibly have to say about Isabella?"

"Will you step outside with me?"

He grunted and turned back to his empty glass. "I'm busy."

"Charlie . . ." Carlisle put a hand on his shoulder, only to have it shaken off. He realized he was going to have to say something to demand the chief's attention, but wished he could do it somewhere more private. He sighed quietly and dropped his voice to a whisper. "I have information about her."

Charlie snorted. "Do you? Imagine that."

Carlisle glanced at Emmett, confused by the lack of reaction. "I do."

"Funny," he said, staring at his glass as though he might find more whiskey hiding between the ice cubes. "All this time I've been looking for her and you haven't said a word. But suddenly you have information."

"Charlie, please come outside and talk with me."

Charlie raised his glass, catching Jack's eye as he rattled the ice. Jack nodded, but looked away quickly when Carlisle shook his head.

"You're too late, you know." Charlie waved a hand around the bar. "They already tried the whole intervention thing. I didn't give a damn then, and I don't give a damn now."

"Of course you don't." Emmett dropped down in the booth across from him. "You'll stop drinking when Isabella comes home, right?"

Charlie glared at him. "Son, you'd best find your way to the door before you and your dad both end up spending a night in jail."

"Actually, that's a good idea. Arrest me, Chief, and we'll have a conversation in the car on the way to the station."

For a moment Charlie looked like he might. But then he dropped his eyes back to his glass and mumbled, "I'm off duty."

"Here's the deal," Carlisle said. "Jack's not going to bring over another drink until I've had my say. But if you give me five minutes outside, I'll buy you the next one."

Charlie sighed heavily. "Fine." He pushed himself to his feet and followed Carlisle and Emmett out to the parking lot.

Carlisle searched for a way to begin as the door swung shut behind them. Should he tell Charlie where Isabella was right away? He wanted to, but he was afraid Charlie would lose focus.

"Listen," he said. "There's something you need to understand about my family."

Charlie crossed his arms across his chest. "Your kids don't cause trouble and you all mind your own business. As long as that doesn't change, we'll get along just fine."

"I'm afraid you and I are going to be in one another's business for a little while. Which means you need to understand what we are."

"Okay, I'll bite. What are you? Communists? Comic book enthusiasts?"

"We're vampires."

Charlie stared for a moment before rolling his eyes and turning away. "I can't believe I came out here for this."

"Hold up," Emmett said, grabbing his shoulder before he could go back inside. "You promised us five minutes."

"Oh, so you have more to say on the subject? I suppose Jack is a unicorn and I'm Bigfoot."

Emmett snickered, and Carlisle shot him a look.

"What? That was funny."

"I know it's far-fetched, Charlie, but it's important that you understand this. We're not human."

"I don't care. Be whatever you want; you're not my concern."

"No, but Isabella is."

Charlie stiffened, staring straight into Carlisle's eyes. "What exactly does she have to do with you?"

"She's been bitten."

For several long moments, Charlie said nothing. He stood there, grinding his teeth, staring at Carlisle as his face darkened to deeper and deeper shades of red. When he finally spoke, he was shaking.

"I ought to shoot you in the head for that," he growled. "I don't care what deranged ideas you go around spouting, but you leave my daughter out of it, or so help me, I *will* kill you."

"We've beaten around the bush long enough," Emmett said. "I understand that you're upset, Chief, but there's a little girl back home who made her way here all the way from Mexico, *by herself*, because she wanted to see her father. I'm not going back to her and telling her that you couldn't tear yourself away from your whiskey long enough to pay her a visit."

Charlie's face went from red to white in a matter of seconds. "What did you say?"

Emmett crossed his arms over his chest. "Are you coming with us or what?"

The police chief struggled to compose himself, trying to tamp down the hope that Carlisle knew he wanted to feel. But he wasn't entirely successful. "You're telling me," he said, trying to sound dubious, "that my daughter is in Forks?"

Carlisle nodded, backing Emmett up.

"At your house?"

"Jasper found her wandering around in the woods," Emmett said.

Charlie swallowed hard. "If I find out you're lying to me—"

"You'll kill me. Got it."

Carlisle was relieved that Charlie was going to come along willingly, but just as he had feared, the Chief had gotten distracted from a key issue. "Charlie," he said hesitantly, "you need to be prepared for what you're about to see. Bella isn't the little girl you remember."

"Save it," he said, holding up his hand. "I'm finished with your bullshit. You can tell me all the tall tales you want after I've seen my daughter, but until then, put a sock in it."

"You need to understand how dangerous this situation will be for you."

"No, he doesn't," Emmett said.

Carlisle raised his eyebrows in question.

"We're talking about the man's daughter, Carlisle. There's no amount of danger that will keep him away from her." He turned to Charlie. "All you need to understand is that we'll do whatever it takes to keep both you and Isabella safe. Whether you like it or not."

"Is that a threat?" Charlie asked, taking a step toward him, and despite the fact that Emmett had a good five inches on him, the chief still managed to look intimidating.

"It's a heads-up. You don't want to listen to Carlisle? Fine. It won't make much sense to you when we do what we have to do, but we're still going to do it."

"If you touch my little girl—"

"You'll kill me. Let's go." He grabbed Charlie's shoulder and steered him toward the Mercedes.

Bella stank.

She stank so badly that no one except Edward would stand near her, and even Edward was breathing as little as possible.

Which was a little bit unfair, because *they* were the ones who had made her smell this way.

Jasper had been the first. When she'd come back from hunting with Edward, Jasper and Alice had met her at the river with a change of clothes and a bottle of dandruff shampoo.

"Use this," Jasper said, handing it over to her. "Everywhere, not just on your hair. But do us a favor and wash in the river, will you? We don't want that stuff stinking up the house."

Alice was already hanging some sheets over nearby tree limbs to serve as a screen. "It reeks," she said over her shoulder, "which is pretty much the point."

Bella looked at the bottle, puzzled.

"It helps to have a lot of chemical smells around you to taint the scent of blood," Jasper explained.

She nodded dumbly and washed as directed. As it turned out, Jasper was right. The shampoo had a startlingly powerful odor, and it lingered in a cloud around her as she dried off and dressed in the fresh clothes.

Rosalie had met her next, handing over a bottle of lotion. It was also excessively scented, and though it wasn't as bad as the shampoo, it was loaded with chemicals. Alice had added her contribution by loading Bella's hair with gels and sprays—and then twisting it into a pretty coif, for good measure—and then Esme had sprayed her with a particularly unpleasant perfume.

So now, she was marinating in putrid chemicals so strong that they almost completely obscured the scent of Charlie's flannel shirt.

She was still at the river. She didn't want to carry her stench into the house where the others would have no choice but to smell her. But they had all come out with her and were standing several yards away, flashing her encouraging smiles. Even Jasper had given her a wink when he'd caught her eye.

Bella squeezed Edward's hand, grateful to him when he responded by slipping a hand to her hip and pulling her closer to him.

"It's going to be fine," he murmured, leaning over her. "Alice and Jasper will keep an eye on you, and if you start to lose control we'll all jump in and help out."

"To the river," she whispered. "If you have to . . . I want to go in the river."

He nodded and smiled, and the warmth in his eyes distracted her momentarily from her worry.

But then she heard tires on the gravel drive in the distance, and she shivered.

"You're going to do great," Edward said, and then because he had used up the last of his air, he took in a deep breath through his mouth and held it.

The others shifted a little closer, and Esme stepped forward to give Bella's arm an encouraging squeeze before moving back again.

They waited for the car to pull up in front of the house, and when the doors opened, Esme called out quietly, "We're back here, Carlisle!"

Bella caught her breath when she heard her father's voice ask where they were going.

"They're waiting by the river behind the house," Carlisle told him.

Charlie's footsteps stopped. "Why? I swear to god, if you're lying to me—"

"I assume it's because the outside air will help dissipate your scent," Carlisle interrupted.

"Wait, Chief, put this on," Emmett said. There was the crinkle of plastic and then a silent moment before Charlie answered.

"Why?"

"Don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to."

"It will make things easier for Isabella," Carlisle's more conciliatory voice answered.

Bella heard the rustle of fabric, and then the footsteps started up again. Charlie appeared around the side of the house, an ill-fitting T-shirt pulled on over his uniform. His eyes were bloodshot and wary, and they scanned the trees frantically before his gaze landed on Bella.

His breath hitched and he broke into a run.

"Charlie, be careful!" Carlisle yelled, and Jasper was suddenly at Bella's side, murmuring in her ear.

"Move with him, just like the eggs."

It was a good thing he reminded her. Charlie slammed into her with a force that would have sent her stumbling back if she hadn't already been moving. He pulled her hard against him, and for a moment her face was buried in his chest, her ear pressed directly over the heavy, wet pulse of his heart. Before she could think to break away he was pulling back, gripping her shoulders and pushing her out to arm's length, his eyes running frantically over her.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

But he didn't give her time to answer. He pulled her back to him again, squeezing her hard, and his throat was *right there*. She held her breath, desperately fighting the urge to scent her prey, to attack. But she didn't have the control. She was losing the battle and the panic was rising.

Jasper and Edward both jumped in and pulled her back while Carlisle held Charlie. The police chief was cursing at them, yelling for them to let go, but Bella clung to Edward like a lifeline.

"Into the water," Edward said, but Jasper was refusing.

"No, wait, it will wash everything off. Isabella, breathe."

She shook her head frantically. Just the sound of Charlie's blood was driving her crazy. If she smelled it she would lose control completely."

"Do it, Isabella! We planned for this!"

She struggled in his grasp, trying to wrench herself free, though she wasn't sure if it was the water or the blood she would run for once she was loose.

"Damn it, kid! I'll put you in the water if I have to, but if I do we're calling this a failed experiment and we're not trying again for three months."

"No!" She gasped in panic, and as soon as the new air entered her lungs she gagged and recoiled.

"Good, Bella."

It was Edward's voice this time, calm and soothing, his lips close to her ear.

"Breathe it in. We did all this for a reason, remember?"

She took another breath, feeling herself steady. She could smell the blood, thick and sweet and begging to be tasted, and it set her throat afire. But mingled with that scent was the shampoo, the mousse, the hair spray, the perfume, the lotions, and then something else. Something revolting and familiar. Bella's gaze darted around the trees, trying to find where it was coming from.

"It's Jared's shirt," Edward murmured. "He let us borrow it."

Bella stared wide-eyed at the T-shirt Charlie was wearing. It stank. Worse than Bella did, even. It soured the scent of Charlie's blood enough that it was bearable. Her throat still burned with thirst, but she could resist. She straightened slowly, easing out of Jasper's grip and starting toward Charlie again.

Only he was gaping at her in horror now, pale and stricken.

"Dad?" she whispered, halting her step.

For a moment he didn't answer. He just stared at her, his face a sickly pallor.

Bella dropped her gaze to the ground, her hands twisting in front of her. Of course he was horrified. She was a monster now. Why had she ever thought she could come back? Why had she thought he would want her like this?

But then he was moving forward again, his footsteps and his thudding heart and his stinking shirt all closing in on her, and he reached out to raise her chin, cupping her cheeks in his warm hands.

"What happened to you?" he whispered, his hands sweeping down her cheeks to her shoulders, and then down her arms. "My little girl . . . my Bella . . . what happened to you?" He pulled her against him again, hugging her hard, and then he did something Bella had never seen him do before.

Her stoic, emotionally awkward father broke down and cried.

He wept into her hair, kissing to top of her head, mumbling over and over again, "My baby, my baby, my little girl." His body shook with the force of his sobs and he rocked her back and forth, pinning her against his warm body.

Bella kept her nose buried in his shirt as she clung to him. Her throat was killing her but the wolf stench kept her focused.

Several long minutes passed before Charlie managed to compose himself, using the collar of his borrowed T-shirt to dry his eyes. He released Bella and took a step back, but he couldn't seem to keep himself from touching her. He rubbed her arm, tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, brushed lint from her shoulder, and generally fidgeted in the way he always did when he wasn't sure what to do with himself.

"I didn't give up," he finally told her, his red eyes pleading for understanding. "I just didn't know what to do. There were no leads to follow, not a single trace."

Bella's lower lip trembled. "I'm sorry."

"What happened, baby? Where have you been?"

Bella was suddenly conscious of seven pairs of eyes on her in addition to Charlie's, and she wrapped her arms around herself, hunching down as if she could make herself disappear.

"No. It doesn't matter." He was shaking his head quickly. "You're back, that's all I care about. Come on, let's get you home."

She jerked in shock and fell back a step. "No. I can't."

"Of course you can. I kept your room just the way you left it. All your stuff is still there."

"You don't understand. I can't live with you."

"She can't, Charlie," Carlisle said, moving forward. "You need to acknowledge what she is."

"She's my daughter!"

"She's a vampire."

"No!"

"Dad, I am."

He was trembling all over as he took her face in his hands again. "Bella, I don't know what these *lunatics* have been telling you, but you're not a vampire."

"They're not lunatics. They're helping me."

"This isn't helping, this is brainwashing."

She took a step back. "Look at me, Dad. Look at my eyes. You know this isn't normal."

But he couldn't look at her, not for very long, before his eyes darted away. "You look like you've been sick. You need to come home so you can get some rest."

"I can't."

"Isabella Marie, that's enough! You're still my daughter, and you'll come home when I tell you to!"

"Stop." Edward's voice was quiet, but firm, and he pulled Bella back a few steps, tucking her under his arm. "Chief, I understand that you're upset, but Bella is, too. She doesn't need you yelling at her. She needs you to listen."

Charlie's eyes darkened as he appraised Edward. "Two things, boy. First, get your goddamn hands off of my daughter. And second, I don't need a teenager telling me how to raise my kid."

"Two more things, *boy*," Edward snapped back, his arm tightening around Bella. "I've got sixty years on you, so don't talk down to me—"

"Edward!" Carlisle broke in sharply, giving him a stern look.

Edward clamped his jaw shut, though it looked as if it took great effort to do so, and at Carlisle's gesture he reluctantly released Bella and moved away from her.

With that matter settled, Carlisle turned to Charlie. "I'll make you a deal," he said. "Call your friend Billy Black. If you can convince him that Isabella should go home with you, I won't argue."

Charlie smirked. "Are you sure you want to make that deal? Billy doesn't like you very much."

"Billy doesn't like us because he knows what we are."

Charlie considered the offer. "And what alternative do you have in mind? Where else is she supposed to go?"

"She's welcome here."

"In a house full of teenage boys?" He snorted. "I don't think so."

"My boys aren't teenagers," Carlisle said with a small smile. "Emmett's eighty-nine. He's the baby of the family."

Emmett flashed Charlie a wide grin, but it only seemed to unnerve him. The chief rubbed a hand through his hair and muttered under his breath, "Even worse."

"Hey," Emmett said, looking affronted. "We may be vampires, but we're still gentlemen. We're not going to take advantage of a little girl."

"Yeah? Tell *him* that." Charlie jerked his thumb at Edward.

"Edward is quite fond of Isabella," Carlisle told him, "but I assure you, he has been nothing but respectful. I wouldn't tolerate anything else."

Esme drifted forward and placed a hand on Charlie's arm. "I wish she could go home with you, Charlie. I wish things weren't any more complicated than that. But Isabella is facing some very difficult challenges, and this is the safest place for her."

Charlie looked at her, his eyes pleading. "What if it were your kid? What would you do?"

"It would break my heart," she said gently. "But I would have to do what was best for her."

"You can call her any time," Carlisle said, moving up behind Esme. "Day or night. And we'll arrange for you to visit whenever Bella feels up to it."

Charlie was silent for a long time, looking lost and helpless. Finally, he took a deep breath and looked sadly at Bella. "No drinking or smoking," he told Carlisle, "and not too much caffeine."

Carlisle chuckled to himself, but he nodded.

"And I don't want her out all hours of the night. Her curfew is ten o'clock."

"Dad!"

"And these two," he said, pointing between Edward and Bella. "They need a chaperone at all times."

"Deal," Carlisle said.

"*What?*" Edward protested.

"I'm sorry, Edward, but I agree with him. They're reasonable rules for a teenage girl."

"This is stupid," he muttered.

Charlie sighed, still focused only on Bella. "I don't know how I'm going to tell your mother."

"Um . . ." Bella bit her lip. "You can't."

"What do you mean, I can't?"

"This has to stay secret, Dad. She can't do secrets."

"Maybe not," Rosalie pointed out. "I mean, there's no more Volturi, right? Who's going to care if people find out about vampires?"

"It's dangerous for us," Jasper answered.

"Why?"

"Because humans will panic, and they'll start bombing anybody they suspect. And that's assuming another vampire regime doesn't rise up to fill the vacancy. It's best to play it close to the vest until we see how things are going to shake out."

"Renée has been worried sick for two months," Charlie spat angrily. "You're telling me I'm just supposed to pretend Bella is still missing?"

"It's best if you just let her forget about me," Bella whispered sadly.

"Forget? That's never going to happen, baby. Mothers don't do that, they don't just forget about their kids."

The air left Bella's lungs in a rush as the guilt slammed into her. Charlie was still talking, but she couldn't hear him over the rushing in her ears.

Mothers didn't forget about their kids.

Not good mothers, anyway.

Bella sank to her knees, only vaguely aware of Edward and Jasper crouching on either side of her. Her mind latched onto the memory of a warm baby boy with black curls as soft as silk and dark, soulful eyes.

She had tried to make excuses for herself. She hadn't wanted him. She was only sixteen. She was a monster, unfit even to take care of herself, much less a baby. *He* was a monster, and his existence had taken everything from her.

But Charlie had said it, and she knew it was true. Mothers didn't forget about their kids. They didn't abandon helpless babies to vicious, unstable people like Joham and Serena. What Bella had done was unforgivable.

If Charlie knew, he probably wouldn't want to have anything more to do with her.

Charlie was kneeling in front of her. She could feel his hands on her shoulders, smell the rank odor of his shirt. She felt exposed, as though he could see all of her secrets and all of her sins. Panic rose up inside of her. She needed to run, to get far away from him.

"The blood," she gasped, because she knew they would believe her. She knew they would let her go. She scrambled to her feet and ran to the river, diving down to the bottom and hiding herself in the weeds. She could hear Charlie's anxiety-laden voice, and Carlisle's soothing reassurances. She could hear the disturbance in the water as someone waded into the shallows before diving down to join her at the bottom. She felt the body slow as it neared her, and she recognized Edward's arms coming around to grip the river plants on either side of her, hovering an inch or two above her.

Bella released her hold and tucked her arms against her chest, letting herself float until she settled against Edward's body. She let him hold her down, anchoring her deep under the protective weight of the water, hiding her from the truths she didn't want to acknowledge.

After a few minutes she heard Charlie leave with Carlisle and Esme, but still she stayed, concealed beneath the river and Edward. He tapped her shoulder once, a wordless question, but she shook her head quickly and he gave her arm a squeeze. A few more minutes went by and she felt his fingers move to her hair, plucking out Alice's pins and freeing her long locks to the pull of the current. When all of the pins were out he laced his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp with slow, relaxing strokes.

She let a half hour pass, and then an hour, before she finally felt able to face the world again. She pushed against the soft riverbed, nudging her body against Edward's, and he released his hold on the weeds. He wrapped an arm around her waist and the two of them drifted lazily away from their haven, allowing the current to carry them downstream before they reached the surface.

Once they emerged into the warm night air, they swam to the shallows and waded out of the water. Edward caught Bella's hand and she leaned her head against his arm.

"Thank you," she murmured.

"It was my sincere pleasure."

She smiled up at him and he squeezed her hand.

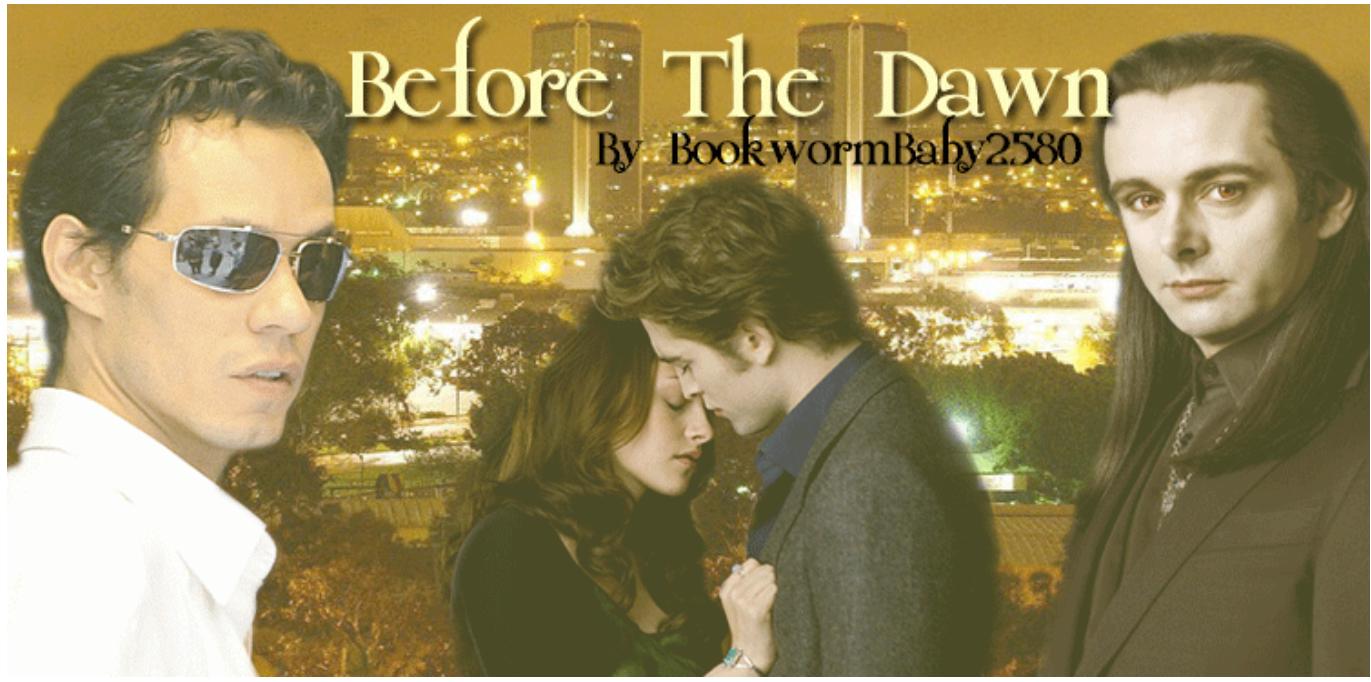
Wordlessly, contentedly, they made their way back toward the house in their sodden clothes. Almost everyone had gone back inside already, but as they approached the house Bella noticed Jasper leaning against one of the trees outside. He caught her eye, and the hard look on his face told her that he hadn't for a second believed her lie that her thirst had suddenly become too much for her to bear.

He had seen right through her and he wasn't pleased.

"Isabella," he said as they passed, his voice as hard as his face.

"Save it," Edward snapped, and he guided Bella into the house without even glancing Jasper's way.

The Best-Laid Schemes



The Idea was born at the bottom of the river.

While Bella had hidden from Charlie and the truth of what she was, while Edward had hovered protectively over her, the idea had blossomed into existence.

She hadn't been ready for it then. So it stayed quiet, lurking in the back of her mind, waiting for the right moment.

It had been there, feeding off of her guilt when she had let Edward protect her from Jasper's accusing eyes. It was there now, whisper-quiet and unacknowledged, while she sat on the stairs in the middle of a cacophony of sound. Loud music that Bella only vaguely recognized poured from a stereo system in the living room, while Emmett and Rosalie ripped up the damaged flooring all throughout the main floor. Esme was on the phone arranging for the sale of their antique furniture, which was currently in the garage, and Carlisle was moving through the first floor wreckage, writing down a list of supplies that would need to be purchased for the replacement flooring.

Edward's piano had already been moved, and the low dais that it rested on had been re-covered in white laminate. It was back now, and Edward was tuning it, the tapping of the keys adding to the aural hurricane reverberating through the house.

Bella had offered to help with the work, but had instead found herself sitting next to Alice on the stairs, a laptop computer on her knees. "We need to choose a color scheme for your room!" Alice had declared excitedly.

Bella had started to protest that it didn't need redecorating, but Alice poked out her bottom lip and batted her eyelashes. "You wouldn't take my fun away, would you, Bella?"

Bella had surrendered, and now she was trying to choose between dozens of design ideas that Alice was showing her.

"I don't know. They're all so pretty. Any one of them would be amazing."

Alice shook her head. "That just tells me that we haven't found *the one* yet. Do you like the fluffy, lacy, girly ones or the sleek, straight lines?"

"Ummm . . . I guess sleeker lines?"

"Bold colors or pastels?"

"I don't know. They're all pretty. I guess I like the bold ones better."

"What about patterns? Do you like florals?"

Bella thought of the over-chintzed bedroom in the house in Mexico and shuddered. "No. No florals."

"Okay. What about neutral colors? Blacks, whites, tans?"

"Sure, they're fine."

Alice pursed her lips, clearly dissatisfied with Bella's lukewarm responses. She wanted to get a reaction, Bella knew, but it was hard to get all that excited about color schemes.

"There's a patchwork quilt in your room at Charlie's," Alice mused. "Do you like that? Down-home country style?"

"How do you know there's a patchwork quilt in my room?"

"Rose told me."

"How does Rose know?"

"When she went to borrow Charlie's flannel, she poked around a little. She thought there might be something she could bring you to help you feel more comfortable, but then she was worried that Charlie would miss whatever she took." She suddenly brightened. "Do you want something from your room? I bet Charlie would let you take anything you want."

"I haven't been in that room in years," Bella said, and Alice looked crestfallen.

"But maybe a nice chair to sit in and read?" Bella suggested, trying to brighten her up again.

"Of course! What kind of chair do you want?"

That stumped her. She wasn't familiar enough with the different styles of chairs to give them names, even if she did have a particular style in mind.

"Um . . . anything's fine."

Alice stared thoughtfully into space while Bella flipped through images on the computer, her attention drifting to the third floor.

Jasper was up there. He had been clearing out his study for Edward to use as a bedroom, but now he was just sitting alone in Carlisle's office, two fingers tapping on the arm of a chair. Every now and then he would take a deep breath, but other than that and the tapping, Bella hadn't heard him make a single move in twenty minutes.

He was upset with her. It was disappointing after how well they had gotten along the day before, when he was preparing her to see Charlie. She had thought they were making progress. But he was back to watching her every move with dark, suspicious eyes.

The Idea fidgeted in the back of her mind.

"I've got it!" Alice burst out. She snatched the computer off of Bella's lap and turned it toward herself, blocking Bella's view of the screen. "You're going to love it! I mean, really, really love it!" She clicked away at the mouse, moving almost too quickly for the computer to keep up, and after a few seconds she turned it around and presented it to Bella.

She had pulled up an interior decorating program that let the user model different colors to see if how they worked together. The virtual room was painted in tan, with accents of deep golds and sage greens, and a red clay crown molding bordering the room.

Bella gasped. The colors reminded her forcibly of home, and she felt a sudden urge to reach out and hug the computer.

"Oh, Alice, I *do* love it! It's perfect!"

"I knew it! I knew we'd find something! Edward, come look!"

Edward laughed and shook his head. "I see it, Alice. You're practically yelling it."

"So? What do you think?"

"It's good. I like the southwestern flavor."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "You're not anywhere near excited enough for my liking."

"That's because you're not doing my room yet. Are you going to do an homage to my home, too? Do the place up like a speakeasy, with Gatling guns as accents and a mural of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre on the wall?"

"Be careful what you wish for, Masen. I might just do it."

He laughed and turned back to his piano. "I like your ideas for Bella's room. And yes, I think you definitely *should* get some potted cactuses for the shelves."

She clapped her hands excitedly. "I can't wait to go shopping! Oh, Bella, I wish you could come with us, but I promise I'll only bring home things you'll absolutely love. Your room is going to be the coziest place in the whole house."

"I can't wait to see what you find."

"Carlisle," Edward said as he leaned over his piano, "he's just about ready."

Carlisle set his clipboard aside and headed toward the stairs. "Thank you, Edward." He vaulted over Alice and Bella. "Ladies."

"What's going on?" Bella asked.

"Jasper's got something on his mind," Alice said, surfing a new decorating site for accents. "He takes *forever* to get to it sometimes. Hey, what do you think of these Navajo rugs? Are they too . . . ?"

"They're a little too. Except that one, actually, with the light browns. That would look really good." She tried to focus on color schemes with Alice, but her attention strayed to the top floor. There was nothing but silence now that Carlisle had reached his study, and Bella wondered what they were thinking, what they were waiting for.

It was in the middle of Edward playing a scale on his piano and Rosalie ripping up a particularly stiff bit of flooring that Jasper finally spoke.

"I'm not wrong, you know," he said, the noise in the house inadequate to drown out his voice.

"About what?" came the answer from Carlisle.

"Isabella. I can always place them. I mean, *always*, within a few days. And that kid is brand new. Under a week if I had to pin it down as close as I could."

Edward caught Bella's gaze and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"Yes . . ." Carlisle prompted.

"Peter saw it, too. We have experience with this. We know our newborns."

"I'm not sure I understand. Has someone challenged your assessment?"

"Does he not know that we can hear him?" Bella whispered to Alice.

It was Edward who answered. "He knows. He just doesn't care. It's too hard to keep secrets around here, so we've pretty much stopped trying."

"Just ignore him," Alice said airily. "Do you want a queen sized bed or a king?"

But she couldn't ignore him, and the silence that had fallen upstairs unnerved her more than ever.
"Um . . . why do I need a bed?"

"It is a *bed room*."

"Edward doesn't have one."

"Edward doesn't like to curl up and read in bed. I thought you might."

"Here's the thing," Jasper began again upstairs. "She's been missing for two months. She's been a vampire for a week. So where has she been?"

"You're welcome to ask her," Carlisle answered, "if you're concerned about it."

"We have asked her. Chief Swan asked her again last night. She doesn't answer."

"She was under some pressure last night."

"And speaking of last night, how was that so easy for her? She shouldn't have been able to do that."

Alice reached out and squeezed Bella's hand, but Bella's attention was so focused on Jasper and Carlisle that she barely noticed.

"You prepared her well," Carlisle was saying. "Your ideas were ingenious—particularly the use of the wolf scent."

"She learned too quickly and she stayed too calm for week-old vampire."

"She did well, but her control wavered relatively quickly."

"No it didn't," Jasper said, his voice dark. "She never lost control. She told us that she came back here to see her father, but she only spent few minutes with him before she lied about her thirst and bailed."

Bella hunched over her knees, feeling exposed. She didn't want Edward to look at her. She didn't want him to know she had lied, and she especially didn't want him to know why. It was only when she noticed how loud her breathing sounded in her ears that she realized the activity around her had stopped. The music was still going, but no one was pulling up flooring or talking on the phone. They were all listening to Carlisle and Jasper talk about her.

After several silent moments upstairs, Carlisle spoke again.

"Jasper, do you remember when you and Alice first joined us?"

"I remember."

"You were suspicious of us all. We didn't behave the way you expected us to, and you weren't accustomed to having your expectations unmet."

Jasper drew in a deliberate breath and let it out. "Yeah."

"You're a very meticulous man. You take great pains to see to it that you're never surprised, because surprises unnerve you."

Jasper gave no answer, but the tapping of his fingers started up again.

Silence fell between them again, and Bella wished she had someplace to hide. She was just sure everyone was looking at her, listening to her, gauging her reactions. As if to reaffirm her fears, Alice started lightly stroking her hair, but stopped when Bella cringed away.

"You think I'm being too hard on her," Jasper finally said.

"I do." Carlisle's voice was warm and affectionate. "Please understand, I don't fault you for it. Your caution has been a boon to this family on countless occasions, and I'm deeply grateful for your counsel."

"But you want me to give her the benefit of the doubt."

"I'm not asking you to," Carlisle said, still so warm. "You have good instincts, and I wouldn't ask you to defy them. I just want you to give her time. She's still so young, both in human and vampire terms, and you can't blame her for being overwhelmed. She may confide in us yet, if we can show her we're worthy of her trust."

"But is *she* worthy of *ours*?"

"Time will tell. I believe your remarkable patience will serve you well here."

Another silence fell, stretching on for several minutes this time. Edward started tinkering with his piano again, and then gradually the activity around Bella resumed. Emmett and Rosalie were prying up the last of the flooring when Jasper spoke again.

"Why is it so much easier for her than it is for me?"

Carlisle's quiet chuckle drifted down through the ceiling. "Don't sell yourself short, son. Your control is excellent."

"Not like hers. I never could have done what she did as a newborn."

Bella heard the squeak of a chair before Carlisle spoke again. "I'm not so sure that's true. You never saw your family after you were changed, did you?"

"No."

"It makes a difference. We tend to think of emotional responses as separate entities from physical ones, but I expect you know better than anyone how interconnected they really are. Isabella's affection for her father tempered her instincts enough that the other precautions you put in place were able to take effect."

"You think the difference is that she cared about him?"

"Absolutely. That's a large part of what enabled me to learn to endure the smell of blood while I operated on my early patients. I was invested in their well-being." He sighed, and Bella heard the chair squeak again. "I wish you and the others would get more involved with your peers at school."

"That means being around them more. It increases the risk."

"Statistically, yes. But you'd be surprised how much easier it is to stop thinking about blood when you're engaged in interesting conversation."

"You really think that would make things easier?"

"I do."

Silence fell again, and some of the tension eased out of Bella's shoulders, but when Jasper spoke again she stiffened.

"She's too evasive. It worries me."

"I know."

Bella waited for Carlisle to say something else, to defend her or side with Jasper, but he seemed content to stop there. After another long silence, Bella heard the scraping of chairs and a quiet murmur from Jasper that she didn't quite catch.

"I consider it an honor," Carlisle answered, and then the two of them exited the office.

Jasper descended the stairs first. "Alice, take a walk with me," he ordered as he stepped between her and Bella.

"Jasper—"

"Now, Alice!"

She rolled her eyes and closed the laptop, passing it back to Bella. "I'll be back soon. Keep thinking about ideas for your room."

Bella watched her follow Jasper out the front door, both of them moving along the narrow joists that Emmett and Rosalie had exposed when they'd ripped up the floor.

Carlisle descended the stairs behind Jasper and took Alice's place beside Bella. He reached out a hand, perhaps to touch her hair or squeeze her shoulder, but then thought better of it. He curled his fingers into a fist and dropped it into his lap. For a moment he didn't say anything, and Bella cast a furtive look at him as she hugged Alice's laptop to her chest.

"There's some tension between you and Jasper," he finally began.

"It's not her fault," Edward said from his piano bench, but at a silent reproach from Carlisle he ducked his head and stared at the keys.

Bella didn't say anything.

"It's to be expected, you know. We vampires aren't meant to live like this, in large family groups. We're too territorial. Our instincts tell us to lash out at those we perceive as threats."

She chewed at her lip. "I'm not a threat."

"Neither is Jasper," he said lightly, a smile playing at his lips. "But even if I could convince you of that logically, you wouldn't believe it on an instinctual level."

Bella shuddered. Those scars told her all she needed to know.

"It's all right to trust your instincts. It's how many newborns survive, particularly if they've been abandoned by their sires."

Bella waited for the "but." She waited for him to tell her to give Jasper what he wanted. Instead he leaned back against the stair railing, a nostalgic smile on his face.

"I reacted much the same way, you know. Back when Jasper and Alice first joined us. Most of us did. Esme was the only one who was able to look past his scars and see him for the man he is."

He waited for a response, but when he didn't get one he continued. "We all came to understand one another eventually, and I'm confident that you can, too. I hope you'll allow some time to let things settle between the two of you."

"Do I have a choice?" she muttered, more to herself than anything.

Carlisle's smile fell and his shoulders slumped. "Of course you have a choice. I won't keep you here against your will."

"That's not the message I got."

He leaned forward on his knees, bringing one hand up to rub his forehead. "If you remain in Forks, I do need you to stay with us. But if you're really unhappy here, I won't stop you from leaving the territory."

The Idea rattled in the back of her mind.

"She's not." Edward pushed away from his piano and moved along the floor joists to the stairs. He dropped down on the step below Bella's feet and looked up at her, his eyes begging for the answer he wanted. "Are you, Bella? I mean, not because of us. I know you're unhappy, but it's not us, is it?"

She shook her head, but couldn't hold his gaze. Of course they hadn't caused the worst of it. It wasn't their fault that she had lost her family, her life, her son . . . but she felt suffocated in this house. There was always someone watching her, monitoring her every move, making sure she followed the rules.

"What is it?" Carlisle asked gently.

She took a shaky breath, hating that they were all staring at her once again, seeing every weakness. "I don't like being watched all the time."

"Of course you don't." Carlisle nodded, his eyes full of understanding. "Of course you don't. I'm sure all of this is overwhelming for you." He paused, his eyebrows pulled together in concentration. "You're welcome to wander the forest behind the house. As long as you stay within about fifteen miles to the south or the east, you shouldn't run the risk of coming across any humans."

Bella immediately perked up at the idea. "You don't care if I go out alone?"

"No . . . though I'd appreciate it if you'd check in now and then if you intend to be out for more than a few hours. And if your father calls, we may have someone run out and track you down, so try to leave an easy trail to follow."

Bella nodded, a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Charlie had already called twice, and both times Bella had gotten the impression that he was checking to make sure he hadn't dreamed her return. The conversations had been brief, since neither of them were very good with words, but Bella knew that the contact meant a lot to him.

"As a matter of fact," Carlisle continued, "you're about to have the house to yourself for a few hours. That is, unless you'd prefer to have someone stay with you?" His gaze flicked to Edward and then back again.

"No," Bella said quickly. "I mean . . . it's okay. You don't have to babysit me."

"All right. I'll take a cell phone with me. It's speed dial six on the home phone, so just give me a call if you need anything."

"When are you going to let us get our own cell phones?" Emmett asked, prying up the last of the flooring.

"You can get them any time you like."

"Really?"

"Sure. You just can't use them in public."

Emmett huffed and tossed the wood aside. "Why do you and Esme get to use them when none of the rest of us do?"

"To the people of Forks, the rest of you are teenagers."

"So? Teenagers use cell phones."

"Do any of your classmates have them?"

Emmett snorted. "In this backward town?"

"That's what I thought." Carlisle smiled patiently. "We don't draw undue attention to ourselves and that means you won't be the first student at Forks High School with a cell phone."

Emmett looked like he was about to argue, but Carlisle continued.

"You may, however, be the second. As soon as you see one of your peers with one, you can all get your own."

Emmett's sulky expression suddenly morphed into a calculating grin. "Really?"

"Practice subtlety, please, Emmett. This is about *not* drawing attention to ourselves."

"Oh, I'm subtle," he said, turning to pick up an armload of splintered wood. "Sly, even. I'm going to get this done, and nobody will know I had anything to do with it."

Carlisle chuckled and stood. "I'll help you finish hauling the scrap out, and then we should all get on our way. We won't be able to have anything delivered, so we'll need to rent a truck while we're in Port Angeles."

His words were followed by a flurry of activity as everyone started carrying bundles of the old flooring out to the front yard. Alice and Jasper reappeared to help out, and soon they had the mess cleared out, leaving only the joists and the platform for Edward's piano. Bella couldn't help the smile that leapt to her face when she saw Carlisle grab Esme around the waist and spin her around before dancing her across the framework of the floor. Their feet unerringly found the boards beneath them as they gazed into one another's eyes.

"I shouldn't let you out of the house looking like this," he murmured, his hand gripping the back of her paint-stained T-shirt. "You'll drive the poor locals mad with desire."

Edward dropped down next to Bella on the stairs, distracting her from the scene. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay? They don't really need my help."

She smiled at him, but shook her head. As fond as she was of him, she still craved a little time to herself. She wasn't used to the constant scrutiny, and it was wearing on her.

"Okay. We'll be back soon. If you're feeling adventurous, I'll show you how to lay carpet." He squeezed her hand by way of parting and headed out the front door.

"Let's get a move on, lovebirds," Emmett said, striding past Carlisle and Esme, who were now kissing passionately in the middle of the living room. "Time's a-wastin'."

The two of them broke apart, and Esme looked back at Bella as they headed out the door. "Take care, sweetheart. Call us if you need anything."

Bella fluttered her fingers in a wave, and then the door closed behind them, leaving her alone in the house. She listened while car doors opened and closed and two engines rumbled to life. When the sounds faded off into the distance she let out a long breath and finally relaxed.

They were gone. She was alone.

She stood and moved to the stereo, turning off the music and letting the peace of the empty house seep into her bones. She could hear the muffled sounds of the forest beyond the walls of the house: the twitter of birds, the rush of the river, the rustle of wind in the trees. It sounded warm and safe after the chaos of the house's destruction.

But she soon realized that being alone with her thoughts wasn't as pleasant as she had hoped it would be. With nothing to distract her, her mind wandered back to the house in Mexico, to the monster who had imprisoned her there and to the little boy she had left in his care.

And that was when the Idea pushed its way into the forefront of her mind.

She dismissed it as soon as she had acknowledged it. There were some things she just couldn't do.

But it wouldn't go away. It twitched and nudged. It scratched and tugged. And though Bella didn't want to have anything to do with it, she soon realized she had to give it some serious thought.

She didn't want it. As awkward and uncomfortable as she found her current situation, it was still a million times better than what she had come from. Jasper was intimidating, to be sure, but Edward . . . Edward was . . .

She didn't know what Edward was, exactly, but the more she thought about it, the more she realized it didn't matter. Edward didn't matter, and Jasper didn't matter, and even sweet, generous Alice didn't matter.

Because the Idea was more than just an idea. It was an imperative. She had to go back.

Every self-preserving instinct in her body fought back against the Idea, but she knew she didn't really have a choice. Her guilt over leaving her son wasn't going to go away. It was, in fact, intensifying. He was on her mind every free moment, and even plenty of moments when she was supposed to be focused on other things.

She couldn't forget him. She was ashamed of herself for even trying. Her mother would never have done that. Charlie would never have done that. She had become a disappointment to both of them when she had run from her responsibilities.

She had become a disappointment to herself.

She didn't know what she would do when she got there. Just the thought of seeing Joham again left her feeling weak and nauseated. If the opportunity presented itself, she would take her son and run with him, but she doubted that she'd get the chance. And she couldn't risk challenging Joham. If she

lost the fight, he would turn her away or even kill her. That wasn't an option. She had to be with Alexander, even if it meant submitting to Joham's tortures again.

She had to resign herself to the most likely scenario. She was going to Mexico, and she doubted that she would be coming back.

It left a hollow ache in her chest to think of it. Carlisle had been good to her, despite her fears. Esme, Rosalie, Alice . . . and Edward. It hurt too much to even think of him, so she didn't. She couldn't, or she would lose her nerve.

She thought of Charlie again, and it nearly broke her. He would be devastated when he found out she had gone again. But she had to. If he knew what she was going back to, he would understand. She was doing what he would do.

She moved along the exposed boards to the kitchen and scribbled a note on the pad next to the phone.

Tell Charlie I'm sorry.

It was the best she could do. She couldn't bear the thought of telling him the reason she had to leave again. It was best to let him think she was still the same old Bella, still his little girl.

It would be easier for him.

She thought of leaving something for Edward, too. Something to thank him for being so . . . so exactly what she needed. But she froze up at the thought of saying goodbye to him, and she finally just dropped the pen and turned away. She was shaking all over from terror, from sadness, from the guilt of leaving more chaos in her wake. That seemed to be all she could do since she had turned into this. She had walked into a harmonious family and turned them all against one another. She had walked into an elegant home and was leaving it half gutted.

It was time for her to leave, before she made it all worse.

She walked out the back door, making sure it latched firmly behind her, and with one more longing look at the house, she turned southwest in a path that would take her to the ocean without crossing La Push.

She didn't get far. It was only a few minutes before she heard the squeal of tires in the distance, and then someone was running toward her in the trees.

Edward. She felt simultaneously relieved and tormented. How could she leave if he asked her to stay? Her heart was already pulling her in two directions, and if he pulled any harder she would rip in two. She slowed to a stop, her shoulders slumping.

She could hear seven people running toward her now, but Edward reached her first. He skidded to a stop in front of her, grabbing her arms and shaking her.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, his voice pained and desperate. "You're not leaving, Bella. Please. Please, you're not really leaving?"

"Edward, let go of her." Carlisle stopped a few yards away from them, the others coming up behind him. "I told her she could leave if she wanted to. It's her choice."

Edward ignored him, still gripping Bella's arms tightly. "Are we really so awful? Have we made you so miserable?"

"I have to go back," she whispered, but it was without conviction. She didn't want it. "I'm sorry."

"Why? Back to what? I thought your sire abandoned you?"

She shook her head, wishing that the truth didn't condemn her so harshly. "It was me. I left."

She was conscious again of eyes on her, analyzing her. Of Jasper, especially, studying her and discovering her secrets.

"Why?" Edward asked her. His grip loosened and he pulled her closer, winding one arm around her waist.

She let her head fall against his chest. "It was so awful there." She wanted to tell him everything, to unburden her soul onto his strong shoulders, but she knew she couldn't take the disapproval that would follow. Instead she just clutched the back of his shirt and shuddered at the memory of Joham's hands on her. "He was so awful."

"Then why go back? Stay here with us . . . with me."

Her knees buckled from the sheer weight of her desire to give in. But she couldn't.

"I left . . ." *a baby, my son*, "something. I have to go back for it."

"Bella . . ."

It was Alice who stepped forward, her eyes haunted with the ghost of too much knowledge. "Bella, you won't find what you're looking for. I'm sorry, but . . . whatever it is . . . it's not there."

"Yes it is," she hissed, the anger coiling in her stomach and escaping before she could stop it. How dare she? How dare she try to keep Bella from her son?

Edward's voice was gentle, his breath comforting as it fluttered through her hair. "Where did you leave it?"

"Mexico," she answered, and shivered at the thought of the lonely house with the rows of cots in the living room.

"Do you mind if we drive? Running is fun and all, but it helps to have the cover of tinted windows if we're going to travel in daylight."

Bella sucked in a sharp breath, pulling back to look at him. For a moment, everything else blurred and all she could see were his searching eyes, his crooked, tentative smile. Was he really offering to come with her? Could it be that she didn't have to do this alone?

Alice's voice broke through her haze, bringing her back to reality.

"Edward, it's no good. You can see as well as I can that you won't find anything."

"I know. But it's not fair to ask Bella to trust that. She needs to see it for herself."

"Alice and I will come with you," Jasper said.

Edward shook his head.

"Edward, you heard what Peter said—"

"And you said yourself that Peter was overly paranoid. You make her uncomfortable, Jasper. You're not coming."

He started to argue, but Alice touched his arm. "He's right, we can't. That thing I told you about . . . it's getting more concrete. We need to be here."

"Then Edward needs to be here, too."

She shook her head. "He knows about Edward. That's enough. He needs to *see* you."

Bella felt Edward stiffen. "When were you going to share that with the rest of us?" he demanded.

"When I knew enough to be certain, just like always." Her eyes flashed, but behind the irritation they looked fathomless and old, like she had lived a million lifetimes. "But . . . I'm pretty sure. So come back soon." She moved forward and gripped one of Bella's hands behind Edward's back. "Come back."

Bella buried her head in Edward's chest and nodded. If he came with her, maybe she had a chance of getting Alexander away from Joham and Serena. Maybe she could escape with him after all, and bring him back here. They would all know the truth about her then, but she could handle that if she had her son with her. If she had done what she could to fix her mistake, maybe it would be okay if they knew.

"I haven't gotten her a passport yet," Jasper said.

"That's okay. We've both sneaked across the border before." He released her and nodded in the direction he had come from. "So how about it? Do you mind if we drive?"

"Edward . . ."

Carlisle stepped forward and Edward turned to him, his jaw set, ready to fight. But Carlisle just held out a set of keys.

"Take the Mercedes. You'll need the darker tint if you're heading south."

Edward accepted the keys and allowed Carlisle to pull him into an embrace. The older man slipped a cell phone from his pocket and tucked it into Edward's.

"If you run into any trouble, you call me immediately."

"I will."

Esme drew Bella's attention by stepping forward and embracing her as well. "You be safe," she whispered, her voice imploring.

Bella nodded, but she didn't promise.

Rosalie moved in, wrapping her arms around both of them. "Hurry back. Esme will fret the entire time you're away." She cleared her throat. "And I might, too."

"I really hope I'm wrong," Alice added, joining the hug, but her voice didn't hold any hope. She was sure of her dour prediction.

Bella was overwhelmed by the show of affection and support, and she didn't know how to respond. She swallowed against the lump forming in her throat and offered them the best smile she could muster.

"All right, you bunch of old hens," Edward said, shooing the girls away. "The sooner we get going, the sooner we can be back. Come on, Bella." He held out his hand to her and she took it, her smile growing more genuine.

She was going back for her son, and Edward was coming with her. She felt like she could fly.

The two of them started running back the way Edward had come, toward the two cars that had been parked in the shadow of the trees along the side of the highway. They passed the Volvo, which Edward had left running, unwilling to pause even long enough to cut the engine, and headed for the Mercedes. Edward opened Bella's door for her and gave her a hand into her seat, then rounded the car and climbed behind the wheel. He coaxed the engine to life and pulled onto the freeway, his eyes roaming admiringly over the dash of the car.

"Check the glove box," he said. "Carlisle might have some good music in there."

She rooted around inside, finding a mix of albums nearly as eclectic as the one Edward had kept in his room, if significantly smaller. She withdrew a Bruce Springsteen CD that reminded her of summers with Charlie and examined it. It made her feel connected to her father, and right now she needed to borrow his strength.

"Is this one okay?"

Edward nodded and she slid it into the player. The electric tones of "Blinded by the Light" drifted out of the speakers, and Edward turned up the volume as he accelerated to well over the speed limit. He looked happy and carefree, and his good mood was contagious. There was a lightness in Bella's chest that she hadn't felt in months, and a little giggle bubbled out of her as Bruce started to sing. Optimism brightened her surroundings, and she hugged herself happily when Edward's velvet voice joined in with the song. She felt vibrant and alive, and though she was poised on the edge of what promised to be the biggest change of her life, she felt ready for it.

Finally.

The drive was long, but it was exciting. Edward drove much faster than Carlisle did, at least when traffic allowed. He weaved between cars, breezing by even the fastest drivers and only slowing for the occasional speed trap or congested road. They stopped three times for gas, always at nearly-abandoned roadside stops, and each time Bella cranked up the music in the car and hunched down in her seat with her breath held, trying to think of anything except for the blood pumping in the cashiers' veins.

It was easier than she thought it would be. After all, she had Alexander to think of. What kind of role model could she be for her boy if she couldn't keep herself from killing any human in the general vicinity?

They made amazing time. It was only a little after midnight when they passed San Diego, and not long after that Edward exited the freeway and maneuvered his way to a poorly-maintained side road.

"Where are we going?" Bella asked, scanning her surroundings.

"A convenient place to cross the border. Where did you come across the first time?"

"I swam."

He cocked his head to the side, giving her an odd look. "You didn't swim all the way from Mexico to Washington, did you?"

She nodded.

"Didn't you ever go ashore?"

"I couldn't," she said. "I . . . would have smelled them."

Edward gaped at her, barely sparing any attention for the road ahead. "You stayed in the water so you wouldn't kill anyone?"

She nodded.

He laughed shook his head. "You belong with us, Bella." He took her hand and brought it to his lips, giving it a firm kiss and laughing again. It was a wondering, infectious sound, and Bella found herself smiling along with him.

"We're taking a dryer route this time, if that's okay."

"What if someone sees us?"

"That's where the fun part comes in," he said with a grin. "We stay low, crawl, mostly, and once we're a ways away, we leave a couple of drained animals lying around."

Bella furrowed her brow, not understanding what he was telling her.

"Come on, Bella, you lived in Arizona. Surely you've heard legends of the *chupa cabre*?"

Her eyes widened and she laughed. "You want people to think we're *chupa cabre*?"

"It's better than having them think we're vampires."

Bella laughed again, encouraged by the mischief in his eyes. "Have you started these rumors before?"

"Once, in 1996. Emmett and I took an impulsive trip and didn't think to bring along our passports. We made the papers and everything."

"What about the Volturi? Did they find out?"

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "Unless people were talking about vampires, they didn't care." He pulled the Mercedes into a copse of scrubby trees beside the road and cut the engine.

"Are we just going to leave the car?" Bella asked.

"Yep."

They climbed out and Edward locked it up. "Ready? I'll go first, but stay close."

She nodded.

Edward crouched down, leaning on his hands, and Bella imitated his stance. He crawled forward a few feet, and then took off, tearing across the open land. Bella knew he wasn't going as fast as he could have, but with his speed and stance he did look somewhat animalistic. She followed after him, easily leaping fences and rivers, ducking into the shadows of trees and bushes wherever they were available. When they had put a good ten miles between themselves and the car, Edward tore off after a coyote and drained it, tossing the body out on the open ground.

Bella managed to catch a jackrabbit and did the same. It wasn't as good as a carnivore, but the bitterness was starting to grow on her. It was almost like learning to drink coffee, she thought. She was developing a taste for grass-fed rodents.

Edward held out a hand to her when she was finished, and she took it eagerly.

"So," he said. "Where to?"

"Um." She looked around her. They were east of Tijuana, but the terrain was unfamiliar. They were *too* far east, she thought. Maybe. But she didn't recognize this part of the desert.

Edward saw her uncertainty and stepped in to help. "Maybe we should try retracing your steps. When you left . . . wherever you were . . . where did you go?"

"To the coast. South of Tijuana."

"Straight to the water, huh?"

She nodded.

"Okay. Let's head out to the coast and see if anything catches your eye."

Bella agreed, and taking the somewhat awkward *chupa cabre* stance again, the two of them darted off through the brush.

They didn't make it to the coast, though. They had only been running for about a half hour when Bella skidded to a stop. Edward stopped as well and straightened, jogging back to her.

"What's up?"

"I recognize this. I came this way."

She was staring at a road off in the distance, to the South. She had been on the other side of it when . . .

Her throat burned at the memory of the thumping baseline, the pulsing blood, the open car window. She could see the exact spot where it had happened. The car was gone but the earth was still churned up from the impact.

They were close.

"That way."

She didn't wait for him to answer, but headed southeast. When she reached the road she turned east and followed it, peering through the darkness, trying to catch a glimpse of the hell she had left behind.

She saw it before long, and it was all she could do to force herself to keep going. Every instinct in her body was screaming for her to get away from there, to never go near that house or its inhabitants again.

Every instinct except one. One that knew her son was there, and was desperate to get him back. And it was a strong one.

So she kept running, despite the terror that tried to freeze her limbs, despite the dread that curdled the blood in her stomach. She kept running despite the fact that she wanted to stop Edward, to send him away so he wouldn't know the things she never wanted to show him.

But as they approached the house, she began to sense that something was off. It was too silent. The air conditioner wasn't running, despite the intense summer heat. There was no murmur of voices, no clomping of feet, no clink of chain links against metal bedframes.

Her throat tightened.

But it was late. Joham would be out. Whatever girls he had in there would be sleeping. Serena might be, too, or else quietly reading a book. They would want the house quiet, so as not to disturb the baby.

Of course the house was silent. Why wouldn't it be? That didn't mean Alice was right, that there was nothing to find.

She gave up the too-slow animal gait and pushed herself to her feet. She expected Edward to protest, but he only followed along silently. When they reached the house she burst inside, ready to face Joham, ready to find Alexander and run with him.

But they weren't there.

The room was empty. The cots that had lined the walls for the last few months had disappeared. There were no dishes in the sink, no baby paraphernalia scattered on the kitchen island.

"No," she gasped, and ran upstairs, shoving her way into the bedrooms. "No, no, no!" When she found them empty she ran through them all again, flinging open closets, searching under the beds. But there was nothing.

"Bella." Edward caught her when she darted down the stairs and went to search the bathroom off of the kitchen. "Let me help you. What are you looking for?"

"All of them," she choked out, shoving away from him. "They're here. I know they are."

Edward grabbed her hand, pulling her back to him once again. "There's no one here. Judging by how faded the scents are, the place has been empty for days."

"He has to be!" She jerked her hand out of his and ran to the bathroom, searching in closets, under the sink, knowing full well that it was irrational but needing to all the same. She couldn't accept that Alexander was gone. If she did, she would break.

Edward stood stoically by while she went through the house again, tearing it apart, searching for something—anything—that would indicate where her son had gone. Her eyes stung with phantom tears and dry, racking sobs escaped unnoticed from her throat. She wanted to tear the house apart, to search between the walls and under every tile on the roof.

Edward stopped her when she began punching through the drywall. He dragged her back against his chest and wrapped his arms around her, holding her as she sobbed and made a half-hearted effort to wriggle free.

"I have to find him," she whimpered. "He has to be here."

Edward's grip loosened. "Who?"

Bella sank to the floor, shaking from the weight of her despair. She caught the faintest trace of Alexander's scent and she rolled onto her side, curling into a ball and pressing her face into the floor to try and draw his essence from the board that he had once touched.

"Who, Bella?" Edward lowered himself to his knees behind her, one hand resting lightly on her arm. "Who are you looking for?"

She didn't answer him. She didn't know if she wanted to. In the weeks since she had left her mother she had accrued a lifetime's worth of regrets, and she didn't want Edward to see her for the mess that she was.

But the burden was too heavy to carry alone. It was destroying her, breaking her down, and she was sure it would grind her to dust if she had to hold it much longer. So she took a shuddering breath and whispered the name that haunted her thoughts.

"Alexander."

"Who is Alexander? Is that your sire?"

Her sire? Bella let her hair fall in front of her face, hiding her from Edward. Technically, she supposed, the boy *was* her sire. But by the way the Cullens had used the word, she knew that it meant more to them than just the person whose venom had made her a vampire. To them, the sire was responsible for the vampire he had created.

But Alexander was only a child—her child. It was *she* who should have taken responsibility for *him*.

When she didn't answer, Edward squeezed her arm. "Why do you need to find him?"

Her body shook with grief and desperation, and her fingers dug into the floor beneath her, gouging deep holes into the wood.

"I love him."

She hadn't yet admitted it, even to herself. But since the first time she had held him, felt his warm weight tucked against her chest, she *had* loved him. She just didn't know how to reconcile that love

with the fear and horror of what had come before.

Edward's hand slipped off of her arm, and he rocked back. "Oh."

For several long moments, neither of them spoke. Bella continued to cry as the loss seeped deep into her bones. She couldn't accept that Alexander was lost to her, but she didn't know what to do now.

"I'm going to go outside," Edward finally said, his voice sounding quiet and distant beneath Bella's sobs. "To see if there's any trace of a scent that might let us know where he's gone."

The promise of action, the suggestion that there was something to be done, brought Bella back to herself. She pushed herself to her feet and followed him out the door, scouting the terrain with him, searching for scents.

But they didn't find anything more than animal trails. After circling the house several times, pushing the perimeter wider each time, Edward finally stopped and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Bella. The weather has destroyed his scent—if he left one at all. It's possible he left in a car, and that's just not possible to track."

"No!" Despair started to settle on her again, and she reacted violently. "There has to be a way! I have to find him!"

His eyes were pained when he turned to her. "I can try going into Tijuana and asking around. Maybe he passed through, mentioned to someone where he was going."

She nodded, grasping desperately to the frayed edges of hope, knowing it was a long shot but unable to acknowledge that it was. Edward would find him. He had the advantage of being able to read minds, after all. There was no one better suited for the task.

"What does Alexander look like? Maybe you could make a sketch of him that I could show people?"

"Not Alexander. Joham would have gone to the city. Or Serena."

"Who are they?"

But Bella was already running back into the house, racing up the stairs to a desk she had ransacked earlier and pulling out a sheet of lined paper. She found a pen and sketched out a likeness of Joham, her hand moving with perfect precision. Edward followed her and looked over her shoulder as she set the first paper aside and then began a second drawing.

"Joham and Serena?" he asked.

She nodded.

"I'm going to give you the cell phone, so I can get in touch with you if I need to. Will you be all right here?"

She nodded again and accepted the phone, trading it for the drawings.

He stared down at them and fidgeted, his lips pressed into a tight line. "The road isn't far away. You'll want to keep the doors and windows closed."

"I will."

He cleared his throat, his gaze still fixed on the papers in his hands.

"I'll do everything I can," he said, and then was out the door and down the stairs before she could respond.

Bella listened to his soft footfalls until she couldn't hear them anymore, and then she drifted down the stairs. She scanned the empty living room, its walls decorated with pictures put up by a family that had mysteriously disappeared, floors grooved and scratched by the cots that had also vanished.

She moved to the space near the window, where her cot had been, and sank to the floor. She leaned against the wall and traced the tallies she had scratched there, marking her presence, counting down her days. She had despaired here. She had fantasized. She had crafted apologies to her family, again and again.

She had thought she would die here.

And she nearly had. If Alexander had been like Serena, unable to produce venom . . . if Joham had been there to take the baby before he could bite her . . .

The fact that the boy had wanted her sent sharp pains stabbing through her chest. When she had hated him, he had loved her. He had given her life, the thing she had clung to so desperately, so hopelessly. He had saved her, and now she had to do the same for him.

She couldn't leave him with Joham and Serena. She couldn't let him be raised by them, become like them.

All of her hopes were pinned on Edward, but as time passed they grew dimmer and dimmer. It was a long shot. For Edward to happen across the same people that Joham might have. For them to remember him, or have any information. Hour succeeded hour, with only her weak breathing and the sounds of animals and cars outside of the house to mark their passage.

When the eastern sky was just beginning to lighten, the phone vibrated and beeped. She flipped it open and read the text message from a number with a Washington area code.

Please come home as soon as you can. —Alice

Not long after, Bella heard Edward's step in the dirt outside and moved to the porch to wait for him. Her stomach felt heavy and sour, but there was a little flicker of hope inside, and she desperately needed him to give her something to justify it. She couldn't read anything in his flat, expressionless face, and she wrung her hands in front of her, trying to force herself to be patient.

"I'm sorry," he said without preamble once he reached the porch. "I didn't find anything. A few people recognized Joham, but they hadn't seen him recently and didn't know anything about where he might have gone."

Bella noticed the cool remoteness of his voice, but she couldn't make herself think about what it meant. She wrapped her arms around herself, trying to hold her pieces together.

"What do I do?" she whispered, her voice as dry and aimless as the desert wind.

Edward's stiff stance softened and he moved toward her, letting one hand drift around to the small of her back. "I don't know. We could look somewhere else, try other cities, but I don't think it's likely that we'll find anyone with real information. From what I've seen, Joham isn't one for idle conversation."

Bella sagged against him, desperation warring with defeat. She couldn't stand to give up, but she didn't know what else to do.

"Peter and Charlotte might be able to help," he said, his voice low and cautious.

Bella's head snapped up and she stumbled back a step, staring at him in horror. "Peter wants to kill me!"

"He doesn't. Not really. He doesn't care about you one way or the other."

"He told Jasper—"

"He's worried about Jasper. You have to understand where they come from, Bella. For a long time, the only way either of them survived was to immediately remove anything that could ever become a threat. Peter still lives that way, but Jasper doesn't, and Peter's afraid he's going to lose his best friend."

"He won't help me."

"He will if Jasper asks him to."

"Why would Jasper help me?"

"Because *I'll* ask him to."

She shook her head, afraid to pin her hopes on a man who had lobbied for her death. "How could Peter help?"

"He's connected. Information travels surprisingly well between nomads. They see a lot and they tell stories."

"You think he might have heard of Joham?"

"He might know someone who knows someone who knows someone. But I'll be honest . . . your picture of Joham probably won't do as much good as information about him would. It's stories that get spread around, not images."

Bella shuddered. She could imagine reports of Joham being passed from vampire to vampire, shared like tall tales or urban legends. Stories of a man who kidnapped girls to force them to bear his children . . . that had to be noteworthy even among blood-drinking monsters, didn't it?

"Alice wants us to go home," she said, because she couldn't say anything else.

"She called?"

"She sent a message." She gestured toward the phone, which she had left lying on the floor beneath the window, and Edward went inside to retrieve it. He came back out after a moment, his eyes straying back the way they had come.

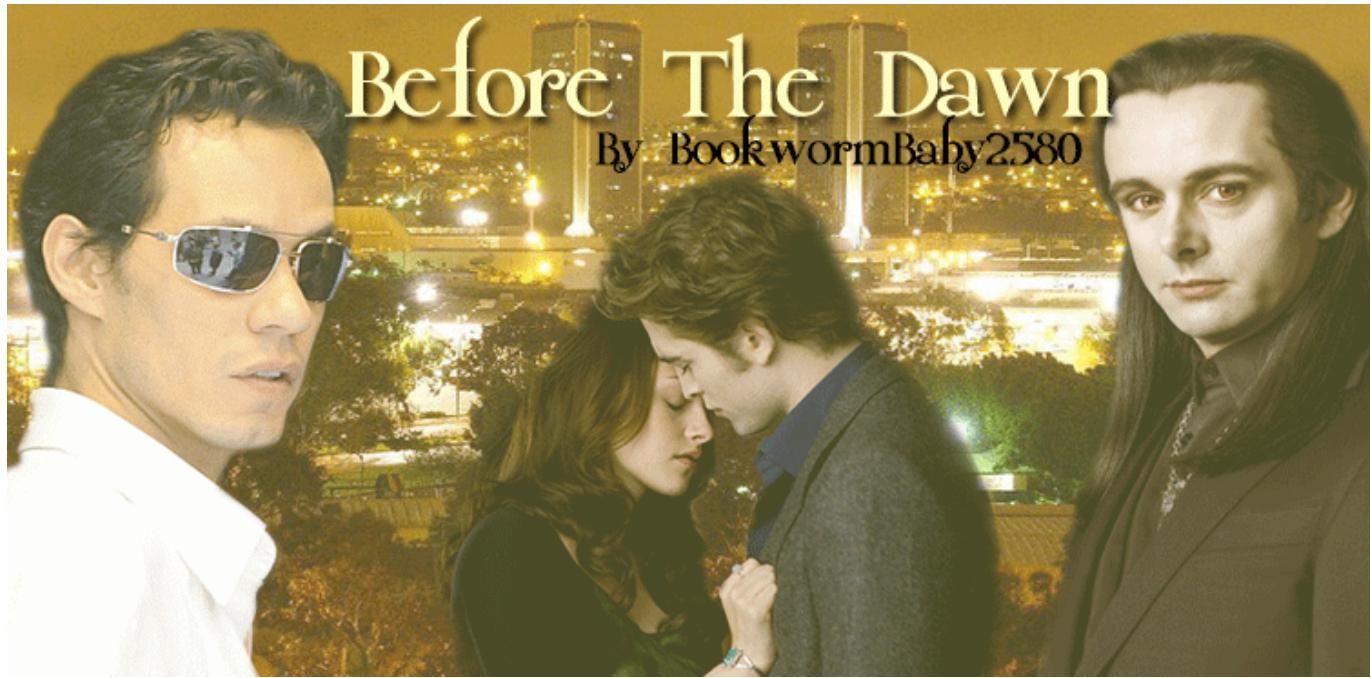
"We should go," he said. "We've waited too long already." He eyed the lightening horizon and then headed inside again, jogging up the stairs. When he came back down, he was carrying two blankets.

"It's not ideal," he said, handing one to her, "but it's better than nothing."

She watched him throw the blanket around himself, leaving his head uncovered for now, and she did the same. She was feeling the tearing already, the agony that came from leaving behind her the one connection she had to her son. She wanted to run back inside, to throw herself on the floor where she had spent so many months in desperate ennui, wishing she could be anywhere else in the world.

But when Edward started running, she followed him, every step bringing with it a fresh stab of sorrow.

Hierarchy



Before The Dawn

By BookwormBaby2580

The ride home was mostly silent. Edward had warned Bella that he would have to take some side roads to avoid an immigration checkpoint, and that they would end up driving through rural areas that would expose her to more people. But she didn't care. There was little that interested her *less* than blood at the moment. She was sinking, submerged in an ocean of despair, and it was every bit as insulating as the water had been.

How could she want blood when her son was gone?

She sat in the passenger seat, curled up in a ball, letting her devastation consume her. Beside her, Edward was just as quiet. Since his warning about the side roads, he hadn't said a word. Mile after mile fell behind them, and between them . . . there was nothing. Hours passed. The sun burned hot, then sank below the horizon. As the light dimmed, brightly-colored explosions of light began bursting in the sky off in the distance.

It was Independence Day. Bella hadn't even noticed. The date had ceased to matter to her a long time ago.

It felt somehow discordant, knowing that there were people celebrating, picnicking, ooh-ing and ah-ing over fireworks while she fell apart. She didn't understand why they weren't hurting along with her. How the devouring ache inside of her wasn't escaping the confines of her chest and swallowing the world whole.

But there was an odd, resigned sort of appropriateness about it, too, Bella thought. She had forfeited her life when she had stopped to celebrate Cinco de Mayo, and now, on the Fourth of July, she had lost her soul.

They were only a mile or two from home when Edward suddenly slowed and pulled the car onto the shoulder of the road. Bella peered outside and was surprised to see Jasper and Alice striding toward them through the trees. She turned back to ask Edward what was going on, but he was already out of the car and stalking toward Jasper, anger roiling behind his eyes.

"That's what you were keeping from me?" he yelled.

"Edward, come on."

Edward ignored his protest, grabbing him by the lapels and shoving him against a tree. Bella cringed, waiting for Jasper to retaliate, but he did nothing.

"How could you do that to me?" Edward yelled.

"You know me better than that. I've done some pretty underhanded things, but I wouldn't stoop that low."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Jasper reached up and loosened Edward's hands from his shirt. "I think you should go away."

"What?" Edward blinked in surprise.

"Go up to Alaska and spend some time with Tanya. Try to put this behind you."

Bella gasped and pushed the car door open, darting to Edward's side. "No, don't go away! Please?"

Jasper gave her a puzzled frown, but addressed Edward. "Look, I wanted this for you. I thought it was heading that direction. But if it's all one-sided, the best thing you can do is cut ties and get away before it gets any worse."

Edward slid an arm around Bella's waist and pulled her close. "It's too late."

"Too late for what?" Bella asked him.

He shook his head and hugged her closer. "Nothing. It's nothing you need to worry about."

"Edward, this is only going to get harder for you. The more time you spend with her—"

"I can't. There's no telling how much longer I have. I'm not going to waste it."

Jasper sighed and gestured toward the car. "We should go. We have company waiting for us at home."

Edward must have seen something in Jasper's head, because his eyes widened. "I thought Amun only had a mate. Who are the others?"

"Benjamin and Tia," Jasper said, leading them to the car. "If you're sticking around, I need you to get as much information from them as you can. They're after something, and I can't figure out what."

"It's obvious, isn't it? Amun's going to make a bid for Aro's position. I suspect he wants Carlisle's support." He slid into the driver's seat again and started the engine while the others found seats of their own.

Bella scooted around until her back was pressed against the passenger door. It made her uncomfortable to have Jasper behind her.

"Yeah, he said as much last night," Jasper agreed. "But there's something else, and it has to do with Benjamin. Amun is *fiercely* possessive of him, and every time the kid disagrees with him, Amun practically flies into a panic. I want to know what's up."

"I'll see what I can do. Anything else?"

"Yeah . . . Kebi. She's too quiet. It makes me nervous not to know what's going on in that head of hers."

"I'll have a listen."

"Keep it quiet, though. We're trying to downplay both your talent and Alice's. The last thing we need is Amun taking undue interest in you two."

Edward grunted. "What did Carlisle say when Amun asked for his support?"

"He said no. He wished him luck, but said he'd remain neutral. But of course, he invited them all to stay as long as they liked, and Amun is taking him up on it. I think he's hoping that the association will lead people to assume that he has Carlisle's endorsement."

"He's probably right."

Jasper turned his attention to Bella. "Kid, you'll want to watch what you say around them. The less information they have, the better."

"Who are they?"

"Some old friends of Carlisle's."

She scowled at him. "This is how you treat your friends?"

One corner of his mouth quirked up. "What you have to understand about Carlisle is that hasn't figured out how to have anything *but* friends."

"They're dangerous," Edward agreed. "And they'll have an agenda. Just be careful."

"Having said that," Jasper went on, "I wonder if you'd help me out with a little demonstration."

Bella regarded him suspiciously.

"I want you to get angry. At Emmett, maybe; he has a talent for getting under your skin. Next time he makes a smart remark, go ahead and get mad. Attack him like you did the other day."

"Why?"

"So that I can stop you, just like I did before."

Bella shuddered, remembering the helpless feeling of being pinned to the floor beneath him.

"I know," Jasper said, his voice gentle. "It's not a small thing I'm asking."

"What's the point?"

"There are several points. The first is that Amun gets a visual reminder that I know how to handle a newborn. I want him associating me with my army days as much as possible. Second, when I do what I do, Carlisle will tell me to back off. I'll obey, and Amun will see that my allegiance lies with my coven leader. And third, once I let you up, you're going to run straight to Carlisle for protection. It will demonstrate that the way he runs his coven inspires loyalty."

She swallowed nervously. "If I do this, will you do something for me?"

"Do you mean asking Peter to find out what he can about this Joham of yours?"

She hugged herself tightly and nodded. She knew about Alice's abilities, of course, but it still unnerved her how everyone in the coven just always seemed to *know* things.

"I'll do that whether you help me or not. It's entirely up to you. Just remember, what benefits your coven also benefits you. In situations like this, it's important for us to stand together."

Bella stared at him. Was he counting her among their coven? What did that mean? He probably wanted to inflate their numbers for the benefit of this Amun person, but did that mean he didn't see her as a threat? Did it mean he could be counted as an ally?

She wasn't ready to trust him, but she would take what she could get. She took a deep breath and nodded, trying to convince herself that it wouldn't be so bad to have him attack her again, if she knew it was just for show.

"Okay," she said. "I'll do it."

He smiled and winked at her. "'Atta girl."

They spent the rest of the drive educating Bella on Amun's past. Thousands of years ago, he and a handful of other vampires had lived openly in Egypt as gods. The Volturi had put an end to it in their rise to power, and all but Amun and Kebi had been killed. Amun had been savvy enough to throw his support behind Aro, and thus managed to survive, but he had been looking for a way to reclaim his power ever since. Aro had known it, and had taken every opportunity he could to spite Amun. Several times he had even used Chelsea to lure away any talented Vampires that Amun had recruited to his cause.

"He still thinks of himself as a god," Edward said, "and he's only happy when he's being treated like one."

His description reminded Bella forcibly of Joham, but all she said was, "He's not any better than the Volturi."

"Worse. If he had his way, the entire human race would be enslaved by vampires."

"Pull over," Jasper said as they approached the turn-off to the house.

Edward obeyed. "Not coming home?"

"Not with you. Amun doesn't need to know we had this little chat." He and Alice slipped out of the car, but before she closed the door, Alice leaned back in.

"Bella? When we're outside later tonight, don't stand near Amun's coven. We don't want to send the wrong message."

Bella frowned in confusion, but nodded. How did you argue with a psychic, after all?

Edward steered back onto the road, and in just a couple of minutes he was turning onto the gravel driveway.

"There they are now," she heard Carlisle say from the house, and when the car emerged from the trees she saw him stepping out onto the porch, leading a group of four unfamiliar vampires. They all had features that hinted at exotic origins, and Bella eyed them closely as they drew near. The nearest to Carlisle looked like the oldest. He wore a black linen suit and held himself stiffly, eyeing the approaching car with a wary frown. A woman stood beside him, but Bella couldn't pinpoint any details because of the long, shapeless dress she wore and the scarf that she had wrapped over her head and across the front of her face. Her burgundy eyes were wide and unlined, and continually sought out the larger man, as if looking for reassurance or instruction.

A boy followed them out. He looked about Bella's age, maybe a little younger, and was dressed simply in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. He had an open face and a wide smile, and his fingers were linked with those of a girl who trailed after him. She also wore jeans with a long-sleeved blouse, and her long, black hair fell in thick cascades over her shoulders. She didn't smile, and she watched the approaching car with a wariness that mirrored the larger man's.

They waited for Edward to park the car, and then Carlisle descended the steps as Edward and Bella climbed out. He moved to Edward's side and put an arm around his shoulders, beaming proudly.

"This," he said to his visitors, "is Edward, the first member of my family. Edward, you know all about Amun and Kebi, of course."

"It's nice to finally meet you," Edward said, moving forward with a hand extended.

"Likewise," Amun said, but kept his hands clasped behind his back.

Edward dropped his arm and simply nodded to him and Kebi.

"And this is Benjamin and Tia," Carlisle continued, indicating the second couple.

"Carlisle has hardly stopped talking about you since we arrived," Benjamin said.

Tia stepped forward, her jaw set in defiance, and held out her hand to Edward. Amun growled, but Edward just chuckled as he shook Tia's hand.

"My talent doesn't work the same way as Aro's," he told her. "I don't need contact to read your mind, but I can only see what you're thinking while you're thinking it. And even then, only if I'm paying attention." He winked at her and the girl smiled, arching an eyebrow.

"And your newborn? Is she allowed to greet us?"

"Of course," Carlisle said. "Isabella is the newest member of our coven. You'll have to forgive her if she keeps her distance. She's still getting used to the close quarters."

"So," Amun said, turning and heading back into the house. "Your coven is still growing."

"I do manage to pick up a new one here and there," was Carlisle's amiable reply as they all ambled inside.

Bella didn't miss the discreet nod Edward gave Tia when everyone else had turned away.

The rest of the Cullens were waiting in the living room, and everyone moved back to their seats. Edward headed for the piano, settling down on the bench and beginning a soft, slow melody. Bella followed and sank to the floor next to one of the piano legs.

"So sorry for the interruption," Carlisle said. "Please continue, Emmett."

Emmett sat in one of the armchairs with Rosalie perched on his lap. He started speaking slowly and clearly in his deep baritone, stroking his wife's hair absently. "It was the custom then to bring away, The bride from home at blushing shut of day . . ."

Bella turned curious eyes on Edward. "What is he doing?" she whispered, her words quiet enough that they wouldn't disturb the gathering in the living room.

"He's reciting *Lamia*. Emmett is partial to English poets, Keats in particular."

Bella rocked back, staring at Emmett. That hulking mountain of a man enjoyed poetry? She never would have believed it.

Edward grinned. "Don't let that ugly mug fool you. He's cultured."

Emmett winked at her, never breaking pace in his recitation. His pronunciation had a hint of Southern flavor to it, she realized as she listened to him. Not as much as Jasper's but it was there, and it added warmth to his oration. Bella had obviously missed the beginning of the poem, so she just let herself enjoy the rich sound of Emmett's voice as it moved through the flowing cadences, perfectly complemented by Edward's soft accompaniment.

When he finished speaking, Carlisle turned to his guests expectantly. They were silent for a moment, and then Amun spoke.

"This is how you spend your time?"

"Some of it," Carlisle responded with a smile. "We have a variety of hobbies."

"It's interesting," Benjamin said. "But it's so *human*. Reading pretty rhymes about love and death. What's the point?"

"Simply to enjoy it. Can you think of a better way for us to spend our excess time."

"Surely you have necessities to take care of?"

"Certainly. Esme and I have our careers, and the others attend school most of the year. But that still leaves us ample time for leisure."

"How do you spend *your* time?" Rosalie asked Benjamin.

"We move around frequently," he told her. "So it's always a good idea to scout out possible new shelters. Plus there's hunting, and we put a lot of effort into covering our tracks. And—" He broke off and glanced anxiously at Amun before smiling widely and tickling Tia's sides. "And of course, our mates take up much of our time."

Bella couldn't help but wonder what it was that he had stopped himself from saying. And *why* he had stopped himself. It was no wonder Jasper was suspicious of this coven. She glanced at Edward and saw that his shoulders were stiffer than they had been before, his eyes wide and staring intently somewhere beyond the keys of the piano. His breathing had gone shallow, and Bella's curiosity intensified. Had he seen something in Benjamin's mind?

"That seems like a perfectly pleasant way of life to me," Carlisle said.

"And yet, you've rejected it."

He chuckled. "True enough. I've rejected a lot of things about the traditional vampire way of life."

"Why?" Benjamin asked, leaning forward. "Why don't you feed from humans? Why do you pretend to be one of them?"

"Would you like the short answer or the long one?"

Benjamin's eyes sparkled with humor and curiosity. "Let's start with the short one and see if it convinces me."

"The short answer," Carlisle said, leaning forward as well, "is that I think it's wrong to feed from humans. They're sentient beings, created in the image of God, and to deprive even one of them of life is the gravest of sins."

"God? Carlisle, you're aware that an entire civilization used to think that Amun was a god. What makes you think your belief is any less misguided?"

Carlisle just shrugged, apparently uninterested in defending his faith. "We'll have to turn to the long answer then. Are you familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs?"

"I'm afraid I'm not."

"Rosalie, hand me a notebook? Abraham Maslow proposed a theory that a person's needs must be met in a specific order." He accepted the spiral-bound notebook that Rosalie had pulled out of an end table drawer and flipped it open. "It's often represented as a pyramid, to reiterate the idea that a foundation must have adequate strength before you can build upon it." He plucked a pen from his pocket and drew a triangle on the page, dividing it into five sections.

"At the bottom level is the most basic of our physiological needs. Maslow identified these as food, water, shelter, oxygen, and so on. As vampires, of course, we can do without most of these. For us, the only item on this level is blood. If we're deprived of it, we can think of nothing else."

Benjamin raised an eyebrow. "Thirst is compelling, but I wouldn't say it keeps us from thinking of anything else."

"Trust me, if you go without it for long enough, it does."

"You've done this?"

Carlisle nodded, grimacing.

"I'll take your word for it, then. Please continue."

"The next level," Carlisle said, pointing, "is security. For humans this is health, property, financial stability . . . essentially, anything that allows them to be sure that their basic needs will continue to be met. For vampires, maintaining our needs on this level takes up the bulk of our time. We scout for our next blood source and defend ourselves against hostile covens. If we didn't, we would risk our future."

"You say 'we'," Benjamin pointed out. "But you don't."

Carlisle shook his head. "I'm fortunate enough to have plenty of wildlife nearby, and my family generally makes an unattractive target for other covens. I have reached a point where this level takes little of my attention to satisfy."

"A matter worth consideration, but I'm not sure it sells me on the necessity of drinking animal blood."

Carlisle chuckled and moved on. "The third step is friendship, family, and sexual intimacy. For some vampires, our mates and our covens fulfill this role. For nomadic pairs, you'll often see them searching for more connection than their mates can provide. They seek one another out and spend a few hours trading fish stories before moving on again."

Benjamin nodded, conceding his point.

"That's generally as high on the scale as a vampire gets. The next level involves achievement and respect, and there's simply not enough of a cohesive vampire community to allow for it under normal circumstances. This, I believe, is where Chelsea's real value to the Volturi came in."

Benjamin raised his eyebrows.

"She allowed a large group of vampires to live together peacefully, which meant they could engage in some healthy competition and earn social commendation. Without Chelsea to tame their instincts, that would never have been possible."

"And you believe you've also overcome this challenge?"

"This is where the animal blood comes in. It offers us two important benefits. First, it fundamentally alters our physiology, and allows our instinctive reactions to become subordinate to reason."

Benjamin sat back in his seat, a skeptical frown on his face. "You really believe the blood you drink can do that?"

Carlisle spread his hands, taking in the roomful of vampires. "You need but to look around to see the truth of it. I've spent the last fifty years sharing a home with six other vampires."

The boy nodded, a reluctant acceptance of the claim. He glanced at Amun, but looked away quickly when he met the older man's gaze. "And the other benefit?"

"It allows me to take part in a community. Resisting human blood is much easier when it's a habit. As long as I abstain, I can treat humans as neighbors instead of livestock. This gives me the opportunity to practice in a field where I can excel, and contribute to a thriving society. It's very satisfying."

Benjamin eyed the drawing. "And that allows you to move on to what?"

"The top of the pyramid is where you achieve self-actualization. It's at this level that you begin to appreciate art, explore your creativity, and analyze your own beliefs and prejudices. Right now, to you, reading poetry seems frivolous and unnecessary. But when all of your other needs are satisfied, it's an appealing way to spend your time."

"So you believe that your lifestyle makes you a better man?"

Carlisle smiled and set his drawing aside. "I believe that it allows me to have something I want."

Benjamin was silent for a long moment, watching Carlisle through narrowed eyes. Everyone seemed to be waiting for his reaction, but Amun was the one who finally burst out.

"Poppycock!"

Carlisle turned to him with raised eyebrows, his imperturbable smile still in place.

"You're allowing the theories of a human to dictate the way you live as a vampire? Absurd!"

Carlisle opened his mouth to speak, but Amun rushed on.

"We could waste our time reading silly little poems about *humans* if we chose to, but we have better things to do with our time—things that have concrete benefits. We don't have to pretend to be something we're not to feel good about ourselves."

He fell silent, his angry stare a challenge, but Carlisle didn't rise to it. He simply shrugged his shoulders and sat back again. "Perhaps you're right. It may be that I only put stock in Maslow's theory because it gives justification to the beliefs I already hold."

"When was this theory proposed?" Amun demanded.

"Nineteen forty-three."

"And has the field of psychology changed very much since then?" he asked sarcastically.

Carlisle chuckled and nodded. "Quite a bit, actually. And many modifications have been made to Maslow's original structure. For instance, Maslow actually placed sex at the base of the pyramid, with the other physiological needs. That placement has been challenged, and based on my own experience and what I've observed in others, I chose to give you the modified version."

The corner of Benjamin's mouth quirked up. "You're saying this hierarchy might be more fluid than your diagram would suggest."

"There's a very good chance of it," Carlisle answered with a smile. "After all, I did find some satisfaction in my work, even before I had fulfilled my need for family. But those were painfully lonely years."

"It's utter rubbish," Amun muttered.

"Perhaps," Carlisle said with a laugh. "And it may be more useful as a descriptive model than a prescriptive one. I only offer it as food for thought. Make of it what you will."

"It's very compelling," Benjamin murmured.

"Yes," Tia said, speaking up, "but so is human blood."

Benjamin laughed and gave her shoulders a squeeze.

"It *is* interesting, though," Tia admitted. "You've given us something new to argue over, Carlisle. I'm obliged. I'm tired of our old standbys."

"Show us some more, then," Benjamin said. "What other hobbies does your self-actualization allow for?"

"Games," Emmett answered with a broad smile. "It's too bad the weather's nice. I'd love to teach you to play baseball."

"How about a little capture the flag?" Jasper drawled. "Simple rules, and we'll add a penalty for collisions that are more than, say, ninety decibels."

"How loud is that?" Tia asked.

Jasper stood and moved to the front door. He pulled it open and then slammed it shut again, rattling the pictures on the walls. "About that loud."

She smiled. "Piece of cake."

"So you're in?" Emmett asked.

Benjamin nodded. "We're in. Amun?"

"It's hardly dignified to play games like children," the older man sniffed.

Benjamin laughed. "You worry about being dignified while Tia and I have some fun."

Amun ground his teeth, and for a moment Bella thought he was going to forbid Benjamin to play, but as usual, Carlisle smoothed things over.

"Perhaps you'd be willing to referee for us," he said to Amun. "That way you can be involved without having to play."

He gave a curt nod.

"Wonderful!"

"Bella, you'll play too, right?" Alice spoke up.

Her head snapped up. "Oh, um—"

"Please? Someone always has to sit out to keep the numbers even. If you play, we all can."

Bella wanted to refuse, but Alice seemed to have a talent for puppy-dog eyes. Her pleading look was making the decision very difficult.

"We tend to get physical," Carlisle said gently. "But it's all in fun. There's no malice behind it."

Bella suddenly felt exposed. She didn't like that everyone was so aware of her fear. It put her at a disadvantage. So she took a deep breath and stiffened her spine. "I'll play."

Emmett let out a whoop. "Odds and evens, Rosie. I'm odd."

They both stood and put a hand behind their backs, and on the count of three they showed them. Rosalie was holding up two fingers, and Emmett one.

"Yes!" Emmett did a little fist pump. "Alice, you're on my team."

Alice moved to Emmett's side, and Jasper stood and joined Rosalie.

"We always separate the couples when we play on teams," Edward explained to Bella. "It makes for a more interesting game."

"Edward, you're mine," Rosalie called out, and Edward flashed Bella a crooked smile.

"Would you mind being my other half and playing on Emmett's side?"

Bella smiled back—she couldn't seem to help it when he looked at her that way—and they both went to stand with their teams.

Emmett was scrutinizing their visitors closely. "Hmmmm . . . I want Tia."

"That means you're with me, Benjamin," Rosalie said. "And you, Carlisle."

Emmett looked his team over as Esme came to join them, and a wide grin spread across his face. "Would you look at this? I got all the girls. Emmett's Angels!"

"Only more fashionable," Alice said with a giggle. "Let's get changed." She linked her arms through Bella's and Tia's and steered them toward the stairs. "Our clothes can get end up a little worse for the wear during these games. I recommend layers of good, sturdy fabrics. Wear leggings beneath jeans, cottons beneath wools. And you might as well skip the shoes entirely; they only get in the way."

The others followed them upstairs, and suitable clothes were found for everyone. Once they were changed and Alice had produced a pair of polyester scarves to serve as flags, they headed outside into the woods. Jasper walked them around in a large oval that he designated as the playing field, and then led them across the center. There couldn't have been a more effective way of labeling the boundaries. With twelve fresh vampire scents embedded in the bracken, it was easy to pick out the limits of the field.

It was interesting, Bella thought, that they didn't choose a clearing to play in. They seemed to prefer the obstacles and limited visibility that the trees presented, as well as the opportunities to maneuver in the branches overhead. She had to admit that the set-up appealed to her, too. The game took on a new challenge when it was played in three dimensions.

And it surprised her when she realized that she was having fun. The first time Benjamin came at her from practically out of nowhere and tackled her to the ground, she nearly panicked. But her anxiety was dispelled when he hopped up and offered her his hand, helping her to her feet and escorting her to his team's "jail." Carlisle had been right, she realized. It was all in fun. Somehow that thought freed her, and she was able to put aside her inhibitions.

Most of them, anyway. Any time she saw Jasper's scarred form heading toward her, she turned tail and ran.

But when Carlisle managed to slip past everyone else's defenses and snatch her team's flag from its hiding place in the crook of a high tree branch, she didn't even hesitate before tearing off after him and shoving him to the ground.

He laughed in surrender and hopped to his feet, but suddenly froze and tilted his head back. He sniffed the breeze tentatively, and his eyes widened.

"Aro," he said loudly, and then took off running toward the northwest.

The reaction was instantaneous. Everyone abandoned the game and ran after him, and Bella saw Alice and Jasper exchange a knowing glance.

"Stay close to me," Edward murmured as he grabbed Bella's hand and pulled her along with him. "It will be tense for a minute or two, but everything will be fine."

Bella ran with him without asking questions, but there was a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. She had heard plenty about Aro in the last few days, and she had already decided she wanted nothing to do with the man. Whatever this was about, it couldn't be good. She remembered Alice's warning to avoid standing too close to Amun and his coven, so she tugged on Edward's hand, pulling him a suitable distance away from them.

They had gone less than a mile when Carlisle suddenly stopped short, the rest of them skidding to a halt behind him. Several yards beyond them crouched a vampire, and Bella couldn't help but think he made for a fairly unimpressive sight. He was short and thin, his black hair pulled back into a long ponytail that blended with his black leather coat and black wool trousers. His skin had a powdery, insubstantial look to it, and his red eyes seemed dull and cloudy. He surveyed the group of vampires in front of him, suspicion etched deeply in his features, and his gaze lingered on Amun's coven. His eyes narrowed, but they widened again in shock and fury when he saw Bella and Edward.

"*You*," he hissed at Carlisle. "It was *you*!"

He let out a loud snarl and lunged at Carlisle—a poorly planned action, Bella thought, as Jasper and Edward both rushed forward to intercept him. They slammed into him, throwing him backward onto the ground, and then Jasper shoved him onto his stomach and pinned him in a position that was disturbingly familiar to Bella. Jasper's knee was planted in Aro's back, his hands yanked Aro's elbows back, effectively neutralizing him.

"No, Jasper, let him up." Carlisle tried to move closer, but Emmett darted up behind him and put a hand on his shoulder.

Carlisle pushed his hand aside, but only took a couple of steps toward Jasper, who was staring down at Aro in indecision.

"Now, Jasper," he said firmly. "Aro, I'm disappointed that you would think me capable of such a thing. I've always been your friend."

"*My friend?*" Aro hissed. "You consort with my enemies and dare to call yourself my *friend*?"

Carlisle extended his hand. "You have but to take my hand to know the truth."

"No!" It was Amun who stepped in this time. He grabbed Carlisle's elbow and dragged him back. "I told you things in confidence, Carlisle. I don't care to have them shared with *him*."

Carlisle looked back and forth between Aro and Amun, torn, but he finally nodded his acquiescence. "You're right. I'm sorry. Aro, you're welcome here, but I have to ask you to respect Amun's privacy."

"Welcome?" he spat incredulously. "With the coven who sent a newborn to destroy everything I've built?" His eyes strayed to Bella again, and Carlisle glanced back at her.

"Isabella? I assure you, Aro, she had nothing to do with the attack on Volterra. We only just heard about it." He held an arm out to her. "Come here, sweetheart."

Bella eyed Aro and shook her head, feeling exposed and vulnerable. She wanted Edward's solid presence beside her again, his arm thrown protectively over her shoulder, but he was still hovering near Aro. Carlisle might make a nice substitute, but he was so close to the source of danger . . .

"You expect me to believe that?" Aro growled. "When you've recruited a martial expert to your coven?"

Carlisle looked surprised. "You know Jasper?"

"She's not one of mine," Jasper growled, glaring coldly at Bella. "Any newborn I trained would be better behaved. Isabella, when you're told to come, you *come*."

She shuddered and hurried to Carlisle's side, letting him tuck her against his chest.

"Old friend," Carlisle said to Aro, his voice low and earnest, "Eleazar and I have been so worried about you. I can't tell you how relieved I am to know you're alive."

His words had a clear effect on Aro. The shorter man straightened and brushed dirt from his coat.

"Come back to the house with us," Carlisle continued. "I want to call Eleazar and let him know you're here, and then maybe you can tell us what happened."

Aro nodded, and for a moment Bella thought she saw an eager gleam in his eye. It disappeared quickly, however, and he allowed Carlisle to lead him back toward the house.

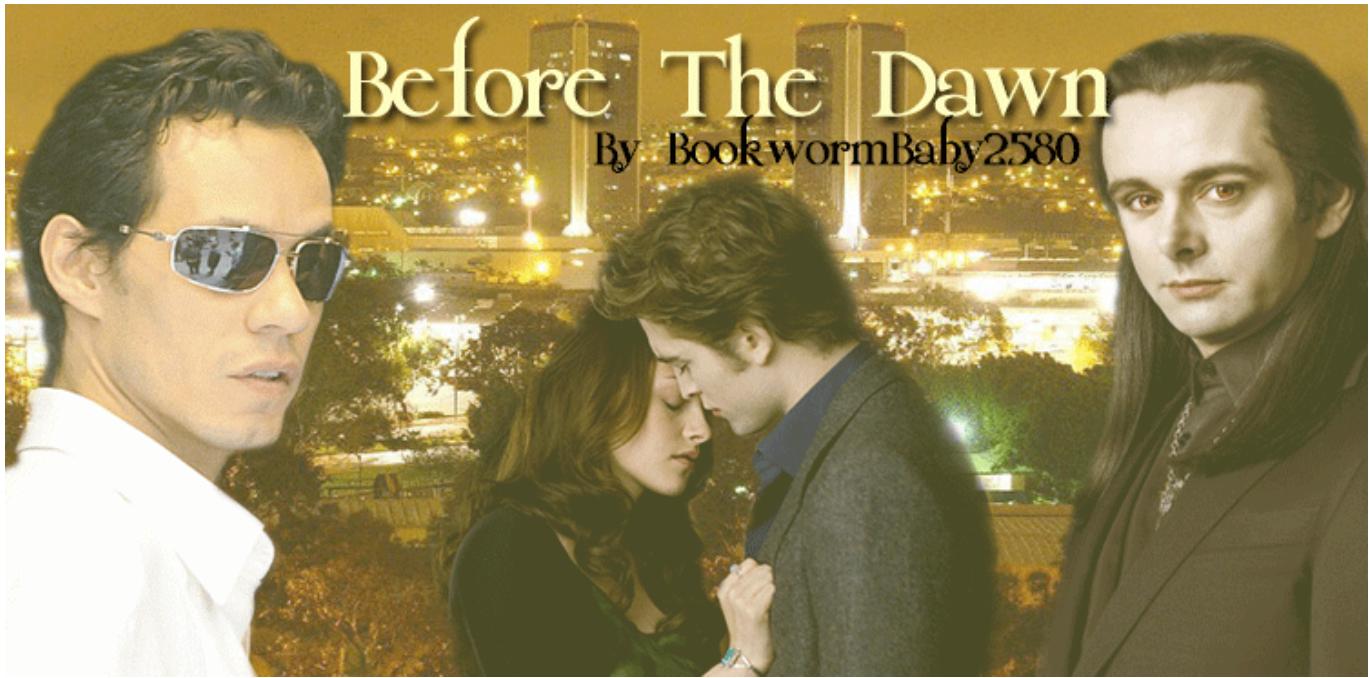
Edward and Jasper moved to Bella's side as the rest of the group followed Carlisle, but Jasper grabbed Bella's elbow and held them back. When there was a fair distance between them and the rest of the group, he leaned close and whispered, "I think that was enough of a demonstration, don't you?"

She gasped and turned her startled gaze on him.

He winked. "I hope you'll forgive me for changing things without any warning."

She smiled at him and nodded, relieved that he wasn't really angry with her. But she still sidled closer to Edward to put some extra distance between herself and Jasper.

Allegiances



Before The Dawn

By BookwormBaby2580

Bella's bedroom was perfect. The warm colors felt friendly and familiar, and the little potted cactuses added just enough of a homey feel. The bed that she now sat on was large and soft, with an ornate wooden headboard and soft, expensive linens. Alice had even moved many of the books from the library onto the shelves that had once held Edward's music, and the musty smell of the ink and paper lent its own soothing familiarity.

But Bella couldn't be soothed. She was trying her hardest to be patient—to wait for Jasper to call Peter, to wait for Peter to dig up information—but Carlisle's visitors had brought everything to a screeching halt. She understood that these men were important. That Aro had once led the entire vampire world, and that the question of whether he would continue in the role or be replaced weighed heavily on Carlisle's mind. She knew that it would even have a direct bearing on her life.

But she couldn't bring herself to care. All she could focus on was her son, and his continued absence. Again and again, she revisited the memory of holding the tiny, warm body in her arms, and she berated herself mercilessly for rejecting him, for not seeing how precious he was. How could she ever have run from him? How had she imagined she could live without him?

She heard Jasper's habitually quiet footfalls in the hallway, followed by a soft tap on her door.

"Come in," she mumbled.

He pushed the door open and entered, his brows pulled together in a frown of concentration. He moved inside and stopped at the foot of her bed, fixing her with an intense gaze.

"Who were you thinking about?"

She looked away from him, letting her eyes stray to the glass wall of the room as she whispered, "Alexander."

Jasper sighed, a disappointed sound, Bella thought. But then, she should be used to disappointing him by now. Somehow she always failed to measure up to expectations. His, and everyone else's.

It was no wonder she had abandoned her child. That was just the kind of person she was.

"They're ready," Jasper said. "Will you come down?"

She nodded and slipped off the bed, following him downstairs.

Carlisle had insisted on seeing to some of Aro's physical needs before allowing anyone to ask questions. He had been given time for a shower, and Bella felt a twinge of gratitude toward Carlisle when she remembered how wonderful it had felt when he had afforded her the same privilege.

Aro had been provided with a set of clean clothes to change into as well, taken from Carlisle's own closet. Alice had done a quick hem job on the pants, but the seams of the Oxford shirt drooped off of Aro's shoulders. Bella idly pondered the fact that she, Peter, and Charlotte had all been given clothes that had been pre-ordered by Alice. She wondered why the same hadn't been done for Aro or Amun's coven.

Her musings were cut short, however, when she reached the bottom of the stairs. Aro had been heading toward the living room with Carlisle, but he suddenly spun and darted toward Bella, grabbing her arm with one leather-gloved hand and jerking her close to him. His eyes were fierce, startling, and Bella threw up an arm and tried to dodge away as he went for her throat.

But he didn't bite. Jasper snarled behind her and Carlisle rushed to her side, but Aro only leaned in and inhaled deeply.

"Aro, please." Carlisle gripped his wrist, pulling his hand off of Bella's arm. "Isabella is sensitive to the invasion of her personal space."

Aro looked vaguely displeased, but he allowed Carlisle to ease him away from Bella.

"Satisfied?" Jasper asked.

Aro straightened and gave him a curt nod. "I had to be sure. You understand, of course."

"Perfectly. But the sooner you get it out of your head that Carlisle had anything to do with the murder of his friends, the sooner we can figure out what actually happened."

"Of course," Aro replied stiffly.

"Isabella, go in and sit down."

Bella followed Jasper's instructions, heading directly for the corner near the hearth and curling up in a ball. Edward joined her and leaned against the wall beside her, once again placing himself between her and the rest of the vampires gathering in the newly-redesigned living room. Attention drifted away from her as everyone found places to sit on the white plush furniture or the white carpet that now covered the floors. Aro sat beside Carlisle and Esme on the couch, and Amun took a chair across from them with Kebi kneeling at his feet. Once everyone was settled, all eyes turned to Aro.

"Did you get through to Eleazar?" Aro asked Carlisle.

"I got his voice mail, but I left him a message."

Aro nodded. He stared into space for a few moments, his milky eyes fixed on something only he could see.

"We heard it was a newborn," Carlisle said, prompting Aro to begin.

His lips pulled back, baring glistening teeth. "Who told you that?"

"I think he'd prefer it if I didn't say," Carlisle answered with a wry smile.

"Alistair." Aro sniffed disdainfully. "That surprises me. I would have expected him to find some crevice to wedge himself into until things settle down."

"I expect he probably did, after he passed the news on to me."

"Why are you so quick to dismiss your suspicions about Alistair?" Amun asked.

"You'd have to have met him," Carlisle replied. "I've never known anyone less likely to stage a coup."

"Yet he knew all about the attack . . ."

"Alistair is practiced in the ancient arts. He uses them to gather information and ward himself against danger, but he doesn't have the nerve to go on the offensive."

"No," Aro agreed, "it's doubtful that Alistair was behind it. But I *will* find out who was."

"Jasper has a theory."

Aro turned to Jasper, his eyebrows raised.

"It's a long shot," Jasper said. He had picked up a wooden-handled hunting knife somewhere and was fidgeting with it absently. "Why don't you tell us what happened? I can't have any kind of real theory until I know the details."

Aro sat back and stared into the empty fireplace. "Heidi caught the scent . . . followed it . . . found a trail of bodies. She traced it and managed to catch sight of a little brunette as she ran out of the city, but she didn't follow. She came back to me and reported what she had seen."

"And you decided to send Chelsea to take care of it?" Carlisle guessed.

Aro nodded. "She and Afton had been in Switzerland during the last feeding. They needed to hunt anyway, so they said they would take care of it while they were out. I never imagined . . ."

"Why did you think it was a newborn?" Jasper asked.

"Heidi caught a glimpse of her eyes—just very briefly, but it was enough. They were too bright to be anything but a newborn's."

Amun gave Aro a malicious smile. "And what makes you think Chelsea is really dead? Perhaps she just got sick of you."

Aro leapt to his feet, snarling, and Amun did the same, but Carlisle cleared his throat pointedly.

They both backed down and returned to their seats, but Aro couldn't let Amun's attack go unanswered.

"My coven members don't abandon their responsibilities," he spat. "Though I understand how that could be hard for you to comprehend. Have you ever managed to keep your followers loyal for more than a handful of years?"

"My protégés," Amun said through clenched teeth, "when left to their own devices, were perfectly loyal. It was only when you used that harpy of yours to seduce them away—"

"Don't you *dare* speak ill of Chelsea—"

"Gentlemen," Carlisle interrupted, a note of warning in his voice. "If you must continue this, please take it outside." He took Esme's hand. "My wife just replaced the flooring."

They both relented, though Bella thought it looked like it took tremendous effort on both their parts.

"My apologies, Carlisle," Aro said. "I'm not used to such ill-mannered behavior."

Carlisle put up a hand, and Amun's retort died on his tongue.

"Please, Aro, continue."

The anger drained out of his face, and Bella thought the drawn look that replaced it made him seem much older.

"We all felt it when she died," he whispered. "It was like all of the warmth left us. My coven, my friends . . . suddenly they felt like . . . threats. My own Renata—" His voice caught and he swallowed hard. "Renata turned on me. She attacked me."

Amun smirked. "That's your reward for manipulating your coven into staying with you."

"Amun, please," Carlisle said, his voice firm.

Amun fell silent, but he didn't bother trying to hide the smug satisfaction on his face.

Carlisle turned back to Aro. "Renata? Is she dead?"

He nodded, his dark eyes looking empty. "I killed her. And others."

"Marcus and Caius?"

"Marcus . . ." he shook his head. "I don't know. But Caius is dead. Jane tried to protect him, but . . ." He lowered his head, and Bella thought she saw his shoulders shake.

"And . . ." Carlisle hesitated. "Sulpicia?"

Aro stiffened, his head coming up sharply. "My mate is not your concern!"

"Of course not. I don't mean to interfere. I was only worried about her."

Aro stared at him for a long moment before relaxing again. "You always were rather fond of her."

Carlisle nodded.

"She's safe," he said coolly. "That's all you need to know."

"Thank God."

"Tell me," Amun said conversationally, his smirk belying his polite tone, "how are Ann and Demetri?"

"Ann is dead," Aro snapped. "And Demetri turned tail and ran the moment we felt the loss of Chelsea's influence."

"Oh, dear. So much for loyalty."

"Amun," Carlisle said in another gentle reproof, "my friend has experienced a devastating loss. If you cannot be sensitive to that, I'll have to ask you to leave."

"Fine." Amun rose, and Kebi quickly climbed to her feet. "We need to hunt anyway. Benjamin?"

"You go," Benjamin said. He was sitting on the floor with his back against the arm of the couch beside Esme, his mate curled up beside him. "I want to hear the rest."

Amun looked indecisive for a moment, but eventually he sat down again. Kebi resettled at his feet.

"You don't have to stay just because we do," Tia told him. "Go. Benjamin and I can hunt another time."

Amun shot her a baleful glare. "We'll go together."

"Mind if I play devil's advocate for a minute?" Jasper asked Aro, ignoring Amun and his coven.

Aro turned to him.

He fingered the blade of his knife. "Suppose Chelsea isn't dead."

"I know she is," Aro said. "I felt it."

"You felt the loss of your bond to your coven. But Chelsea created that bond, correct?"

Aro nodded.

"Which means she had the power to destroy it."

"But why would she? She knew what her gift meant to us."

Jasper flipped the hunting knife into the air and caught it, tossing it up and down almost thoughtfully as he spoke. "Here's the tricky thing about emotions. When you feel one of them strongly toward another person, you start to assume that the other person feels the same way about you. With the same intensity." He caught the knife and held it, turning his gaze on Aro. "The trouble is, that's not often the case. You wanted Chelsea in your coven, but did she want the same? It's hard to say."

"How *dare* you insinuate—"

Jasper sent the knife spinning through the air right at Aro, interrupting his angry response. Aro snatched it out of the air an inch or two in front of his face, baring his teeth at Jasper.

"Devil's advocate, remember?" Jasper said. "A wise man considers the situation from every angle."

Aro frowned distastefully at the knife and threw it back to Jasper. "Go on."

"Maybe Chelsea got tired of Italy. Maybe someone offended her. Maybe, for any of a handful of possible reasons, she decided she wanted to leave the Volturi."

"Hard to imagine," Aro said. "She was a member of the most powerful coven in the world. Why would anyone want to leave that?"

Jasper's mouth quirked up at the corners. "It's happened once or twice before."

Aro grunted.

"So, suppose Chelsea just wanted out. We all know it wouldn't be as simple for her as it was for Carlisle and Eleazar. She was the glue holding your coven together. You would have done whatever it took to keep her."

"Why, Jasper." Aro gave him a cold smile. "You make me sound like a tyrant."

"Order isn't tyranny."

The two of them locked gazes for a long time, and Aro finally nodded.

"So you would have done what you could to keep Chelsea from leaving—at the very least, until you could find a replacement. And Chelsea would have known that. She couldn't run, not when you had someone like Demetri to track her down. The only choice would be for her to fake her death."

"You're suggesting that Chelsea created the newborn and sent her into Volterra?"

"Or simply took the opportunity when it presented itself."

Aro hissed. "This is your theory? That Chelsea let her entire coven be destroyed because she was bored with us?"

"It's one of them." Jasper was flipping his knife into the air again, catching it before it could fall to the plush carpet beneath him.

"Would you care to share the others?"

Jasper told him briefly about his suspicions that Maria might be behind it. "And, of course, it's possible that it was just an unruly newborn who got the best of your girl."

"Chelsea and Afton were both experienced fighters," Aro said, looking affronted. "They knew how to handle a newborn."

"So do I, but newborns have a way of breaking through even the best defenses." Jasper gestured to the scars that marred his face and neck. "That's why we used them."

Aro's face twisted into a sour look. "That seems far more likely than the possibility that she abandoned us, at any rate."

"Maybe." Jasper shrugged, looking unconcerned, but Bella could see tension in the lines around his eyes.

"I suppose it's not really surprising that there are so many possibilities," Amun said with thinly veiled malice. "You boys managed to make an impressive collection of enemies. For all we know, it could have been one of Caius's werewolves with an old grudge."

"Speaking of werewolves," Carlisle said before Aro and Amun could start in on each other again, "I have some interesting news. How long has it been since either of you encountered a shifter?"

Aro's eyebrows shot up. "It's been since . . . since China, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

Edward caught Bella's hand as Carlisle started telling Aro and Amun about the Quileutes. "Do you want to get some air?" he whispered.

She nodded eagerly, letting him pull her to her feet.

"I could use a breather as well," Jasper muttered, tossing his knife aside. "Mind if I tag along?"

"Not at all."

Bella's immediate reaction was resentment. It drove her crazy that Jasper was *always* around, insinuating himself into every minute of her day. But then again, she *was* asking for his help. Maybe he would take the opportunity on this walk to call Peter. She gave him a shy smile, and he returned it with a nod.

The three of them headed out the door and started a brisk jog through the trees. Their course was meandering and seemingly directionless, but when they had gotten far enough from the house that they could no longer hear the conversation inside, Jasper and Edward slowed to a walk.

"Well?" Jasper said, looking at Edward over Bella's head.

"We got it wrong," Edward said. "We thought they were here to court Carlisle's favor."

"They're not?"

"It never even occurred to me how valuable Eleazar would be to them right now."

Jasper cursed under his breath. "Of course he is. How did I not see that coming?" He frowned, his hand running absently through his hair. "So why did they come here? Do they think they can use Carlisle as some kind of leverage to gain his favor?"

"Well . . . yes. But both Amun and Aro went to Alaska first. Amun must have arrived when they were in New York, because he found the cabin empty. Aro picked up Amun's scent when he got there and decided to track him and see what he was up to."

Jasper blew out a heavy breath. "We need to let him know what he's up against. Alice, baby, I need a cell phone."

Bella glanced around, puzzled. She hadn't heard Alice anywhere nearby. It wasn't until Jasper and Edward stopped and cast expectant glances back toward the house that she understood what they were doing.

"Wait . . . if Alice saw you asking for that, why wouldn't she have told you to take a phone before we left?"

"I didn't know I was going to ask for it then. She can only see the future once we've decided it."

"So she wouldn't see you saying you wanted a phone until you actually did?"

"A moment or two before, yeah." Jasper grinned at her. "It doesn't always work. She has to be paying attention."

"It doesn't always work for *us*," Edward amended. "She's always paying attention to Jasper."

He smirked and gave a little shrug.

The three of them stood in silence for a few minutes, until they heard Alice's light footfalls approaching. Jasper held out his arms and Alice leapt into them, wrapping her legs around his waist and greeting him with an enthusiastic kiss.

"You're a treasure," he murmured, smiling up into her face.

"I know." She wriggled out of his grasp and dropped to the ground, holding the phone out to him. "Make it quick. Tia's not far behind me."

"Tia?" Edward asked, and Bella felt a tiny flare of resentment at the interest in his voice. "Why is she following you?"

"How am I supposed to know? You're the mind reader. I just know she's coming."

Jasper quickly dialed a number on the cell phone and listened as the automated answering service instructed him to leave a message after the tone.

"Eleazar, it's Jasper. I expect you've gotten Carlisle's message, but you should think twice about coming back right away. Amun and Aro are both looking to get the better of each other, and they figure you're the guy to help them with that."

"I can hear Tia's thoughts," Edward murmured.

Jasper continued. "It might not be such a bad idea for you to be hard to find for a little while. But . ." He glanced up at the sound of a snapping twig. "Do call us back as soon as you can. We get a little worried when we can't reach you."

He clicked the phone shut and tucked it away, and the four of them all turned toward the sounds of the girl approaching them through the trees. When she came into sight, she flashed them all a bright grin.

"So," she said, "can I assume you all came out here to gossip about my coven?"

Jasper arched an eyebrow. "Is that what you call a coven?"

"What would you call it?"

"I don't know. A den of vipers?"

Bella gasped at the blatant insult but Tia laughed brightly. "That's right, you're the empath. That tells you quite a lot about us, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, you guys are a real treat. Tell me again why you stay together?"

"Because of Benjamin," Edward answered for her.

She nodded. "My Benjamin is too pure-hearted for his own good. He doesn't see how Amun uses him, or how jealous Kebi is of every minute he spends with Amun. But I see it, and they know I do. They hate me for it."

Alice gave a low whistle.

"What does Amun use Benjamin for?" Jasper asked.

"Haven't you told him, mind reader?" Tia wandered over to a nearby fern and ran her fingers lightly over the leaves. "Everyone loves my Benjamin. Even Mother Earth. She dances for him."

Jasper's eyes narrowed. "What does that mean?"

"He can move the earth," Edward said, his brow furrowed in concentration. "And . . . that cyclone . . . was that wind or water?"

"I'm not sure which one you saw," Tia said with an enigmatic smile, "but he can bid them both to his service."

Jasper let out a low hiss.

"And don't forget fire." Tia flashed him a bright smile. "Fire is always willing to play with him as well."

"*Holy mother . . .*" Jasper breathed.

Edward was shaking his head. "It's no wonder Amun doesn't want us to know."

"What do you want?" Jasper asked Tia.

She raised her eyebrows in an expression that was as reproachful as it was querying. "What do you mean?"

"You showed us your hand for a reason. You want something."

"I want to be rid of something."

Jasper fixed her with a steely gaze. "It's Kebi. She's trouble, isn't she?"

"Kebi?" Tia laughed a trilling little laugh. "Kebi has never had an original thought in her life. She's nothing more than a dim little wart."

Jasper glanced at Edward, who nodded.

"Then what's the problem? It's not like Amun is any kind of a threat."

Her smile fell for the first time. "Benjamin cares for him. All this time he has really believed that Amun was trying to keep him safe from Aro. I know Amun only meant to keep him for himself, but Benjamin thinks I'm paranoid." She locked eyes with Jasper and then with Edward. "But I'm not, am I?"

They exchanged glances and Jasper shook his head.

"I want freedom," she said. "I've spent two hundred years on the run, hiding in caves. I accepted it because I knew Benjamin had to be protected. But the threat is gone now, and I want a real life. I want to live in the real world."

"That's reasonable," Edward said. "But what do you want from us?"

"I thought you could help Benjamin see Amun's intentions for what they are. Nothing overt; he'll resist you if he feels like you have an agenda. But maybe you could plant a few seeds of doubt?"

"And what do we get out of it?"

"The same thing I do. You get rid of Amun. Without Benjamin, he has no chance of succeeding Aro." Her cool smile returned. "You don't want to see him in power any more than I do."

Jasper gave her a long, contemplative look, the corners of his mouth slowly pulling up. "I like her," he told Alice.

Alice grinned. "She's growing on me, too."

"We'll keep our eyes open for opportunities," Jasper told her, "but I'm not making any promises."

"Of course not. You're too slick to make promises." She winked at him and turned away. "Alice will you walk me back? I was glancing through your fashion magazines—you don't mind, do you?—and I want to have a very serious conversation about hemlines."

"Oh, they're so exciting right now!" Alice linked her arm through Tia's as they started back toward the house. "We can't talk about skirt lengths this season without talking Calvin Klein. While everything at Bryant Park was short, short, short, he released a whole collection of knee-length dresses . . ."

Jasper smiled after them. "That's going to be useful."

"For Amun," Edward agreed. "You still need to find some leverage against Aro."

"We've got him wearing gloves. That's something."

"Yeah. For now."

Jasper tossed the cell phone to Edward. "I'm heading back. Hang onto that in case Eleazar calls."

"Wait!" Bella blurted out when he started to turn away. "What about Peter?"

He turned back to her. "What about him?"

"Aren't you going to call him? So he can look for Alexander?"

Jasper's brow furrowed. "We need to have a long conversation before I can do that, and frankly, it's not a conversation I want to have in front of Carlisle's friends. The less information they have, the better."

His refusal stung like a slap to the face. "But you said . . ."

"I know what I said," he growled, but then his expression softened and he took a step toward her. "I know. I'm juggling a lot here, Isabella. Just give me a chance to arrange it."

Bella wrapped her arms around herself and looked away. She couldn't understand why he thought this could wait. Alexander was *missing*. Didn't he see the urgency in that?

"Hey." He reached out and rubbed her arm. "I'll make it a priority. I promise."

She didn't look at him, but she nodded.

"Don't stay out too long," he told Edward. "I could use your help keeping Hatfield and McCoy in line."

Edward pulled Bella against him as Jasper strode away. "Don't worry," he whispered. "I won't let him forget."

Bella let out a breath and tucked herself against Edward's chest. He was so steady, so dependable, traits that she had undervalued for too long. Charlie had been the same way—a safe, calm refuge when life with her mother had gotten too unstable for her. She had taken him for granted.

She had taken so *much* for granted.

She wouldn't this time, though. She cherished the comfort that Edward offered. She let herself feel the slow strokes of his hand rubbing over her back, let herself be soothed by the soft rise and fall of his chest beneath her ear.

But after a few minutes she realized that something had changed. Edward's comforting touch had become something different, something . . . intimate. One hand caressed her back while the other drifted up into her hair, his fingertips trailing across her scalp. She could feel his lips on the top of her head, pressing feather-light kisses to her hair, and a tremor ran through her. It felt . . . surprisingly good. She hadn't realized until this moment how much she had been craving this, how much she ached for his touch.

Edward had been her friend and ally almost from the moment she had met him, but it had never even occurred to her that he was becoming something more. Not until now, when the gentled touch of his fingers began stirring up a tempest inside of her. She let out a shuddering breath and pushed herself closer to him, tilting her head back into his hand, letting her eyes drift closed to shut out anything but the sensations he was evoking in her. She had longed for this when she had thought she was going to die. It was this intensity, this feeling of fulfillment that she had wished she'd had the chance to experience. And now she was getting it.

But she didn't deserve it.

She had left her son, abandoned him to his demon of a father, and now she didn't even know where he was. What right did she have to pleasure? What had she done to deserve fulfillment? Why should she be allowed to grow complacent here in the relative safety of Cullen territory when she was doing nothing to take care of her son?

Edward's hand slipped from her hair, moved to her cheek and cupped it. It was everything she wanted and exactly what she couldn't have. It took all of her strength, but she turned away from him and stepped out of his embrace. It was torture. Every inch she put between them felt like miles of emptiness.

"I'm sorry," Edward whispered.

She didn't answer. The lump in her throat and the chaos in her mind wouldn't let her. The two of them stood there in silence for several long minutes, until Edward finally sighed.

"Maybe Jasper is right," he said quietly. "Maybe I should go to Alaska."

"No!" Bella whirled back to him and grabbed at his shirt, panic rising inside of her. "You can't! You can't leave! I need you!"

He gazed down at her, his eyes dark with confusion and pain. "I don't know what to do when you say that," he told her, his voice begging for something Bella couldn't define. "I'm trying *so hard* to be your friend, Bella. But when you touch me . . . when you let me hold you . . ." He cradled her head in both of his hands. "I know I'm not the one you want. I know. But just once . . . please . . ." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Just once . . ."

And then his lips were on hers, gentle and tentative, and desire flooded her senses. It washed everything else away, all of her thoughts, her reservations, her very ability to reason. She slid her hands to his shoulders, clinging to him, pulling herself closer. Her lips parted and she tasted him, invited him in, forgetting everything except for his flavor, his hands in her hair, his solid strength bracing her up.

But too soon he was pulling away. She tried to follow him, but he stopped her with a hand on her shoulder, pushing her back.

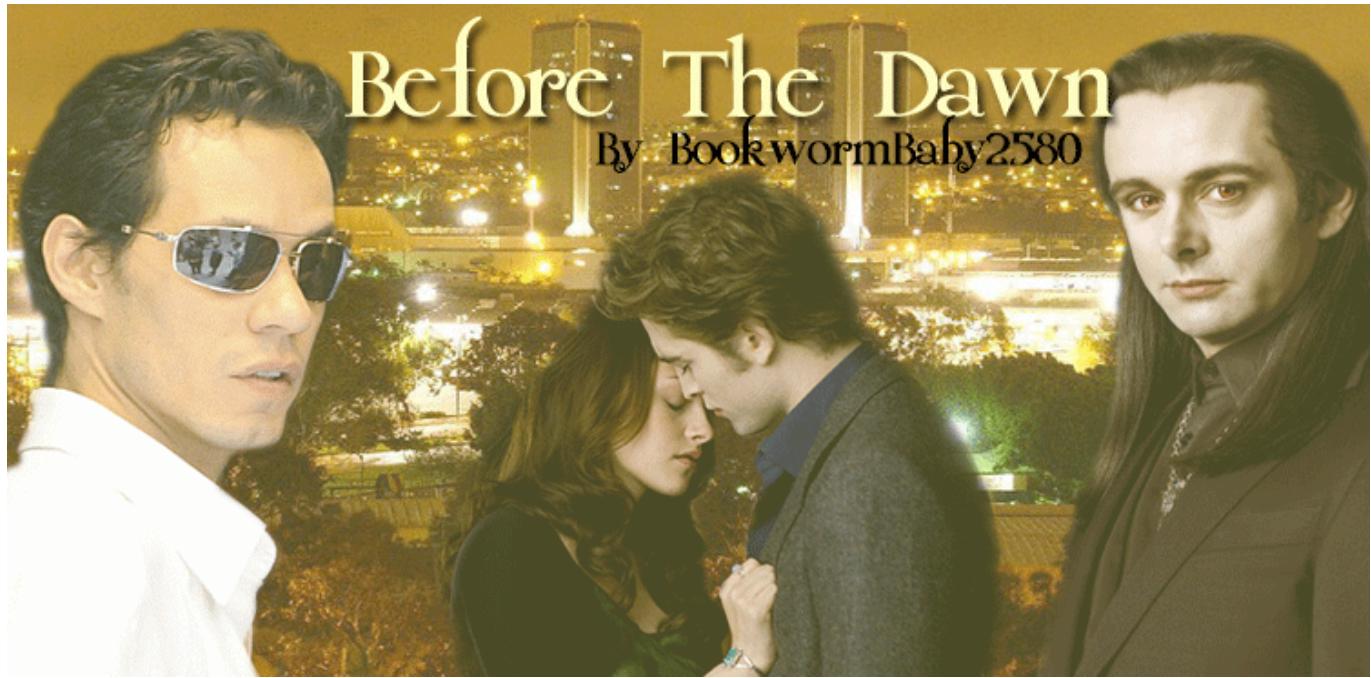
"I'm sorry," he whispered, his eyes not meeting hers. "I'm so sorry."

And then he ran, darting off into the trees and leaving her alone in the woods, confused and overwhelmed. She sank to her knees, her hands gripping fistfuls of soil and needles, but all she could feel was Edward's essence, all around her, inside of her, racing in tingling waves up and down her limbs.

Edward had kissed her, and then he had run away from her. She didn't have the first idea what any of it meant, but she knew that it was dangerous. For just a moment, he had made her forget Alexander.

She couldn't ever let that happen again.

Lay It Down



The eastern sky was lightening when Bella finally headed home. The hours spent alone in the cool of the night had helped steady her a little bit, but little tremors still ran through her limbs at irregular intervals. Edward had kissed her. He had kissed her, and something had shaken loose inside of her. She was *different* somehow, fundamentally altered by the few moments she had spent in his arms.

It scared her. She wished she could lock it back up again. She needed focus now. She needed to get her son back.

Bella found a casual gathering behind the house when she returned. Three Adirondack chairs had been set up in the grass, and Carlisle, Aro, and Amun each sat in one. Esme was curled up in Carlisle's lap and Kebi knelt at Amun's feet.

"There you are, sweetheart," Esme said with a warm smile. "Did you enjoy your walk?"

Bella nodded automatically. It was a little bizarre to her that she could be out for hours and still have it referred to as a "walk."

"Where's Edward? Didn't he come back with you?"

"I'll go find him!"

Alice came bursting out of the house and darted past them in a blur of energy. She disappeared into the trees as Jasper stepped out after her. He moved up behind Carlisle's chair and leaned down to whisper in his ear.

Carlisle frowned and pulled back to give him a stern look. "Jasper, I don't want you pushing her."

"She's ready."

He hesitated, eyeing Bella, but eventually he nodded. "All right. Aro, Amun, I can see that you could both do with a feeding, and obviously you'll have to travel a little ways to do it. Would you mind taking care of that today so that I can address a private matter with my coven?"

"Hiding things, are we?" Amun asked with an arched eyebrow. "That's not like you, Carlisle."

He shook his head, his imperturbable smile in place. "It's not about secrets. Isabella is shy. She has some personal business she wants to discuss, and I'm afraid it will only make it more difficult on her to have guests present."

Aro's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Perhaps we should wait for this evening. It's less conspicuous that way."

"There's a reason we settled here," Jasper said with a wry smile. "If you keep north, you'll have cloud cover for the rest of the day."

"You're welcome to any of the cars in the garage," Carlisle added. "The keys are hanging just inside the front door."

Bella could see that both Aro and Amun were reluctant to leave, but she couldn't tell if it was because they didn't trust Carlisle or because they didn't trust each other.

Amun cocked his head in challenge. "You're really asking us to hunt in broad daylight?"

"If it makes you uncomfortable, perhaps we should leave," Carlisle said, nudging Esme off of his lap and standing up. "I'm sure it won't be too difficult to find a private place to talk."

"That's completely unnecessary."

It was Benjamin who had spoken. He was descending the stairs inside the house, Tia's hand in his, and the two of them headed out the back door. "We're happy to give you all the space you need, right Amun? After all, we did drop in unannounced. That's not the human way."

"Our host isn't human," Amun reminded him tersely.

"But he embraces their customs." He gave Carlisle a bright smile. "I hesitate to press your hospitality, but I can't help asking . . . the Vanquish?"

Carlisle laughed. "You're welcome to it, but I should warn you: if it comes back with so much as a nick in the paint, Edward will tear your limbs off."

"I'll be very careful, I promise."

"Amun, I doubt you'll want to squeeze into the back seat. You're welcome to take another car. I'm somewhat partial to the Mercedes, myself, particularly if the sun worries you. That one and Esme's SUV have the darkest window tinting."

Bella heard Alice and Edward jogging back to them through the forest, but she didn't turn. Alice stopped when she reached Bella's side, but Edward stayed several yards behind them. Bella wasn't exactly sure where things stood between them, but it hurt a little that he didn't stand beside her. He *always* stood beside her. She wondered if he regretted kissing her, and she peeked back at him to see if he was looking at her.

He wasn't. His eyes were fixed on Carlisle, his expression devoid of emotion.

Carlisle helped his guests figure out their transportation, and then he and Esme stood beside the garage and waved as three cars drove off. Everyone waited, listening as the sounds of the engines died away in the distance. Once they were out of earshot, Jasper headed toward the house.

"Come here, kid," he said, beckoning Bella forward. "This conversation has been a long time in coming. Let's get it done."

Bella hurried after him, intensely grateful for his intervention on her behalf. She followed him across the living room, but shot him a confused glance when he pointed to the corner near the hearth where she liked to curl up.

"Have a seat," he said.

She didn't argue. He was helping, after all. But she was even more confused when he dragged the coffee table over and pushed it in front of her, angling it across the corner so it blocked her from the rest of the room.

"How does that feel?" he asked. "Comfortable or confining?"

It was an odd question, but she actually did feel a little more comfortable. She liked the closeness of the space, the feeling of protection that it offered, however false.

"I like it."

"I figured. Edward, come here."

The rest of the family had followed them into the house, and Jasper started positioning them in specific places. Edward was directed to stand next to the wall beside the coffee table. Esme was guided to a chair couple of yards beyond him with Rosalie perched on the arm. Carlisle and Emmett were farther still, both seated on the couch, and when he was finished with his careful arrangements, Jasper settled on the floor across the room from Bella and pulled Alice into his lap.

Bella knew exactly what he was doing. He was arranging things to make her feel less threatened. She couldn't decide whether it was manipulative or just very, very thoughtful.

"All right, go ahead. Tell us anything that might help us track down these friends of yours."

"Um . . . well . . . Joham has dark hair and he wears it in a ponytail—"

"Yeah, we have your drawings," Jasper interrupted. "I'm talking about habits or affinities. Are they nomads? Do they have regular circuit?"

Bella hunched down in her corner and drew her knees up to her chest. "I don't know."

Jasper opened his mouth to speak again, but Carlisle held up a hand. "Let's start with Alexander," he said to Bella. "Why don't you tell us how you met him?"

Edward suddenly stiffened and Alice clapped a hand over her mouth. Carlisle shot them both a frown before turning his warm gaze on Bella again.

"Go ahead, sweetheart."

She drew in a shaky breath. "Alexander is my son."

Esme gasped and Carlisle was immediately on his feet, moving to her side to take her hand.

"Isabella, I never imagined . . ." he breathed, his eyes wide. "You're so young . . ." He trailed off and shook his head. "I'm sorry. You say you last saw him in Mexico? Did you take him with you to your mother's wedding?"

Bella frowned, perplexed. "No."

"Does he live there with his father? Or was he adopted by someone there? Is that why your mother chose to be married in Mexico?"

"No . . . he wasn't born yet."

"You were pregnant with him at your mother's wedding, then?"

Bella folded her arms on her knees and buried her face in them. Nothing was coming out right.

She heard Emmett laugh quietly. "This is going nowhere fast. Sit down, Doc. Let her tell her story."

"Of course. I'm sorry, Isabella."

She peeked up as he settled on the couch again, and took another deep breath. Alice turned and buried her head into Jasper's shoulder, and that alone nearly made her lose her nerve. She looked away from her, staring past her into the trees beyond the glass wall, and with halting, fumbling words she began telling them about her stop at the bar in Tijuana. She described her meeting with Joham, trembling as she related the details about the kidnaping and did her best to convey, without really saying the words, the treatment she'd had to endure from him.

By then she had stopped staring and had buried her head in her arms again. In muffled tones she described Serena, Yesenia and the other girls, and the horrific birth of her son. And then, her throat tight with shame and regret, she told them how she had run away and left Alexander with Joham.

When she stopped talking, the room fell silent. For several long moments, no one spoke. Bella raised her head just enough to peek out at them, and caught sight of Edward. He was staring straight ahead, his jaw flexed and rigid. She couldn't read his expression but there was something in his eyes that made her breath falter.

Rosalie and Esme were clutching one another tightly, their heads bowed close together. Emmett had moved to stand behind them, a hand on each of their shoulders. Carlisle's gaze moved between them and Bella, concern and pity showing in his eyes.

Alice was still huddled against Jasper, hiding her face, while he slowly stroked her hair and stared at Bella.

Carlisle was the first to speak. He cleared his throat uncomfortably and stood up from the couch. He wavered for a moment in indecision, then moved to the coffee table and sat down in front of Bella.

"Sweetheart . . ." He reached out and took her hand, pressing it between his, and cleared his throat again. "Isabella . . . trauma can affect our memories in . . . unexpected ways."

That wasn't the reaction she had prepared herself for. She looked up at him in confusion as he continued, obviously ill at ease.

"During very painful moments in our lives, our memories can become repressed or even altered. A dream or a speculation about the future can get recorded by the hippocampus as though it actually happened."

"What do you mean?"

"You may have . . . misremembered certain events."

"Misremembered?"

"Sweetheart . . ." He pressed her hand between his. "Vampires . . . can't have children."

She gaped at him, and then eyed the rest of the family, who were all watching her tentatively—except for Edward, who was still staring straight ahead.

"You don't believe me?"

"I'm sure the memories seem very real to you, but what you're describing is physically impossible. The vampire species is propagated through venom, not through sexual reproduction."

She jerked her hand away. "You think I *made up* my son?"

"Of course not—"

"He's not a figment of my imagination!" Bella pushed herself to her feet, her hands balling into fists.

Carlisle rose as well. "I'm not accusing you of making anything up. I know it must seem like you've lost someone very dear to you."

He reached out to brush her cheek and she reacted without thinking. She bit him, sinking her teeth deep into the hard flesh of his hand before jerking back and pressing herself into the corner. She clapped both hands over her mouth in horror, shocked by what she had done.

In less than a second, Jasper had pushed Alice off of his lap and leapt to his feet. He darted up behind Carlisle, but the coven leader raised his uninjured hand to stop him.

"Let her be, Jasper. It's my fault."

"I know it's your fault. If you'd stayed where I put you it wouldn't have happened." He took Carlisle's elbow and steered him back to the couch, though he didn't insist that Emmett return there. He moved to Esme's side and touched her hair briefly, then returned to his place on the floor next to Alice.

"What if it were possible?" Edward asked. His voice was quiet, barely more than a whisper, and he was still staring straight ahead.

"Edward—"

"What if it's some kind of talent?" he interrupted, louder this time. "What if this man, this Joham, had an extra ability?"

"Talents tend to be enhancements of the mind. They're not usually so physical."

"Benjamin's is."

Carlisle raised his eyebrows. "Benjamin?"

"He can control the elements," Jasper supplied.

"He *what*?"

"If he can do that," Edward said, still staring pointedly in front of him, "why couldn't there be someone who could . . . have a child?"

Bella heard Carlisle sigh, though her gaze didn't stray from Edward.

"Son—"

"Don't tell me you know because you're a doctor, or because you haven't seen it before. We learn new things all the time."

"There's no physiological basis. Sperm can't survive in venom."

"But what if—"

"Edward." Carlisle stood again and moved to his son's side, gripping his shoulder. "Isabella has only been missing for two months. Even if it were possible, there simply wasn't time."

Edward finally dropped his gaze, his shoulders slumping.

"No!" Bella gasped. "Edward!" He had to believe her. If he didn't, nobody would. "I *know* what happened! I'm not confused!"

Edward nudged the coffee table out of the way with his toe and moved to Bella's side. He leaned over her, and Bella's skin tingled at the nearness of his body. She had to fight the urge to press herself against him.

"You said the baby bit you," he murmured, uncertainty lacing his tone. "But he was just a newborn, wasn't he?"

"He had teeth." It sounded lame even to her own ears, and she stared down at her toes, trying to avoid seeing the skepticism that she was sure would be in the gazes focused in her direction.

Edward raised a hand and ran his thumb lightly over the bite mark on her neck—the bite that had come from Joham, well before her son had been born. It wasn't until he started to turn away again that she realized that he must have assumed that was the bite that changed her.

"No!" She grabbed his hand and pulled him back to her, steeling her nerves before guiding his fingers beneath the hem of her shirt. Edward jumped in surprise and began to pull away, but she held on and pushed his hand up her ribs until his fingertips brushed the raised skin just below her left breast.

"Here," she whispered.

Edward's eyes went wide as he traced the arc of the scar. He crouched in front of her and pushed her shirt up so he could get a better look at it.

"Carlisle . . ."

Carlisle moved cautiously forward, watching Bella's reaction to make sure she didn't object to his proximity. He stopped behind Edward and eyed the bite mark intently.

Bella felt a surge of triumph—until she saw the sickened look come over his face.

"No," he whispered, his voice barely audible. "Please, God, no."

"Carlisle?" Jasper asked warily.

He swallowed hard, and Bella thought he looked paler than he usually did. "It's from a child."

Esme let out a whimper and rushed out of her chair and into Carlisle's embrace.

"Maybe it's from something else?" Rosalie suggested, her voice trembling.

But Jasper was shaking his head. "Only venom leaves a scar."

"What do we do?" Esme looked to Carlisle, frightened and pleading, though Bella wasn't sure what was bothering her so much.

Jasper cleared his throat uncomfortably. "The first thing we do is make sure we know what we're dealing with. Edward, phone."

Edward drew the cell phone out of his pocket and tossed it to Jasper. He dialed quickly, and Peter's slow drawl answered on the first ring.

"Jasper! Missed me already, did you?"

"You have no idea how much. Listen, I think I finally got in over my head."

"Imagine my surprise. What happened?"

Jasper started by telling him about Amun—about Benjamin's gift and about the tension in their coven—and then went on to describe Aro's arrival.

Peter let out a low whistle. "You realize you're basically harboring a fugitive? Aro's got to be the most wanted vampire in the world right now. There are a lot of people who'd like revenge for the things he's done."

"Yeah," Jasper muttered, "but all that just sets the scene. The real problem is what Isabella left behind in Mexico."

"I *knew* she was trouble! Is she one of Maria's?"

"No. Actually . . ." He wetted his lips nervously. "Isabella may or may not have been turned by an immortal child."

There was a long pause, and when Peter spoke again his voice was soft and cold. "May or may not have been? Friend, you're going to have to do better than that."

"I wish I could. The kid claims she was impregnated by a vampire when she was still human and had a half-breed baby. Carlisle thinks that's a little far-fetched, so he figures the trauma of whatever happened to her must have skewed her memory. But she's got a scar and it's not from an adult, so one way or another there's a kid out there with venom."

Bella turned to Edward, confused. "What's an immortal child?"

"It's a child who's been bitten and turned," he murmured. "It's illegal, and the consequences are always devastating."

"This is bad," Peter said.

Jasper grunted. "It might be. But Isabella might be right. It might not be an immortal child."

"And what if it is? Have you given any thought to what you're going to do about it? Because I guarantee you, Jasper, your coven leader doesn't have what it takes to destroy it."

Bella stiffened. "Destroy . . ."

"And don't think you can handle it yourself, either," Peter went on. "I know you, Jasper. Do you have any idea how much emotion is invested in those kids? You couldn't even eat a decent meal without getting depressed. The atmosphere surrounding the death of an immortal child would *cripple* you."

"No!" Bella clutched at Edward in desperation. "You can't kill him!"

"God *damn* it!" Peter hissed into the phone. "Your newborn is attached, isn't she?"

Jasper sighed wearily. "Yeah."

"And Edward? Is he showing the kind of interest in her that you thought he would."

Jasper shifted uncomfortably. "Yeah."

"Which means Carlisle is invested, too. *Shit!*" Peter drew in a deep breath. "Jasper, listen to me. I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm going to tell you anyway because I don't want to see you end up dead. Your hippie pacifist phase has gone on long enough. You need to get the hell away from there *right now*."

"Peter—"

"I'm sorry, Jasper, and I'm sorry to anyone else who may be listening, but that coven is *fucked*. You need to put some serious miles between you and them—for Alice's sake, if not for your own."

Alice's face was still buried in Jasper's shoulder, and he drummed his fingers lightly on her hip while he listened. When Peter stopped talking, he let the silence hang in the air for a moment.

"Are you finished?" he asked.

Peter sighed.

"I need information. We don't know where this kid is, and we need to track him down before we can be sure what we're dealing with."

"Jasper, come back." It was Charlotte who spoke this time. Her voice was softer, Bella assumed, because she wasn't speaking directly into the phone, but it was still easy enough to hear her.
"They've got you chained up like an animal there, and that's not you. The man I served under can't be . . . *domesticated*."

Bella was surprised by Jasper's tender smile.

"What are you pushing this for, short stack? You don't even like me."

"Yeah, well . . . I like Alice."

Alice giggled.

"Tell you what," Jasper said. "If this kid *does* turn out to be an immortal child, I'll talk to Alice about ducking out of here and laying low with you two for a few years. But we have to know first, so I need you to see if you can get a line on where he is."

"Fine," Peter muttered. "I assume it has a coven?"

"Yeah. The leader's name is Joham. Dark hair, wears it kind of long, might have it in a ponytail. How tall, Bella?"

"Um . . . under six feet?"

"Physical age?"

"I don't know. Around forty?"

"Last seen near Tijuana," Jasper went on. "He'll be with a woman named Serena, who Bella believes is one of his daughters. So . . . she might be half human."

"What exactly does that mean?" Peter asked.

"I could hear her heart," Bella said, "and smell her blood."

Jasper frowned, but nodded. "Physical age?"

"Twenty, maybe?" Bella guessed. "Her hair is really long, dark like Joham's, but her eyes are brown."

"Brown eyes." Jasper arched an eyebrow. "Okay."

"What about temperament?" Peter asked. "What impressions would they leave?"

Bella stepped out of Edward's embrace and moved toward Jasper, though she let him link his fingers with hers and trail after her.

"Joham is . . . polite. Soft-spoken, affectionate even . . . or he tries to seem that way. But he loses his temper easily."

"And Serena?" Peter asked.

"She's condescending. Very cold. And she gets jealous. She tries hard to be Joham's favorite, but he prefers his son. It makes Serena furious."

"Anything else?"

Bella hesitated. "Serena smells . . . strange. Human, but easy to resist. Like Alexander."

"And what does Alexander look like?"

"He's just a baby. Dark curls, brown eyes. He's so little . . ."

"All right. I'll see what I can do. Keep your eyes open, Jasper. You're camped out on a powder keg no matter which way this goes."

"Yeah. Have you heard anything more about armies being raised?"

"Not so much as a whisper."

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way."

They said their goodbyes and then Jasper tossed the phone aside and tucked Alice firmly against his body with one arm. He held the other one out to Bella, and though she wasn't sure exactly what he wanted, she took his hand. He used it to pull himself to his feet, and gave her a wink.

"I don't know, Carlisle," he said. "Isabella doesn't seem all that confused to me."

"Nor to me," Carlisle replied, his gaze turning to Bella. "For what it's worth, I would very much like to be wrong about this."

She nodded and forced herself to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry I bit you."

"I'm sorry I upset you," he replied with a chuckle. He turned to Jasper and his smile fell. "Jasper . . . I want you to know that I understand—"

"Save the speech," he interrupted. "We're not going anywhere."

Carlisle gave him a puzzled look and Jasper laughed.

"I only told him I'd talk to Alice. Baby, do you want to go nomad for a little while?"

Alice finally raised her head. "Are you kidding? That would *ruin* my Jimmy Choos!"

Carlisle smiled at her and she wriggled out of Jasper's arms and moved to give Carlisle a peck on the cheek.

"You can't get rid of us that easily, Cullen."

Edward drew everyone's attention from them when he let out a low growl and glared at Rosalie. "Don't," he hissed.

Rosalie ignored him and focused on Bella. "How could you do it?" she demanded. "How could you leave him?"

Bella winced at the lance of pain in her chest.

"Rosalie, we don't know the circumstances," Carlisle said.

"We know enough! He's just a *baby*, and she abandoned him!"

Bella didn't have an answer for her accusations. Her eyes prickled as they filled with venom, and little tremors shook her shoulders.

"She's a newborn," Jasper said firmly. "She could hardly help but react—"

"She's every bit as bad as he is!" Rosalie turned her furious gaze on Bella, hissing at her through her teeth. "You deserve everything you got from Joham. You can tell your sad, simpering story about all the cruel things he did to you, but you'll get no sympathy from me. You *deserved* it."

"Rosalie, stop it!" Emmett pulled her to her feet and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. "Think about what you're saying."

She jerked her head away. "I can't even look at her," she spat, and darted out the back door into the trees.

Edward tried to slide a comforting arm over Bella's shoulder, but she pushed him away.

"She's right," she said. "I did deserve it. This is all my fault."

"No." Emmett stalked over to her and took her by the shoulders. "You listen to me. That was a hell of a stupid stunt you pulled, stopping off in Tijuana like that. You deserve to be grounded for . . . ever. You deserve to be loaded down with extra chores and lectured until your ears bleed. If I'd done something like that when I was your age, my Pa would have taken a switch to my backside and beat me raw." He gave her shoulders a little shake. "You deserved to be punished for being stupid, but that's not what you got. What Joham did to you was torture. It was brutality, pure and simple. *Nothing* you've done could possibly justify it."

Bella hugged herself, hunching her shoulders against the guilt that weighed so heavily on her conscience. She wanted to accept Emmett's words, but she knew he was being too lenient.

"I left him," she whispered.

"You saved your own skin. There's nothing wrong with that."

"It's how you're wired," Jasper added, moving up behind her. "After the change, your instinct for self-preservation kicks into overdrive and stays there for a good long time. I've known hundreds of newborns, and I can't think of a single one that wouldn't have done exactly the same thing."

Bella shifted out of Emmett's grasp and sidled closer to Edward, turning to put Jasper in her line of sight. "I wish I hadn't. I need him."

"Believe me, I can tell. It feels . . . a lot like the mating bond, actually. And if that's the case, it's only going to get harder on you the longer you're away from him."

Bella shuddered and tucked her head against Edward's chest. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, rubbing soothing circles over her back.

"Don't worry, Bella," he murmured. "We're going to find him, I promise. We won't give up until you have him back again."

Emmett gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I'm going to go find Rosalie."

"Please," Esme said, stepping out from under Carlisle's arm, "let me."

Emmett nodded and Esme disappeared out the door.

"I imagine you could probably use some quiet time," Carlisle told Bella. "Why don't you go on up to your room?" He caught the glance she shot at Edward and smiled. "Take Edward with you, if you'd like, but spend a little time doing something to quiet your mind. If you let the stress build up it will drive you to distraction."

As soon as he said it, Bella found herself aching for the peace of her room. She threaded her fingers through Edward's once again and climbed the spiral staircase with him close behind. She pushed through the door into her bedroom and headed straight for the bed, flopping down in the center of it.

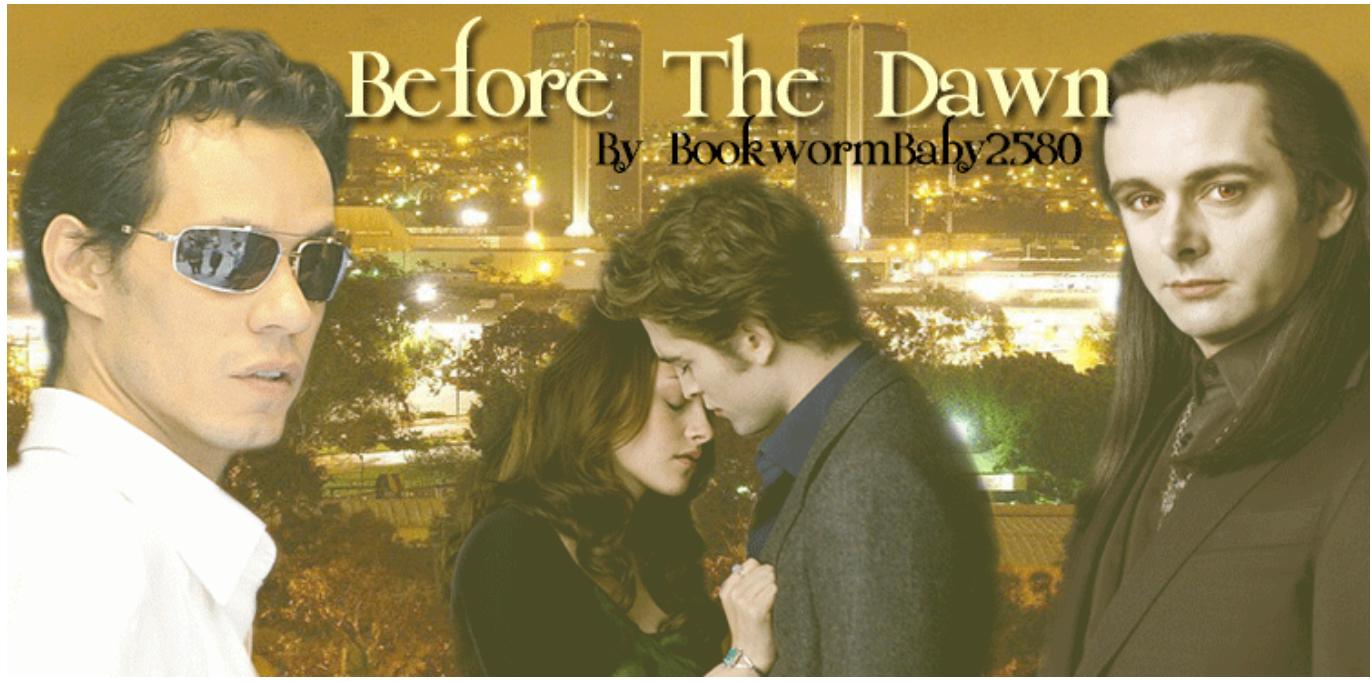
Edward closed the door behind them and seated himself at the foot of the bed. He pulled one of her bare feet into his lap and started massaging it with his long, nimble fingers.

"Do you really think we'll find him?" Bella asked, her voice muffled by the pillow.

"Yes," Edward murmured, "I do."

Bella let herself go limp against the mattress. It was such a relief to have someone she could lean on, someone with strong shoulders who could share the weight of her burden. There was still too much uncertainty, but at least now she didn't have to suffer through it alone. She focused on the sensation of Edward's hands on her toes and let out all of her anxieties in one long, heavy breath. They would still be there later, she knew, but she had done all she could for now and she finally felt like she could take a few minutes to rest.

Redrawing the Lines



Edward spent the next half hour rubbing Bella's feet while she lay on the bed. Neither one of them felt the need to speak, and it was Esme who finally interrupted the silence. She returned home and went straight up the stairs, stopping outside of Bella's bedroom and giving the door a light tap.

"Come in," Bella mumbled. She rolled over and scooted back against the headboard as Esme let herself in.

She smiled at Edward. "Would you excuse us for a few minutes?"

Edward nodded and gave Bella's toes an affectionate squeeze before stepping out and pulling the door closed behind him.

Esme eased herself down on the side of the bed next to Bella and reached out to pat her knee. "Does this bother you?"

Bella shook her head and Esme scooted up next to her. She wrapped an arm around Bella's shoulders, and Bella let herself be pulled into a warm embrace.

"I don't know what to say about everything that's happened to you, sweetheart. I don't think any of us do." Her voice fell to a whisper. "It must have been so awful for you."

Bella tucked her head against Esme's shoulder, and Esme responded by pulling Bella into her lap.

"I want you to know that what Rosalie said was about her and not about you. She has her own difficulties to face, and she has a tendency to lash out when she's reminded of them."

"She's right, though."

"No, darling, I don't think she is. If you had remained where you were, you would only have been mistreated further."

"I could have done something. I'm stronger now. I could have . . ." Bella trailed off, imagining some of the vicious things she would like to have done, but Esme was shaking her head.

"I'm not sure you could have. Psychologically speaking, you were still locked up in Joham's cage. It would have been very difficult for you to defy him, no matter how much you wanted to. I think leaving was the only way to break out of that."

Bella shuddered as she remembered the desperation behind her flight from Joham. She wished she hadn't run, but she couldn't imagine what kind of strength it would have taken to stay.

"You're safe now," Esme murmured, rocking gently back and forth. "We're going to take good care of you, and we're going to do everything we can to help you find your son. Remember, you could never have come and found help if you had stayed behind."

"Do you believe me?" Bella asked.

Esme hesitated a moment before she answered. "I believe it's possible that one or two details became confused. But it certainly sounds like something happened that we've never seen before."

"I didn't imagine him."

"No, darling." Esme stroked her hair soothingly. "I don't think you could possibly have imagined him."

Bella heard Alice gasp downstairs. "Oh! Jasper, will you run an errand with me? We're taking your car, Edward."

Her light footsteps told Bella that she had headed out of the house before waiting for an answer from either of them, but Jasper followed obligingly after her. A moment later the engine of the Volvo flared to life and then faded into the distance.

"What's going on?" Bella asked Esme.

She gave a little shrug. "Alice always has information that we don't. She comes off a little strange at first, but you'll get used to her."

"Does she ever tell you what she's doing?"

"Sometimes, but telling us things in advance can create adverse effects. For instance, she didn't tell the boys you were coming because it would have made you more uncomfortable if they had acted like they were expecting you. But she told Rosalie and me, so that we would agree to cut our trip short."

Bella let her head roll back, and opened her eyes, getting an up-close view of the porcelain skin of Esme's neck, marred by the perfect, even impression of teeth. It didn't look anything like the bite on Bella's neck. It was neat and clean, with no tearing around the punctures.

"Edward said Carlisle changed you," Bella said. She hadn't necessarily meant to blurt out what she was thinking, but her body sometimes acted before she realized it was. Like when she had attacked Emmett or bitten Carlisle. Her rational mind would never have allowed it, but lately she seemed beyond the control of her rational mind, and it frightened her.

"That's right," Esme answered. "He did."

"You were dying."

"Yes."

Bella slid a hand up beneath the hem of her shirt and fingered the tiny crescent in her own skin. It was neat and perfect, no tearing. Just like Esme's.

"Did Edward tell you about how I came to be a part of the family?"

"A little," Bella mumbled. "He said you fell."

"I jumped."

Bella stared at her scar and remembered Yesenia's face darkening to a sickening shade as she escaped Joham in the only way she knew how.

"Life was different for women back then," Esme said, as though she were remembering aloud, and Bella's presence was only incidental. "We were fighting to be recognized as more than property or children, and we were having some success. But a woman was still expected to be married and submit to her husband, and I'm afraid I didn't make a very good match."

"Charles was malicious and violent. Cruel in a different way than your Joham, I imagine, but the effect was the same. I was frightened and depressed. I wanted to run from him—planned for it, even. Until I found out I was pregnant with my son."

Bella shifted back to look at her, but Esme just stared off into the distance, her expression soft and sad.

"I was angry at first. I didn't want him."

Bella caught her breath. She hadn't expected that from Esme. She hadn't expected to have that in common with her. "You didn't . . . want him?"

She shook her head. "He tied me to my husband in a very real way. For a woman to support herself and her child was . . . well, it's difficult even now, but it was much harder then."

"What happened?"

"I lived with him," she said, and her hand drifted absently to her abdomen, rubbing at the spot that had once swollen to accommodate her child. "He grew inside of me, month after month. I could feel him moving. And I was so alone that . . . well, I started to talk to him. I told him why I wanted to leave his father, how important it was to me, and then I realized that it was just as important for him. No child should ever have to be subjected to the life I was living. So I suppose . . . I bonded with him over a common trial. And I made up my mind to do whatever it took to keep us both safe."

Esme's eyes glistened and she forced a small smile. "I tried. I did my best, I think. But I exerted myself too much and without my husband's money it was difficult to get proper medical care. I tried to protect him, but in the end I'm afraid I only cost him his health."

"He died?"

She nodded and tucked Bella close to her again. "Yes, he did. By then I loved him so much that I couldn't imagine living without him. I tried to follow."

Bella shuddered, unnerved by how similar their stories were. She would have given up her own life to get back to her son as well. In a different way, maybe, but she had been ready to go back to Joham and deal with whatever he forced on her if it meant she could protect Alexander.

"Were you angry with Carlisle for stopping you?"

"I was at first. I came to realize that there is more to live for than to die for, but I'll never stop mourning my son. And I want you to know that I'll do whatever I can to see to it that you don't have to mourn yours."

A bubble of hope swelled in Bella's chest. "You won't let them hurt him?"

"I'll do everything in my power," she said solemnly. "I can't promise you that everything will be okay, but I can promise that I won't let him go without a fight. And that means something in our world, especially now that the Volturi has fallen. Having Carlisle Cullen on your side is nothing to turn up your nose at."

Bella hesitated. "Is he on my side?"

Bella heard Carlisle's quick step on the stairs, and a moment later he was standing in the doorway.

"Of course I'm on your side, child," he murmured, his golden eyes as warm and sincere as his voice. "And I would be, even if it didn't mean a battle with my wife otherwise."

"Even though I bit you?" Bella mumbled remorsefully.

Carlisle chuckled. "May I come in?"

Bella nodded and scooted off of Esme's lap as Carlisle moved to her bedside. He undid two of the buttons on his shirt and pulled it back off of one shoulder, displaying a ragged scar that was light enough to be easily overlooked.

"Edward gave me this when he was a newborn." He righted his shirt and then pushed his hair off the back of his neck and showed her another bite mark. "This one was from Rosalie. I'm pretty sure she was going for the kill. Emmett wasn't much of a biter, but he's thrown me through more than one wall." He grinned sheepishly. "You would think I'd have learned to give my younger vampires more space, wouldn't you?"

Bella smiled ruefully back. "For what it's worth, I wasn't going for the kill."

"I appreciate that very much."

Esme beamed up at Carlisle, but her smile fell after a moment. "What is it, darling?"

Bella glanced at Esme curiously, then looked back at Carlisle. She hadn't noticed anything in his manner to indicate that there was something on his mind, but Esme apparently had.

His smile faded. "Edward asked for a favor. I want to speak with you about it when you have a moment."

"Of course. I'll be down in a little while."

"Thank you." He tilted her chin up so he could press his lips to hers, then gave Bella a nod and left the room.

Esme gave Bella's knee an affectionate squeeze. "Are you feeling better?"

She nodded.

"Is there anything you want to talk about."

"No," Bella blurted out, but then immediately felt embarrassed by her quick rejection of Esme's offer when she had just bared her soul to Bella. She dropped her gaze and shook her head. "I mean, not right now."

"That's all right. I just want you to know that I'm here if you ever decide you need a listening ear."

"Thank you." Bella peeked up at her gratefully. "That means a lot."

Esme smiled and kissed her forehead. "I'm going to go down and see what Carlisle wants to talk about. Thank you for letting me sit with you for a while."

Bella watched her leave with an odd sort of ache in her chest. She was grateful to know that she had an ally in Esme, but there was more than that. Deep inside, in the secret part of her soul, she was desperately relieved to know that there was someone who understood the conflicting emotions she had felt over her pregnancy and her son's birth.

She considered going downstairs to find Edward once Esme was gone, but her craving for solitude won out. She decided to try her books again instead, and she found that she was better able to concentrate now that she had unburdened herself of her secret. She cruised through novels, biographies, and even a Latin-English dictionary while she enjoyed the relative quiet of her room.

Her peace was shattered, though, when Rosalie returned home. Every muscle tensed at the girl's mere presence, and she listened warily as Rosalie and Emmett climbed the stairs to their room and reconnected with whispers and touches, sharing caresses that held a tenderness Bella hadn't realized either one of them was capable of. After a few minutes alone, both of them left their room and hiked up to the third floor, stopping in Bella's doorway.

She didn't put away her book, but she peeked up at them from behind the pages. Rosalie was staring at the floor, wringing her hands, while Emmett stood encouragingly beside her.

"I know an apology could never be enough," Rosalie said quietly. "But I was wrong, and I *am* sorry."

Bella shrugged and mumbled, "It's fine."

"It's not, but you're sweet to say so." Rosalie forced a smile. "I admire that in you, you know. Being sweet doesn't come naturally to me. If *you* had said what I said, I would probably have scratched your eyes out."

Bella allowed a little grin. "That's a good idea. Maybe I'll do that later."

"I'll even let you. Especially if it will help you forgive me."

Bella flipped her book over and sat back against her headboard. "Did you . . . did you lose a baby? Like Esme?"

"No. Only the hope of one." She leaned into Emmett and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "I wanted a child so badly. It was all wrong, really. I wanted a baby because I thought it would mean there would always be someone to love me. It was a desire born out of selfishness and insecurity, but it was something I wanted very badly. I've never quite gotten over the disappointment."

Bella glanced at Emmett, puzzled. "But you do have someone."

"I do now. And I wouldn't trade Emmett for anything in the world. Still, I tend to get a little irrational over babies and . . ." She trailed off and shrugged. "Well, and some other things. I just hope you can forgive me eventually."

"I will, but—" Bella gulped in a breath and steeled herself for her request.

"But?"

"I want you to help me."

"With what?"

"Protecting him. The way Peter talked . . . what everyone said about immortal children . . . I don't want anyone to hurt him."

Rosalie glanced up at Emmett, and then both of them nodded.

"I promise," Rosalie said. "The Volturi is gone. We're the most powerful coven now, and if we say you can have a child, immortal or not, the rest of the world is just going to have to deal with it."

Bella smiled, relieved and happy. She was no good at playing politics or recruiting allies, but if that was what it took to keep her son safe, she would do her best.

"Keep it from Aro and Amun for now," Emmett reminded her. "We don't need them going off on some crusade to prove their leadership skills. Until we know more, we need to keep a tight lid on it."

Bella nodded, but was distracted by Edward's footsteps in the hall behind them. He glowered at Rosalie as he pushed past her, but she stopped him with a hand on his elbow.

"I'll help too."

Edward's brow furrowed. "Really? I mean, are you sure you want to?"

"No." She looked away from him and shrugged. "But don't you think it's the least I can do?"

"The very least," Edward snapped. He searched her face, though she still didn't look at him, and after a moment he glanced at Emmett. The larger man nodded and Edward turned away from them. "Thanks," he said stiffly.

"Glad to know it's so appreciated," Emmett muttered, but he winked at Bella. "Keep him in line, little one. Don't let him get away with being a moody prick."

Emmett and Rosalie walked away, and Bella turned to Edward. "What was that?"

"I . . . want some information from them," he said, shifting awkwardly. "It's a little bit personal. It's not the kind of thing they usually share with me intentionally."

"What information?"

"It's not important." He dropped down onto the bed beside her. "What are you reading?"

Bella handed him the Sherlock Holmes mystery that she had been looking at before Rosalie's interruption.

"Ah, so have you found out yet that the chauffeur is the killer?"

She gasped. "Edward!"

"I'm just kidding! There's not even a chauffeur in this book."

She crossed her arms over her chest and glowered at him. "Hmph. You think you're so funny."

"I'm hilarious." He set the book down on the night stand and slid an arm around her. "Listen, Bella . . . I need to apologize. For last night."

Bella ducked her head, her lips suddenly tingling with the memory of his kiss. She wished he *wouldn't* apologize for it. She was caught between wanting to repeat it and wanting to forget it entirely.

"It's okay."

"It's not, really." He pulled her closer, one hand slipping up to caress her cheek. "I thought Alexander was something else to you, and I . . . was jealous. I took advantage of a vulnerable moment and did something I was pretty sure you didn't want me to do. I'm sorry for that. I'm sorry for disregarding your feelings."

Bella pressed a hand to her fluttering stomach. "You were jealous?" she whispered, not quite able to look up at him.

"I was. It's not a feeling I'm very familiar with. It's . . . *stronger* than I would have thought." He sighed and dropped his hand. "But that's no excuse. I shouldn't have been so selfish."

Bella wanted to tell him that it was okay. She wanted to bring his hand back up to her cheek, or better yet, kiss him again with none of their confused emotions in the way. But kissing him was dangerous. It made her forget her responsibilities and focus only on his lips, his hands, the solid comfort of his body.

"I won't forget him," she blurted out.

"What?" Edward peered down at her in confusion. "Forget who?"

"Alexander."

He looked puzzled. "No, of course you won't. Is that what you think we expect?"

Bella turned away, staring out the large window into the verdant forest beyond it. She was as frustrated by the bashfulness that kept her from saying what she meant as she was about the impulsiveness that made her blurt out seemingly nonsensical things. She had to get herself under control if she didn't want Edward to think she belonged in a psychiatric ward.

"I can't be happy when he's not here," she said to the window. "It's too easy with you. You make everything feel okay when it's not."

Edward was silent for a long moment. Finally, he nudged her toward the window so her back was to him and then scooted up behind her. He wrapped himself around her, his legs forming a barrier on either side of her and his arms enveloping her in a warm embrace.

"I'm not trying to make you forget him," he murmured in her ear, "but I would be lying if I said I didn't hope I could offer you some comfort. You don't have to torture yourself."

"I left him."

"I know you feel guilty about that, but it doesn't mean you have to be miserable."

"You don't understand, Edward. I left him with *horrible* people. What if they're hurting him? What if they're teaching him to hurt other people? How could I let that happen?"

"We'll find him," Edward promised. "You have no idea how much information gets passed on by the nomads. They tell each other everything, and they don't forget. If any of them have ever encountered Joham, Peter will find out about it."

Their conversation came to a halt when they heard the Volvo turn off the main road in the distance and race down the gravel drive.

"She's going to ruin my suspension," Edward muttered.

"Quit your griping," Rosalie said from downstairs. "You know I'll fix it."

"That's not the p—oh. Charlie's not far behind her." He uncurled himself and slid to the side of the bed, grabbing Bella's hand. "Come on, Alice wants us to get you ready to see him."

Bella let him lead her down the stairs and out to the river, where Esme and Rosalie met them with their arsenal of odors. They spritzed and rubbed their chemical perfumes on her until she smelled nearly as bad as she had before, and then Alice appeared with a bandanna in a Ziploc bag.

"Jared sends his regards," she said with a grin as she opened the bag and released the stench.

Bella accepted the bandanna and wrapped it around her neck. The thing was rank, but she bore it happily enough. The moment Edward had said Charlie's name, she'd gotten the familiar longing ache in her chest. She needed to see him again.

It wasn't long before she heard his tires on the gravel drive, and then his knock on the door. Carlisle greeted him, and Charlie sounded gruff when he spoke.

"I know I'm supposed to wait until you tell me she's ready," he said, "but I have to see her. It's just . . . you don't know what it's like . . . to have her go missing and then not be able to take her home . . ."

"Come in," Carlisle told him. "I'm sorry, I didn't give enough thought to how hard this would be for you. Let's speak with Bella about setting up a regular schedule for visits."

Jasper joined Carlisle and Charlie, and the three of them made their way down to the river. Bella was perched on a rock next to the bank while Edward hovered behind her. Jasper and Carlisle moved to stand beside him. Alice hopped up and grabbed a tree branch, pulling herself up and making herself comfortable.

"You good?" Jasper asked Bella.

She nodded and stood up to intercept Charlie, who was approaching her carefully.

"Is this too hard for you?" he asked her tentatively.

She drew in a deep, wolf-tainted breath and shook her head. "I'm fine."

Charlie hugged her hesitantly, but let go of her quickly and backed away a couple of steps. The two of them stood together awkwardly for a moment before Bella gestured to the rock.

"Do you want to sit down?"

"Yeah. Of course." He lowered himself down and Bella sat beside him, leaving a foot or two of space. It was uncomfortable, but at least it was familiar. She and Charlie had always had a little bit of awkwardness between them.

"I talked to Billy," he said. "About your . . . condition."

"My condition?" She giggled. "You make it sound like something I might recover from."

He rolled his eyes. "Give your old man a break, would you? I'm trying, here."

Bella bit her lip and looked away. "Sorry. I guess this is hard for you to accept."

"What's hard for me to accept is that you're not at home where you belong." He let out a heavy sigh. "But . . . I get it, I guess. Billy told me a little about . . ." he waved a hand, "all this."

"I wish he would tell *me*. I still haven't figured it out, and I'm stuck *living* this way."

Charlie glanced warily back at the Cullens. "Aren't they helping you?"

"Yeah, of course. They've been really great."

He looked pointedly at the rock they were sitting on. "Do they ever let you inside the house?"

She laughed. "I have my own room. Alice decorated it. It's really pretty."

"Yeah? That's good."

A stiff silence settled between them while they both searched for something to say.

"Are you getting enough to eat?"

"Yeah. Um . . . I don't have to eat every day anymore."

Charlie frowned. "That's a vampire thing?"

"Yeah."

"Well . . . maybe you should anyway. You're looking a little thin."

"Isabella's diet won't change her physical appearance," Carlisle said. "It will affect her energy and clarity of thought, but vampire bodies don't change."

Charlie glanced back at him and grunted. "Could be worse I guess. If I'd stopped changing at sixteen, I wouldn't have gotten so ugly."

"You're not ugly," Bella protested. "A little grouchy, maybe . . ."

He frowned, eyeing Bella speculatively. "Billy said you—I mean, I felt it, I guess, but . . ."

"What?"

Charlie poked at her arm. "You're . . . like a rock."

"I know! It's weird, right?"

"Are you . . . are you heavy?"

"Am I *what*?"

The boys laughed and Charlie shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't know," Bella sputtered, turning to Carlisle. "Do I, like, weigh a ton now?"

He shook his head, chuckling. "It's natural for you to associate rigidity with density, but no, you're probably not any heavier than you were as a human. Pick her up, Charlie. See what you think."

Charlie eyed Bella suspiciously. "I'm not going to throw out my back, am I?"

Edward and Jasper snickered, and Bella muttered, "This is so embarrassing."

"Well . . . now I have to try," Charlie said. He stood and pulled Bella to her feet as well. "You're okay? Not going to rip my throat out or anything?"

"I've got my secret appetite-spoiling weapon," she said, tugging at the bandana.

Charlie moved in close, hesitant and graceless, but he hooked his arms behind her shoulders and beneath her knees. He grunted as he lifted her up.

"Well," he said, sounding a little strained, "you're heavier than you were when you were two." He set her down and grinned sheepishly. "But maybe a little lighter than you were last summer when you sprained your ankle and I had to carry you to the car on my back."

Bella laughed at the memory. "I'm less klutzy now, you know. This vampire thing has some perks."

"Yeah? Haven't fallen out any windows lately?"

"You fell out of a window?" Edward asked, sounding appalled.

Bella huffed and dropped back down on the rock, folding her arms across her chest. "One time."

"She landed right on her face, though," Charlie said, laughing. "That's how she got the scar on her—" He pointed to her eyebrow, but stopped when he realized that the scar he was talking about was no longer there. "Oh. Well. She used to have a scar," he finished awkwardly, sitting back down again.

"Things like that tend to heal during the change," Carlisle explained. "Only vampire venom will scar her now."

"Venom." Charlie shuddered.

That brought on another awkward silence. Charlie glanced around, then eyed the river. "That's pretty," he said. "Good fishing?"

"Not bad for salmon and steelhead," Carlisle answered. "There are some nice, wide shallows not far south of here if you ever want to try it out. Just don't let Isabella stand upstream or she'll scare off all the fish."

Charlie shot him a look out of the corner of his eye. "How come you let *him* call you by your full name when you won't let me?"

"Do you prefer Bella, then?" Carlisle asked.

She nodded.

"My apologies. I'll address you correctly in the future."

Bella smiled, but Charlie grumbled discontentedly.

"Isabella is a perfectly nice name."

Bella was distracted from the old argument by the sound of another approaching car.

Carlisle smiled. "Sounds like Amun and Kebi are on their way back."

"And doing their best to ruin *your* suspension," Edward muttered.

"What?" Charlie looked around, confused.

"Carlisle's friend just turned off of the old highway onto the drive to the house," Bella explained.

Charlie stared at her blankly.

"Really good hearing."

"Hm." He shifted on the rock. "So . . . you're kind of like the kids on the reservation, then? Sort of a human-animal combination?"

Bella scrunched up her nose. "Kind of like that, I guess. Only I don't smell nearly as bad as they do."

"Whatever you say." Charlie patted her knee. "Are you doing better, baby? It seems like you're all right."

She hesitated, but nodded.

"I guess it's a pretty big change, huh?"

"Yeah."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "You and me, kid. We were never very good at dealing with change."

Bella shook her head and linked her arm through her father's, and the two of them fell into a silence that was much more comfortable this time. Bella swallowed against the burn in her throat and leaned her head against Charlie's arm, listening to the steady pulse of his blood. Inside, Esme was greeting Amun and explaining why the house smelled of human, and a moment later Amun appeared through the trees with Kebi and Esme trailing after him.

"So you have a visitor," he said to Carlisle, eyeing Charlie and Bella.

Charlie rose and nodded to him, but Amun ignored him and continued to address Carlisle. "Do you often allow *humans* to call on you?"

"Occasionally. Amun, this is one of my neighbors, Charlie Swan. He's Bella's father."

Amun peered at Bella then, curiosity and confusion playing across his face. "Is it your newborn that smells so unpleasant?"

"That would be the scarf she's wearing," Carlisle said with a laugh. "It helps her temper her thirst."

"It's revolting." He looked at Carlisle as though waiting for him to do something, but Carlisle only nodded.

"It certainly is."

"Well?"

Carlisle raised his eyebrows in query.

"Aren't you going to send the human away?"

"Why would I do that?"

Amun stiffened, his jaw going rigid. "You can't tell me you actually expect me to stay here and mingle with *that*?"

"You don't have to, if it makes you uncomfortable. You're welcome to take the car out again. I can't imagine we'll be more than an hour or two, since we don't want to put too much strain on Bella."

"This is outrageous," Amun spat. "How dare you elevate this animal above me?"

"Animal?" Charlie demanded.

Bella pulled him back down next to her and shook her head in warning.

Carlisle had stepped away from Edward and Jasper and was now squaring off with Amun. "Old friend, I've had to ask you to mind your manners more than once. I understand that you're not accustomed to my habits, but you're in my territory and I expect you to adapt. Chief Swan is as much my guest as you are, and if you can't keep a civil tongue I'll have to ask you to be on your way."

Amun gaped at him, and then snapped his jaw closed and seethed. "Of course," he hissed, all but vibrating with rage. "You'll have to forgive me. As you said, your ways are foreign to me."

Carlisle relaxed his stance. "I invite you to pass the time by trying out the jetted tub in my bathroom. It's an indulgence that I don't imagine you've had much opportunity to experience."

Amun growled low in his throat, but turned and stalked back toward the house with Kebi scurrying after him.

"Well, he's charming," Charlie muttered.

Esme swooped in and distracted him, perching next to him on the large stone. "Charlie, there's something I wanted to talk to you about. Have you spoken with Bella's mother yet?"

"No." He sighed heavily. "I don't know what to tell her. How can I lie to her and say that Bella's dead when . . ."

He trailed off, shaking his head, and Esme took his hand. "It really is awful. But I wonder what you would think if there was a way to give Bella and Renée a chance to say goodbye?"

"How?" He glanced between Esme and Bella. "What do you mean?"

"If Bella's mother can't know what we are, we simply can't allow the two of them to be together. The physical changes in Bella are too great not to be noticed by a mother. But these days there's a world of technology that would still allow them to communicate in a way that, if not ideal, might still satisfy Renée. Have you ever used a webcam?"

Bella was shaking her head, not in answer to Esme's question, but in rejection of her plan. "No way. There's no way she would accept that. If we tell her I'm here, she'll be on the next plane."

"Unless we make it medically necessary for her to keep her distance."

Charlie frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If we told her that Bella has developed an immune deficiency that requires her to live in a sterile environment, she would have to accept that there can be no physical contact. In which case, I think she would be satisfied—or as satisfied as a mother can be—with telephone calls and web chats."

She hesitated. "The unfortunate part is that we wouldn't be able to keep it up forever. After a few years it would become apparent that Bella's age isn't changing, which means eventually we'll still have to stage some kind of death. Renée would have to be told up front that Bella's disease is one that will eventually take her life."

Charlie squeezed Bella's shoulders. "What do you think? It could be pretty rough on both of you."

"But it would mean she could stop wondering," Bella said, and Charlie winced.

"I can't tell you how hard it was, not knowing where you were or what else I could do to find you. It's got to be the worst thing a parent can feel."

Bella nodded, understanding all too well. "I think we should do it."

"It'll be tough," he warned. "You'll still have to let her think you're dying. And it will probably be easier on both of you if you don't drag it out for too long."

"It's not perfect, but it's better than nothing."

Esme and Charlie spent the next half hour hammering out the details of their plan. Charlie would call Renée and tell her that Bella had been found in Mexico, but that she was sick. Esme was adamant that, though the circumstances would cause her extra worry, he would have to let her endure it for a couple of days. At the end of that time, he could reveal the disorder that Bella would supposedly have been diagnosed with and explain to Renée that she would have to live in a care hospital in Seattle that could provide a sterile environment. Esme promised to manufacture information about a fake hospital and publish it to the Web so that Renée would feel as informed and involved as possible.

"She's going to come up here," Charlie muttered. "As soon as I tell her that we know where Bella is, she's going to come up here and I'll have to do all this lying in person."

"Can you do it?" Esme asked.

He sighed and rubbed his hands over his face. "Yeah, I can do it."

Carlisle was coaching him on symptoms and treatments of immune deficiencies when Aro returned, closely followed by Benjamin and Tia. The three of them heard the gathering out back and made their way around the house to see what was going on. Their arrival drew Amun and Kebi outside again, and Emmett and Rosalie appeared out of the woods to complete the gathering.

The three newcomers stared at Charlie curiously.

"Charlie, allow me to introduce the rest of our guests," Carlisle said. "This is Aro, Benjamin, and Tia. My friends, this is Charlie Swan, Bella's father."

Aro was peering at Bella with interest. "Are you really able to sit so close to him without difficulty? And you so young?"

"It's difficult," she mumbled, uncomfortable under his scrutiny.

"And yet you refrain. Remarkable."

"We've learned a few tricks that make it easier," Carlisle explained. "You might smell them."

Aro sniffed at the air, studying the scents, and nodded thoughtfully.

"Surely you disapprove of this arrangement, Aro," Amun said. "Carlisle has revealed our secret to a human."

"Don't be absurd. You've always been short-sighted when it comes to humans, Amun. It pays to take one or two of them into your confidence now and then." He arched an eyebrow at Carlisle. "I assume he is discreet?"

"Of course," Carlisle replied. "What kind of father would willingly compromise the well-being of his daughter?"

Aro smiled widely and settled himself in the dirt facing Charlie. "It's unusual for an immortal to keep in contact with her family after the change, but it's not unprecedented. I have an acquaintance who has looked after his family for generations. Every couple of centuries he even picks out a family member to join him in immortality. Two of them were in my coven."

"Such a shame about Renata's death," Amun said. "And was Corin destroyed, too? I wonder what Luca would think of that."

Aro growled low in his throat, but Carlisle stepped in to draw the conversation in a different direction. "For the last millennium and a half, Aro has led the coven that has governed the vampire race," he explained to Charlie. "There was an incident recently, however, and many of them were killed."

"So there was some kind of coup?" Charlie asked.

Carlisle looked uncertain. "Not exactly. That would imply that someone else took their place. As of yet, no one has taken responsibility or claimed the position of power."

"Are you telling me," Charlie asked slowly, "that you're living in some kind of vampire anarchy?"

"If we can't figure out what to do about it, yes, it could devolve into that."

"You've been in charge of things, haven't you?" Charlie asked Aro. "Shouldn't you be holding elections or caucuses or something?"

Aro smiled tightly. "My coven isn't quite so easily replaced."

"No," Carlisle murmured thoughtfully, "but I do think Charlie has a sound idea. Maybe we *should* be holding . . . well, not a caucus, exactly, but something like it."

"What are you talking about?" Amun snapped. "Our kind can't be governed by *election*."

"It's difficult to govern our kind at all. Which is why I think we need to gather. Aro's right, we won't be able to replace the Volturi, so we're going to have to get creative to come up with an effective form of government. For that, I think we would do well to invite as much input as possible."

"Come to think of it," Aro added, "this might not be a bad idea. We haven't had a proper gathering since Roanoke."

Carlisle chuckled, shaking his head. "That was before my time, I'm afraid. If you have any tips on how to make it successful, please share them with me."

"I presume you would be opposed to holding a feast?" When Carlisle arched an eyebrow in answer, Aro shrugged. "It's just as well. Humans are far less isolated now than they used to be. Discretion would be a challenge."

Amun grunted huffily, but didn't say anything.

"Where are you planning on holding this little shindig?" Emmett asked.

"I wonder if Tanya would be willing to host us in Denali." Carlisle glanced at Bella and Charlie, frowning.

"Too remote," Emmett said. "The surrounding area doesn't have the population to support that many vampires feeding. We would be noticed for sure."

"What about Olympic Park?" Jasper suggested. "Or Goat Rocks?"

Carlisle considered his suggestion for a moment. "We could rent a campground . . . but for how many? And how long? Will our numbers draw too much attention from park rangers?"

"I like the idea of camping," Esme said. "Especially of using tents. It's comforting, when you're in a crowd, to have a space to call your own. But what if we did it here? We could set up tents in the woods on the other side of the river, and then clear out the trees between here and the house to make a meeting area."

Carlisle looked at Jasper. "The wolves?"

"They'll have fits," he said frankly. "Which, if you ask me, is all the more reason to have it here."

"Jasper—"

"Will you listen?" His request was calm and without challenge, but it earned him Carlisle's attention.

He gave Jasper an apologetic look. "I will. Please go ahead."

"You let the Quileutes push you around too much. For the most part, that's not a big problem because it keeps the peace. But if you invite them to walk all over you, believe me, they will."

"According to the treaty, this space is yours. You can do what you want with it. If they decided to have a shifter convention out at First Beach, would you try to stop them?"

"Of course not."

"Then you have to behave as though you expect them not to interfere with what's happening on your side of the line. Give them a warning, tell them what's happening, but don't make yourself Sam's subject. The animal in him will only recognize your authority if you exercise it."

Carlisle eyed him for a moment in quiet contemplation. Finally he turned to his wife. "Esme?"

"I admire your tactics more, Carlisle, but I'm afraid you don't listen to Jasper enough when it comes to the wolves. And after all, if we have our gathering here, we'll be able to offer our guests more creature comforts than we could in the park."

"Edward?"

"I agree with Jasper, but walk softly. Sam's in a delicate place."

"Rosalie?"

"We outnumber them, so they'd be stupid to oppose us," she said. "But don't ask their permission. If you give them a chance to say no, they will, and then they'll feel like they have to do something about it if you go ahead with the gathering anyway."

"Thank you, Rosalie. Emmett?"

"Why not invite them?" Emmett asked.

Jasper let out a sharp hiss. "What exactly do you have against peace and quiet? Why do you find it so amusing to throw matches at powder kegs?"

"Fine." Emmett snickered. "Don't invite them. But yeah, Carlisle, I think we should have it here."

Carlisle nodded to him. "Alice? What do you think?"

"I think this is the natural place to have it," she answered from her perch in the tree. "There's already a handful of people thinking about coming to you for information."

"Bella?"

She jerked her head up, startled. She hadn't expected to be included in this decision.

"I don't know," she mumbled.

"It will be hard on you. This is all new to you, and the crowds will add some stress. But it may be beneficial to you to be introduced to so many in our society. It's useful, sometimes, to have a network of friends."

Bella wasn't sure if he intended it, but she heard a greater implication in his words. If the nomads gathered here, she wouldn't need Peter to ask questions for her. She could seek out Joham herself. She looked up at him and nodded. "Okay."

"How will we get everyone here?" Esme asked.

Carlisle and Jasper glanced at each other. "Peter," Carlisle said.

Esme looked uneasy. "The nomad network may be the fastest way to spread news, but I'm not sure I trust them to pass along our expectations about hunting and avoiding the Quileute territory."

"Perhaps you should print invitations," Aro suggested. "It would lend an air of formality to the proceedings, and you could enclose an explanation of your terms."

Jasper was shaking his head. "There's no way nomads will keep invitations."

"I'm not saying they have to keep them. They can pass them along the same way they pass their stories. Trust me, if you put your rules in writing, the nomads will talk about them. The paper invitations are only the seed."

"I like it," Carlisle said. "Jasper, how long do you think it will take?"

"Three or four weeks, if you want it to spread to South America. Crossing to Europe, Africa . . . at least six."

"But we could send some to Eleazar," Esme suggested. "He could get things started in Europe."

"Amun has a friend who keeps an office in Chad," Benjamin put in. "Would he help us?"

"I think he would," Amun said, "assuming at least one of the invitations was addressed directly to him. He responds well to flattery."

"That would help a lot," Carlisle said. "What about Asia? Any acquaintances there?"

Aro and Amun both looked away.

"Surely one of you must know someone there."

Aro cleared his throat awkwardly. "No."

"Perhaps you don't know the stories," Amun growled.

"I know about China."

He nodded stiffly.

"But that's just one country. What about India? Russia?"

Once again, they were both silent.

Carlisle laughed. "Aro, do you mean to tell me that one little incident at a port in Shanghai has kept you out of an entire continent?"

"You didn't see them," he hissed, glaring at Carlisle.

"Oh, for heaven's sake. I'll go myself," Rosalie said. "I'll make a couple of quick stops in Astana and New Delhi. It shouldn't take more than a week."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Carlisle asked.

"Of course not. Maybe I'll scout a couple of locations for our next honeymoon." She shot a sly smile in Emmett's direction and he grinned.

"I'm coming along, then!"

"Would you visit Sydney as well?" Carlisle asked. "I'd hate to think that word never made it to Australia because China was in the way."

"Ooh, Sydney." Emmett nudged Rosalie. "That might be fun."

"Let's give it a month," Carlisle said. "On August fifth, we'll convene the first worldwide vampire caucus."

"And we'll pray to God that we don't all end up killing each other," Jasper muttered.

"You'll be in charge of security, of course," Carlisle told him. "Please let me know if there are any issues that can be dealt with before they become major problems. And Alice, sweetheart, may I give you the task of gathering supplies? We'll need tents, camp chairs, probably a change of clothing or two for each guest, and if you could keep me updated as much as possible with a headcount I'd appreciate it."

"Got it."

"Emmett, before you and Rosalie leave, can I ask you to get us all cell phones and set us up with a plan?"

Emmett's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

"It looks like we may need them. And get another handful of pre-paid ones, would you? I want to have them around, just in case."

"Yes!" Emmett pumped his fist. "You won't regret this, Carlisle. They're going to be so useful."

Carlisle smiled, but was already turning away. "Edward and Bella, will you handle clearing out the trees from here to the house and arrange a gathering area? It will have to be large. Maybe we can dig out an amphitheater . . ."

Benjamin raised a hand. "I'd like to help you with that."

"Benjamin!" Amun hissed, but Benjamin only waved him away.

"Come now, Amun, they have a mind reader. And since they've now had a chance to talk privately, I'm sure Edward has told them all about my talent."

"In fact, we did discuss it briefly," Carlisle said. "I'm so very curious, Benjamin. I've never met someone who could have such a physical impact on the world. I'd like to talk with you about it."

"A physical impact?" Aro perked up. "What is this talent you've been hiding, young one?"

Tia let out a low growl, but Benjamin ignored her. Instead, he stared at the ground at his feet, and a wedge-shaped groove, not much larger than his shoe, formed in the dirt. It sank deeper and deeper, and steps began to form at one end, until Bella realized that he was creating Carlisle's amphitheater in miniature.

"Fascinating," Aro murmured. "It's no wonder Amun is so attached to you."

"That's rather uncharitable, isn't it?" Benjamin said with a smile. "Amun and Kebi are like family to me."

"Of course. I'm sure it's all about mutual affection."

Benjamin laughed off his skepticism and looked to Carlisle. "What do you think of the design?"

"Hmmm . . ." he rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "Perhaps we should take a page from King Arthur's book."

The dirt at Benjamin's feet molded and shifted until his amphitheater became a circle, ringed with tiered seating.

Aro shook his head. "You'll want to be careful about giving up your position as head of the proceedings, Carlisle. If you're going to have your round table, at least mark out your own place nearest the house and see to it that no one else is allowed in it without your invitation. It's essential that you give your guests a visible reminder that *you* are presiding over this gathering."

Carlisle started to shake his head, but Jasper cut him off.

"I agree."

With Jasper's support, Carlisle gave Aro's suggestion more credence. "All right, then. Benjamin, I appreciate your offer. I'll leave you to work out the logistics with Edward and Bella."

Bella twisted around to peek at Edward, and he smiled down at her. Warmth filled her chest at having been included in the plans, and she realized that she had hardly even thought of Charlie's blood for the last several minutes. Of course, as soon as she remembered it, the burn in her throat flared. She buried her nose in her scarf to squelch it again.

Jasper caught her eye and inclined his head in approval.

Charlie squeezed Bella's knee. "Is it always like this?"

"No," Edward assured him, "political crises are rare for us."

"No, I mean . . ." He leaned close to Bella. "Do they always *hover*?"

Bella clapped a hand over her mouth, though not quite in time to stifle the giggle that escaped. She forgot, sometimes, how much alike she and her father were. The constant presence of a crowd of vampires was bound to bother him as much as it bothered her.

"I'm terribly sorry," Carlisle said. "We're ruining your visit. Jasper and Edward have to stay for safety's sake, but the rest of us will give you your space."

"Will you be coming again?" Benjamin asked as Carlisle began shooing everyone back toward the house.

Charlie looked unsure, but Esme stepped in.

"We'll plan another visit once we have things settled with Renée. Call her tonight, Charlie, and let me know what she says."

"I hope we'll get a chance to talk," Benjamin called over his shoulder as he walked away."

Charlie waited until he lost sight of them before turning back to Bella.

"Vampire politics?"

"Yeah, congratulations. Sounds like you just turned Forks into Hotel Transylvania."

Charlie let out a huff and gazed out at the river. "Salmon and steelhead, huh? Maybe I should bring my gear next time. You could come join me, if you don't mind getting up early."

Bella smiled to herself. "I'll be up. I don't sleep anymore."

"Really?" He looked at her in surprise before leaning forward and settling his elbows on his knees.
"Huh. Guess you can't have nightmares, then, can you?"

"Thank god," she muttered.

He frowned. "Are you really doing okay here? Maybe . . . maybe you should be . . . talking to someone."

"What, you mean like therapy?" Bella let out a hard laugh. "How many therapists do you know who have experience helping people transition from human to vampire?"

"You have friends," Edward said quietly. "We all did it, and we're here to help you with whatever you need."

Charlie shot him a scowl over his shoulder before focusing on Bella again.

"It just seems pretty overwhelming. They're all busy doing whatever they're doing, but what about you?"

Bella shook her head, thinking about her clothes, her bedroom, the trip to Mexico, even the help Peter was giving her. "They're doing so much for me. I'll never be able to thank them."

Edward reached out, grazing the top of her head with his fingertips, and he smiled warmly down at her when she looked back at him. Bella shivered as an unexpected thrill ran through her, and she smiled back.

Charlie cleared his throat pointedly. "They don't seem to be very good at keep their hands to themselves, do they?"

"Actually," Edward said, moving around to perch on the edge of the rock next to Bella, "since you're here, I wanted to talk to you about something."

Jasper snorted and shook his head, but Edward ignored him.

"I'd like to ask your permission to court Bella."

Bella gasped in surprise and whipped her head around to stare at Edward. Their conversation in her bedroom had given her the impression that her feelings weren't entirely one-sided, but she would never have expected him to broach the subject with Charlie. She peeked back at her father, trying to gauge his reaction.

Charlie was staring blankly at Edward. After several long seconds he drew in a slow breath.

"Court?" he asked, his voice hard and gruff. "What exactly do you mean by 'court'?"

"I care very deeply for Bella," Edward said, and if he felt any of the awkwardness that Bella did, he didn't show it. "I'd like to engage in a romantic relationship with her."

Charlie arched an eyebrow. "A romantic relationship? Tell me something. How old are you?"

"I'm seventeen."

Charlie stared hard at him until he relented.

"I'm a hundred and three."

"You know how old my daughter is? She's *sixteen*. I don't care if you're a vampire or a rodeo clown, there's no situation where a relationship like that doesn't violate the laws of decency."

"Dad!"

"*No*, Bella. I don't want to hear another word about it. I appreciate that these people are trying to help you, but if you can't stay here without getting dragged into their weird family incest thing, we're going to have to find somewhere else for you to go."

"I'm sorry," Edward said, standing and taking a step back. "Of course Bella isn't expected to participate in any kind of relationship. She'll have a safe home here, no matter what."

Charlie eyed him warily. "You're saying you accept my decision?"

Edward nodded.

"Just like that? You're going to let it go?"

"Yes, sir."

Bella hugged herself, more confused than ever. Was Edward lying to Charlie? If he was willing to do that, why ask for his permission in the first place? Or did he simply not care very much about having a relationship with her? Was it only a whim he would indulge as long as it was convenient?

Charlie eyed him suspiciously, and then looked back at Bella. "I want you to tell me if they're pressuring you into anything."

"They're not," she said, hunching her shoulders in embarrassment. This was the last thing she wanted to talk about with her father, particularly with witnesses. It was all so weird and uncomfortable.

"But you'll tell me if they do?"

She nodded miserably.

Charlie sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face. "I should probably get going," he said. "Apparently, I have to call your mother and tell her that you're sick."

Bella stood and hugged her dad, trying to ignore the tempting pulse of blood just beneath his skin. She kept it brief and pulled away quickly, burying her nose in her bandanna. She loved her father, but the blood was just *so* tempting . . .

"I'll walk you to your car," Jasper said. "Edward and Bella need a few minutes alone to *talk*." He shot them each a pointed look, and then he and Charlie headed back toward the house.

Bella hadn't imagined she could feel more uncomfortable, but once alone with Edward, she found herself struggling under the weight of all the things she didn't understand. She didn't know what he wanted from her, or even what she wanted from him. It was clear that they both wanted *something*, but she couldn't say whether those somethings were compatible.

"Are you okay?" Edward asked. "I'm sorry if I spoke out of turn. Maybe I should have talked to you a little more before I spoke with your father."

Bella shrugged and curled in on herself. She wanted to understand him, but she didn't know what questions to ask. And more than anything, she just wanted to avoid all the awkwardness.

He reached out and took her hand, pressing it between his own. "I guess Jasper is right. It looks like we need to talk. And it's a little weird, because the things I have to say are things that generally shouldn't be said too soon. But you and I . . ." One corner of his mouth pulled up into a wry smile. "We seem to have a habit of jumping to the wrong conclusions when we don't communicate properly."

Bella gave him a little smile in return. She could hardly help it. He was just so warm, so beautiful.

"Bella, I love you." He murmured the words reverently, his thumb stroking the back of her hand. "The more time I spend with you, the more I want. The closer we get, the closer I want to be."

Bella licked her lips nervously, fearful little tremors dancing through her body. She couldn't deny how much she wanted to hear those words from him, but her head was full of Alexander, of Joham, of blood and fear and Charlie's refusal to give them permission.

"But you're not ready."

She sucked in a breath and stared at him.

"Right? That's what you meant when you told me you wouldn't forget Alexander, isn't it? You're telling me that your focus is somewhere else."

She nodded. "I'm sorry." She leaned a little closer to him, unconsciously seeking the comfort of his solid presence.

"It's okay." His smile was back, warm and a little bit crooked, and his eyes shone with friendly affection. "I can wait. You and I have nothing but time."

She chewed at her lip. He was being so open, allowing himself to display a vulnerability that Bella wouldn't have had the nerve to match. But if he was trying, she could too.

"Why did you ask Charlie?"

He laughed softly and slipped an arm around her. "Because I knew he would say no the first time. He just said it himself. He's not a big fan of change."

Bella choked out a laugh and shook her head.

"He's going to take time to adjust to the idea," Edward said. "I'm just getting him started, so that when you're ready, he might be, too."

"But why ask him at all?"

He shrugged. "Partly because I'm old-fashioned, I guess. When I was growing up, that was the respectful thing to do. Courting a girl behind her parents' backs was . . . tawdry. It certainly wasn't how you treated someone you intended to marry."

Bella gave a start at the word. Marriage. That wasn't something she was even close to being able to consider. But Edward seemed to understand, and he brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek.

"I'm sorry. That's too much, too soon, right? We have plenty of time to figure everything out."

She swallowed hard and looked away. "That's only partly why you asked him?" she mumbled, pulling him back to her previous question.

Edward nodded. "The other part is . . . I just think he has a right to say no."

"Why?"

"Because you *are* sixteen. Your father has a responsibility to protect you, at least until you legally come of age. I can understand why he would be uncomfortable with you and me together, given the situation, and I want to respect his right to take care of you."

"He can't take care of me anymore," Bella whispered sadly.

"Maybe not the way he used to. Maybe not the way parents usually do. But that's all the more reason to let him have what influence he can. He's your father, and he loves you. This is just another way for him to show it."

"But won't it bother you to wait?"

Edward touched a fingertip to her chin, and she looked up at his wide smile and sparkling eyes.

"It will drive me *crazy*. I'm not exactly known for my patience." He leaned his forehead against hers, his smile taking on a sweet tenderness. "But I still get to see you every day. Maybe I won't be allowed to touch you the way I want to, or to say all of the things I feel, but I'll get to be with you. I'll get to talk to you and start learning all there is to know about you, and when your father gives his permission, you and I will have a strong foundation of friendship to build on."

There was a warm fluttering in Bella's stomach that she was starting to associate with Edward. Her hands found his and they clung to one another, heads still pressed together. She didn't ever want to move.

"What if he never changes his mind?" Bella whispered, afraid that her pessimism might disturb the blanket of peace that Edward had wrapped them in.

He laughed quietly. "Would you understand what I meant if I said you won't be sixteen forever?"

Bella giggled and let her head slide into the crook of his neck. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close—*too* close, if they were supposed to be respecting Charlie's wishes.

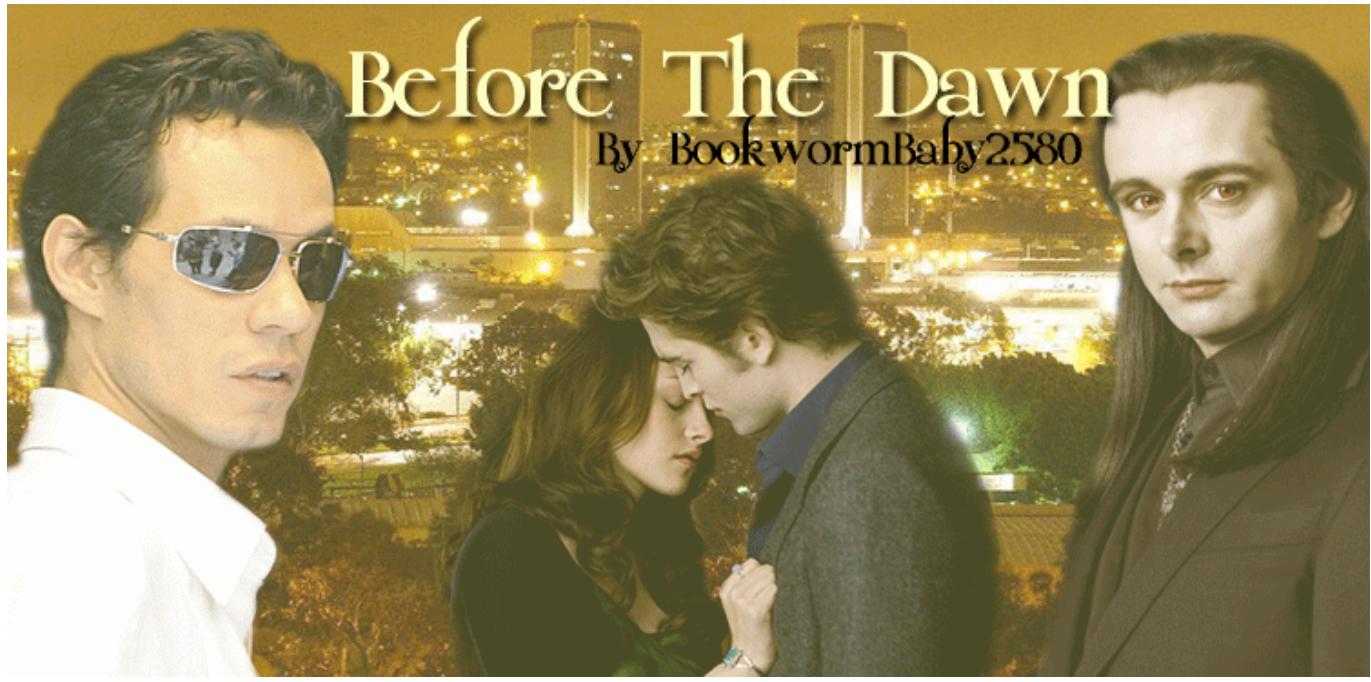
"Eventually, fathers have to let go. I'll do everything I can to convince Charlie that I'm good for you, but this is a choice that ultimately comes down to you and me. I choose you, and if you think that you might choose me someday, I'll wait as long as it takes."

"I do. I mean . . . I will." Bella pulled back and peered up at Edward, relieved to see the understanding that she had been hoping for in his expression. She wasn't entirely sure she deserved it, but she was grateful for it all the same.

"That's all I need to know." He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and then shifted back, putting a respectable distance between the two of them. "Now how about a hunt? Your throat must be killing you by now."

She nodded and stood, resisting the urge to take his hand. It felt like a natural thing to do, but she was sure her father would see it as a romantic gesture. Instead, she let him lead the way into the trees and followed after him, feeling more connected to him than ever despite their physical distance.

Practically Human



"Edward, if we're going to do this, it needs to be sooner rather than later."

Edward glanced up from Esme's draft of the caucus invitation, which he had been reading over Carlisle's shoulder. "Yeah, two seconds, Rose. Esme, I still think it's a little too vague. If we don't want our visitors finding loopholes, we have to be very specific."

"I can't be too specific or it will raise questions at the printers."

Jasper was shaking his head. "Edward is right. We'll just have to print them here. I know it won't be as nice, but I think we need to serve function over style."

"Okay." She pursed her lips. "I'll re-write it."

"Let's go, Edward," Emmett said, descending the stairs with two jam-packed backpacks dangling from his arms. "I want to get to Port Angeles and get some phones."

"You can go," Rosalie told him with a huff. "I can do this without you."

Emmett rolled his eyes. "No you can't fucking do this without me. Quit trying to be all brave-little-warrior and let me take care of you."

"Fine." Rosalie sniffed haughtily, but she couldn't quite hide the tenderness in her eyes. "Edward, hurry up."

"Alice, have you ordered the plane tickets?" Carlisle asked.

"I ordered them through to Astana, but I can't tell how things are going to go once Emmett and Rosalie get to Russia. I'll have to book the rest later."

Bella glanced at Alice, who was hanging a huge piece of butcher paper next to the front door, but her attention strayed back to Edward when he moved to join Rosalie on the couch. He reached out a

hand to take Rosalie's, but she only looked at it disdainfully. "Don't try to comfort me. I don't want your pity."

"Right. Sorry."

"You want my help?" Jasper asked.

Edward looked at Rosalie with raised eyebrows.

"Whatever," she said with a shrug of cool indifference. "I'm not doing this again, so you might as well get what you can out of it."

She looked hard and unruffled, but this time Bella was paying attention, and she saw it. The flat exterior wasn't really Rosalie. It was a mask. Something was upsetting her, and she was refusing to let it show.

Jasper dragged an armchair over to the couch and then the three of them sat forward, elbows propped on knees, and closed their eyes.

And then nothing happened. For several long moments they all just sat there, still as statues.

After a full minute had passed, Edward opened one eye and peeked at Rosalie. "Any time—"

"Shut up," she snapped.

Emmett tossed his backpacks in the corner and moved to sit behind Rosalie on the couch, thumping Edward on the back of the head as he passed. He rested one hand on Rosalie's shoulder, and her posture sagged.

After a few more silent seconds, Edward winced. Bella wanted to ask what they were doing, but they all seemed very engrossed in whatever was happening.

Edward cringed again, and a shudder pulsed through his body. He reached for Rosalie's hand without opening his eyes, but she hissed sharply at the contact and jerked away.

Edward balled his hands into fists and ground them against his thighs. He was panting heavily, sharp breaths rushing in and out between his teeth. He looked like he was in agony, and Bella started toward him to try and help in whatever way she could.

Carlisle stopped her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and steering her away.

"But—Edward . . ."

"He'll be fine."

"What are they doing?"

Carlisle smiled sadly. "You can ask him about it later. Meanwhile, why don't we see if we can find a good place to set up your webcam? I was thinking we might re-arrange things in the office behind the stairs."

Bella followed him back into the little office and listened to him talk about how the room might be made to resemble a sterile hospital room on camera, but her attention was on Edward. She heard

him utter a low, pained moan, and it was all she could do not to drop the desk she was helping Carlisle move and run out to stop whatever was happening.

"There. If we set the camera up here, all she'll see is an empty corner."

Bella nodded absently. "Yeah. That's good."

"Bella, sweetheart." Carlisle rounded the desk and placed a cautious hand on her shoulder. "Edward knew what he was asking from Rosalie. He knew it would be difficult to endure."

"Why is he doing it? What did he ask?"

He pulled out a chair for her, and once she was settle he perched on the edge of the desk. "It seems that all of my girls have been mistreated by the men in their lives," he said, sounding tired.

Bella's stomach immediately tightened.

"I won't go into details," Carlisle assured her, noticing her reaction. "But Rosalie is no exception. She was assaulted by her fiancé and a group of his friends—this was while she was still human, before she met Emmett. The memory is terribly painful for her, and I can only imagine how difficult it must be for her to re-live it in order to show Edward."

"But, why? Why would he want to see that?"

"He's worried about you."

Her eyes widened. "Me?"

"He's afraid of saying or doing something that might trigger a painful memory for you. He asked Esme and Rosalie to share their experiences so that he would be more aware of sensitive issues."

Bella sat back in her chair, hugging herself against the churning in her stomach. Edward was doing this for her?

"Or rather," Carlisle said gently, "I should say that Edward asked Esme. Rosalie volunteered to participate as well. It's tremendously difficult for her to do what she's doing, but she's trying very hard to make up for what she said to you."

"She's doing this . . . to *apologize*?"

He nodded.

"But . . . she already did. She said she was wrong."

"Words mean very little to Rosalie. For her, what really matters is making amends. So she'll do this for you with the hope that you and Edward can avoid some of the difficult situations that she and Emmett have encountered."

"Was it hard for them?" Bella asked, glancing toward the office doorway.

"At times. Occasionally it still is. But they love each other enough to keep working at their relationship, no matter how difficult."

Bella wrung her hands in her lap. She didn't want Edward to have to work so hard, to walk on eggshells to avoid hurting her. She wanted it to be easy for him. And yet, she knew how the memories of her time with Joham haunted her, lurking in every shadowy place, waiting to pounce as soon as she dropped her guard. They hounded her, which meant they would hound Edward as well.

"That must be really frustrating for Emmett," she whispered.

"It can be."

She stared at her hands as she twisted and tugged at them. "It's not really fair. He didn't ask for that."

Carlisle was silent for a long time, and when she finally peeked up at him she found him watching her.

"Neither did Rosalie."

No. She hadn't. Bella pulled her knees up to her chest, a futile attempt to protect herself from the turmoil in her own head. Rosalie hadn't asked for what she had gotten, but it was hers to bear whether she liked it or not. Emmett had a choice.

Edward had a choice.

"I'm sorry to barge in," Esme said, tapping at the door frame. "Carlisle?"

She held out the new draft of the invitation and he took it and read it over.

"I think it's good. Aro? Would you mind taking a look?"

Bella heard Aro's quick footsteps descending the stairs, and he appeared in the doorway in less than a second. He reached for the invitation with a gloved hand and quickly read through it.

"'Cordially invited,' I think . . . and Carlisle, if I were you, I would add that a violation of the code of behavior constitutes a challenge to the coven leader."

"That's a little drastic, isn't it?"

"Do you want your rules obeyed or don't you?"

"I agree," Jasper called from the living room.

Carlisle acquiesced. "See if you can find a polite way to word that, won't you, darling."

"Of course." Esme disappeared again, darting back upstairs to the library.

"What does that mean?" Bella asked. "A challenge to the coven leader?"

"Challenging a coven leader is a very serious thing," Carlisle told her. "It essentially means you're contesting his right to rule his coven and control his territory. When a coven leader is challenged, he either surrenders his claim or engages in a fight to the death."

Bella shuddered. "So, if someone breaks your rules that means you have to fight them?"

"Not alone," Aro said with a coy smile. "If a coven is loyal to their leader, they can help him. Considering the strength of this coven, I find it very unlikely that anyone would risk a fight."

Carlisle was shaking his head sadly. "That's likely true, but I don't relish the idea of some hothead trying his luck. I honestly doubt I would have it in me to kill him."

"All the better. You'll showcase your merciful, gentle nature and further endear yourself to our community."

Carlisle's frown disappeared and he chuckled. "All while proving that I'm unfit to exact justice. Really, Aro, when *are* you going to stop worrying that I'm vying for your position?"

"I'm doing you a favor," he said. "A reluctant leader is almost always wildly popular. I'm simply helping to ensure that you don't find yourself in a position where you're unable to refuse."

"Thank god I have you watching out for my best interests," Carlisle said dryly.

The phone rang then, and Carlisle excused himself to answer it. Aro turned to Bella, and she thought he was about to say something to her when Carlisle's voice stopped them.

"Carmen! I'm so glad you called; we were beginning to get worried. I have news. Is Eleazar with you?"

Aro's attention was riveted on Carlisle's conversation as soon as Carmen confirmed that yes, Eleazar was there. He listened while Carlisle told his friends about Aro's arrival and reassured them of his safety and of Sulpicia's. Carmen described a couple of leads they wanted to follow up on to see who else might have survived, and then Carlisle told them about his plan to hold a political gathering.

Carmen let out a low whistle. "That's quite the undertaking. What does . . . what does *Jasper* think of it all?"

"He might never forgive me for putting him through it," Carlisle laughed.

"But I do hope you'll make it home before then," Jasper called from the living room.

"We'll make a point of it," Carmen said, and Bella thought she sounded a little relieved.

Carmen and Carlisle arranged the details of having Esme's invitations sent and distributed around Europe, and then Carmen said goodbye, excusing herself with the reminder that they had much to do and a limited time to do it.

Carlisle returned to the office when he hung up, finding Aro perched in an office chair with a satisfied smile on his face.

"It will be so good to see Eleazar again," Aro said eagerly.

"Indeed. It's been, what, nearly forty years since he's been to Italy?"

Esme materialized in the doorway and once again presented her invitation to Carlisle and Aro. When they both approved it, she took it back and headed out to the living room.

"All finished, Rosalie?" she asked. "Emmett and I really need to get to Port Angeles. You'll come, won't you? We'll buy you some absurdly expensive jewelry to make you feel better."

"I imagine Edward could use your company right now," Carlisle murmured to Bella.

She pushed herself out of her chair and hurried to the living room, where she found Edward on the couch looking shocked and a little bit ill. She sat down next to him and linked her arm through his—that was something friends did, right?—laying her head on his shoulder.

"I never had any idea," he said, his voice oddly empty. "I've seen bits and pieces, but the whole of it together . . . and the way it felt . . ." He cringed, and one hand clutched at his stomach. "That was so wrong."

He freed his arm from Bella's and wrapped her up in an embrace so tight it was almost painful. She buried her face in his neck and squeezed just as hard, and that was okay too, because sometimes friends gave each other hugs when they needed them. They weren't breaking Charlie's rules.

The next several days were a constant flurry of activity. Esme printed off hundreds of invitations and enclosure cards. Carlisle said they were probably printing more invitations than there were vampires in the world, but he wanted there to be plenty of cards circulating.

Emmett and Rosalie packed the bulk of them in a suitcase and took them with them when they left. The rest were boxed up and mailed to Eleazar and the other contacts who would help distribute them farther, faster.

Meanwhile, Charlie had told his fib to Renée, and she had immediately flown to Washington. Carlisle was on the phone with her every couple of hours, trying to convince her that she couldn't drive to the imaginary hospital in Seattle and demand to see her daughter. He had taken on the role of Bella's alleged primary physician, and was continually assuring Renée that Bella's health was stabilizing and that he was making arrangements for a computer to be placed in her room. The webcam in the office was set up and ready to use as soon as Carlisle decided that a believable amount of time had passed.

He was unflappable. Bella was climbing the walls.

There was just so much *waiting*. She was waiting to speak with her mother, waiting to hear from Peter and Charlotte, waiting for Aro or Amun to make a move, waiting for a scourge of vampires to descend on Forks . . .

"I know it's difficult to be patient," Carlisle told her one afternoon. "Try to find something to distract yourself. After all, a watched pot never boils."

He patted her head and walked away, and Edward dropped down next to her on the couch.

"Doesn't he drive you crazy?"

The grin on his face eased some of her tension and she smiled back.

"Listen, I wondered if you wanted to try a little experiment."

"What kind of experiment?" she asked him.

"Jasper's been thinking about how good your control is. We were wondering if it's just because you have a relationship with Charlie, or if you'd do as well with other people."

"I won't," she said quickly. "I haven't. There was . . . this man . . ."

Edward took her hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a firm kiss to her fingers. "I understand," he murmured. "But that was without the help of Jared's bandana, right? Doesn't that make a difference?"

She nodded.

"Jared promised to give us more whenever we want. He sees it as his responsibility to do whatever he can to keep people safe."

Bella grimaced at the memory of the smell, but she wasn't about to refuse his offer.

"Alice has to do some shopping at a sporting goods store on the edge of town," Edward continued. "It's usually not very busy, so we thought that might be a good place to start. What do you think? Do you want to go with her?"

She scraped her teeth anxiously across her lower lip. "What if I can't do it? What if I lose control?"

"Jasper and I will be right beside you the whole time. We'll keep you from hurting anyone."

"But . . . if people see . . . won't they know something's wrong?"

"We'll sell it as a panic attack," he said with a shrug. "We did it for Jasper once before."

Bella blew out a breath. "You really want me to try going out in public?"

"Not if it's too much. But I think it would good to test your limits a little."

"Okay." She nodded. "I'll try."

She let out a startled gasp as a Ziploc bag came sailing over her shoulder and landed in her lap.

"Five minutes!" Alice called out, already heading back up the stairs from where she had come. "The perfume and stuff is in the box on the front porch—and be sure to put in a pair of the contacts."

Bella peered at the bandana inside the Ziploc bag and decided to leave it there until they were in the car on the way to town. She went outside with Edward, though, and found the colored contact lenses Alice had been talking about. Bella pressed them into her eyes, distracted at first by the way they clouded her vision, but she looked at Edward for approval.

"You look disturbingly normal," he said with a grin, and raised a bottle of perfume to spritz some on her. The two of them went through her ritual of making her smell as foul as possible until Alice and Jasper joined them.

"Nervous?" Jasper asked her with a smile that reminded her he already knew the answer.

"Yes."

"That's good. Being nervous keeps your guard up. It's when you get too comfortable that accidents happen." He gave her a friendly slap on the back and they all headed for the garage.

They took Edward's Volvo to the sporting goods store. Bella tied on her bandana as soon as it came into view, and Edward started filling her in on what she would find inside.

"Mrs. Newton is in the back doing inventory. Her son Mike is at the front counter finishing up with a customer who just bought a rifle. There's a woman in the back looking at bathing suits and three teenagers from La Push messing around with soccer balls."

Jasper tapped anxious fingers on his knee as they pulled into the parking lot. "Carlisle wants us to get to know our neighbors, right?" He shook his head. "Well, kid, let's go get to know Mike Newton."

Bella buried her nose in the bandana and took a deep, reassuring breath.

As soon as they were out of the car, Edward's arm was around Bella's waist. They still weren't breaking Charlie's rules, she told herself as she snuggled against his side. He was making sure she didn't hurt anyone, so it was okay.

"All right so far?" he asked her.

She nodded.

The man buying the rifle was leaving as they approached the door. Bella and Edward gave him plenty of space to get out before following Jasper and Alice inside.

The store wasn't large. Six long shelving units ran from the front of the store to the back, and with a couple of well-placed mirrors, the spiky-haired boy at the counter would be able to see anything that was happening in the store with a few quick glances. He was eyeing the three Quileute boys, who were kicking a ball back and forth down one of the aisles, but as soon as they caught a glimpse of Bella and the others, their smiles fell and they put the ball away. With a dark glare at the four of them, all three boys stalked out of the store.

The boy at the counter didn't seem disappointed to see them go. "Hey, Alice!" he said with a bright smile, but it faltered when his eyes flicked to Jasper. "Hey . . . Jasper . . . what's up?"

Alice was already making a beeline for the camping and fishing section. "We might be buying out your whole store. Give me just a minute."

Bella swallowed against the burn and tried not to think of the three wetly pulsing hearts that were still in the building with them. Mike Newton's blood was the closest, though it was mingled with a heavy dose of an unpleasant cologne, but the woman shopping for bathing suits seemed content to do without soaps or perfumes, and the undiluted aroma of her blood drifted to Bella in tempting tendrils.

She breathed deeply into her bandana and tried to think of Charlie.

The boy at the counter nodded to them, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. His fidgeting only increased when Jasper approached him instead of following Alice.

"How's it going, Mike?" he asked, leaning against the counter.

Mike licked his lips. He looked like he had forgotten how to speak. "Uh . . . good. Good. Is that . . . um . . . does Edward have a girlfriend?" His eyes flicked over to Bella again, but he looked away quickly when he saw that she was watching him.

The artery in his throat pulsed so very invitingly . . .

"They're kind of on-again, off-again," Jasper replied. He leaned forward with a smirk and lowered his voice. "Right now they're off-again, if you can believe it."

Mike glanced at them again, taking in the way Bella clung to Edward's side, and snorted. "Doesn't look like that'll last long."

"No kidding. What's this?" Jasper gestured to a piece of paper that had been tossed next to the register. "Are you planning on trying out for football this year?"

Mike made a face. "I don't know. Maybe."

"You don't seem too excited about it."

"How are you doing?" Edward murmured to Bella. "Are you okay to go in a little farther? Maybe look at the yoga gear?"

"You want me to do yoga?"

He chuckled. "No, but it's a little weird for us to just stand here in the doorway."

Right. Appearances. Bella nodded and they moved to the first aisle, pretending to peruse through the instructional DVDs as they listened to Jasper talk to Mike about football.

"I think it sounds fun," Mike was saying, "but my dad said if I tried out, he would donate new uniforms to the team."

"And that's a bad thing?"

He shrugged, looking miserable. "He obviously doesn't think I'm good enough to make it on my own, and I don't want to be the guy who buys his way onto the team."

Jasper nodded thoughtfully. "Maybe he's just trying to be supportive. He played football in high school, didn't he?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "All four years, three of them on varsity."

"And I bet he loved it."

"He still has pictures up all over the house."

Jasper chuckled. "Sounds like he's trying to share his passion with you. Do the two of you get along very well?"

"All right, I guess. Seems like we don't really have much to talk about."

"All the more reason he'd want you on the team. I'd bet this is more about him than you. I doubt it's him questioning your ability so much as wanting to find some common ground."

Mike tapped his fingers on the flyer. "Maybe. It still doesn't change the fact that I won't know whether I'm actually good enough."

"Believe me, I know that feeling," Jasper muttered.

Mike raised his eyebrows curiously.

"You have no idea what it's like to be a Cullen."

"I guess that's true, huh? Your family all seems so perfect."

"Seems like it comes naturally to them," Jasper agreed. "But not to me. Guys like us . . . we have to work twice as hard." He gestured toward the flyer. "But maybe that's not such a bad thing in this case. I bet if you asked your dad, he'd help you put together a workout routine to get you in shape for try-outs."

"Yeah, maybe."

"Throw him a bone. If you let him feel like he's involved in your life, he'll probably cut you a little more slack."

Mike grinned. "Maybe I can talk him into a later curfew."

"Pick your moment. Maybe after a Spartans win."

Alice skipped up to the counter and linked her arm through Jasper's. "Mike, I have a question. I was looking at the Ultralight one- and two-man tents over there, but they seem awfully small. Aren't they cramped?"

"Oh, yeah, that's more of a recommendation for backpackers, who always want to shave off as many ounces from their tent weight as possible. If you don't have to carry it anywhere, I'd recommend some of the larger Coleman's next to them. They have more head room and storage space, but you're probably still better off with one person in a two-man or two people in a four-man."

"Thank you! That's so helpful! But it doesn't look like you have very many. Are there more in the back?"

"Sure. How many do you need?"

"I'd say about twenty-five each of the two-man and four man."

Mike's eyebrows shot up. "Oh. Uh . . . we don't have that many, but I could order some in for you. A rush shipment could probably be here in a couple of days, but it's expensive."

"We're not in a *super* big hurry, but we might end up needing more later. Carlisle's hosting this environmental retreat thing, but getting a head count is an absolute mess."

"I can get you the fifty you need by next Monday, and then after that we try to keep our inventory at about ten or so a piece . . ."

"Still doing okay?" Edward whispered in Bella's ear.

She nodded. She'd been so engrossed in the conversation between Jasper, Mike, and Alice that she had almost forgotten the burn in her throat. It seemed impossible, now that Edward had reminded her of it, but she just breathed into her bandana and tried to kill the cravings.

"It's not too bad if I don't think about it."

"You're doing so well. It's amazing."

She beamed up at him.

"Do you want to meet Mike?" Edward asked, gesturing toward the front counter.

She tucked herself a little closer to Edward, but nodded. It *was* easier to think of him as a person—rather than food—after hearing his thoughts about his father and football.

Edward tightened his arm around her and steered her toward the counter, a yoga DVD clutched in one hand. He waited for Alice to finish discussing her sizeable order of tents, travel chairs, lanterns, ice chests, and other camping gear, and then dropped the DVD on the counter.

"Hey," Mike said, looking uncomfortable again.

"Hey, Mike. This is my friend Bella."

Mike flashed her a smile that was maybe just a little too eager and held out his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

She took his hand, but the moment she felt his pulse flutter at the base of his thumb, she jerked away again. It was just a little *too* tempting. She forced a smile, though, so he wouldn't think she was being rude. "Hi."

"Your hands are freezing. Maybe you need a pair of those gloves." He pointed behind her to a display on one of the end caps.

Bella just smiled.

"Do you live here in Forks?" he asked as he rang up the DVD.

"Um . . . I just moved here."

"Yeah? From where?"

Bella was surprised at the question, and she glanced quickly up at Edward. "Arizona."

Mike frowned and narrowed his eyes. "Hey! I recognize you. Aren't you Chief Swan's daughter?"

Bella gave a start of surprise and Edward and Jasper exchanged wary looks.

"Yeah, your picture was in the paper, back when . . ." Mike trailed off and his eyes widened.

"Listen," Jasper said, leaning in close to Mike. "We're not really advertising the fact that she's back home. She's had a rough couple of months and we'd like to let things settle down a little before mentioning it to anyone. Avoid the gossip, you know?"

Mike nodded, accepting Jasper's excuses without questioning them. "You got it. I won't say anything. But . . ." He looked back at Bella and smiled at her. "I'm glad you're all right."

Edward tossed his cash on the counter and snatched up the DVD, his mood suddenly souring. "Thanks," he muttered, then steered Bella away from the counter without waiting for his change. He stalked outside and opened the car door for Bella before rounding the car and climbing in himself.

"What's wrong?" Bella asked. "Are you worried about him recognizing me."

"No." Edward glared at the store and seethed.

Bella reached out and ran her fingertips over the back of his hand, until he flipped it over and laced their fingers together. "I'm sorry," he said, his expression softening. "I'm being irrational."

"Why? What happened?"

He let out his breath in an irritated huff. "Mike recognized you because he had . . . *fantasies* about you after he saw your picture in the paper."

Bella clapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes widening. "Are you kidding me?" Her voice came out muffled, but she didn't move her hand.

"In his daydreams, he's quite the hero."

Bella couldn't help it. She started giggling. "I'm so flattered!"

Edward huffed in annoyance.

Bella squeezed his hand and sidled as close as the center console would allow. "I'll take real heroes over imaginary ones any day."

He peeked at her out of the corner of his eye and allowed a small smile.

Alice and Jasper left the store then, and Jasper gave Edward a thump on the back of the head as he climbed into the car.

"Feeling threatened by high school boys now?"

"Shut up," Edward muttered.

Bella giggled and stuffed the bandana back in the Ziploc bag. The wolf smell was still plenty strong, and she could use it again next time she saw Charlie.

When they got home, Carlisle was moderating yet another debate between Amun and Aro. Bella wasn't sure why he put up with them the way he did, but he laughed at their petty squabbling and looked genuinely pleased when arguing points with Amun.

For his part, Aro tended to *agree* with Carlisle a lot. He was always pointing out their similarities, or finding justifications for habits of Carlisle's that Amun criticized. While Amun seemed to be attempting to persuade Carlisle to see things his way, Aro was content to mold himself to fit his host's lifestyle.

Mostly, anyway. Bella didn't see him giving up human blood any time soon.

As always, Kebi knelt at Amun's feet, her head bowed and her face veiled. Bella found her behavior deeply unsettling. She didn't know whether Kebi was happy to surrender herself so willingly to Amun's whims or whether she felt forced in some way, but every time Bella thought of Kebi she was hit with a wave of nausea. She kept hoping that Carlisle would say something, that he would demand that Amun show her a little more respect, but if Carlisle was at all disturbed by Amun's treatment of his mate, he kept it to himself.

"Esme," Alice called out as soon as they walked in the door.

Esme appeared at the top of the stairs and leaned over the railing.

Alice gave her a thumbs-up and the two of them shared wide grins before Esme turned and disappeared again.

Edward smirked.

Bella wanted to ask what was going on, but Tia distracted her from the back porch, beckoning to her and the others with a wave of her hand. Alice skipped outside with a delighted grin, and Bella, Edward, and Jasper all followed after.

Benjamin gave them a curious look as they dragged chairs over and sat on them.

"Does the animal blood make you tired?"

Edward grinned and shook his head.

"So why do you sit all the time? It's . . . odd. Isn't it?" He exchanged a glance with Tia. "Is it just our coven that doesn't sit?"

"It's a habit we've cultivated," Jasper answered. "Humans sit, so we sit. We do a lot of unusual things for the purpose of blending in."

"Like going to high school?" he asked with a smirk.

Jasper nodded. "Keeping a stocked kitchen, attending community events, occasionally tripping over something or 'falling asleep' in class. Carlisle even stops for coffee on the way to work every day."

"These are normal human behaviors?" Benjamin asked, a deep curiosity in his eyes.

Jasper arched an eyebrow. "Haven't had much contact with humans?"

"We haven't had much contact with anyone for a very long time. Amun has been . . ."

"Paranoid," Tia supplied.

"Protective," Benjamin said. "He was afraid that my gift would make me a target."

"He's not wrong. Watch your back, kid. There are a lot of people who would love to get their hands on that talent."

"It's a good thing I have friends who I can trust."

Jasper shook his head. "Trust your mate. Everyone else is suspect."

"Are you always so suspicious?" Benjamin asked with a smile.

"Yes, he is." Alice pushed herself out of her chair and moved to curl up in Jasper's lap. "Which is why his judgment is so valuable."

"Are you telling me you don't trust your coven?" Benjamin asked.

"No." Jasper flicked his eyes to where Amun sat beyond the glass, locked in heated debate with Aro. He gave Benjamin a pointed look. "But not everyone is as worthy of my confidence."

Benjamin frowned, but didn't answer.

"Bella, I have a question," Tia said, changing the subject.

Bella raised her eyebrows, inviting her to continue.

"Alice was showing me some really cute skirts in her closet, and I was just wondering. Do you wear skirts? I mean . . . because . . ." She bent down and rolled up the cuff of her jeans, showing off dark hairs that contrasted sharply against her pale skin. "Humans shave their legs, don't they?"

Bella frowned. She hadn't even considered leg hair since she had been turned, but she hadn't exactly been keeping up with her shaving while she was with Joham. "Um. Yeah. They do."

"I've only been able to scrape a few hairs down with my nails, but it leaves stubble. Have you removed any?"

She shook her head, but Alice spoke up with a grimace.

"You can do it, but I'll warn you, it's not pleasant."

"What do you do?"

"Sit down."

Tia sat in the chair that Alice had vacated, and Alice moved to stand in front of her. She grabbed Tia's ankle and raised her leg, and then rapped her fingertip so hard against Tia's leg that it sent a crack running up her skin. Alice quickly snatched three hairs out of the crack before it could seal itself up again.

"Ow!" Tia cried with a gasp. "Oh! Oh, it tingles! It feels so . . . wrong."

"That's your body protesting the separation," Alice told her. "If you burn the hair, it stops tingling."

"Oh." Tia reached out and accepted the hairs that Alice brushed into her palm. "That's so *weird*."

"Do you want to do more? I'll help."

Tia pressed her lips together, debating for a moment. "They were *really* cute skirts."

"Were they?" Benjamin asked, and his interest seemed to help Tia make up her mind.

"Yes. I want to do the rest. But lets get it over with as quickly as possible."

Benjamin jogged into the woods, and while he gathered an armful of dry wood, a ring of rocks and raised earth gathered themselves next to the porch. When he returned, he dumped the wood haphazardly in the circle, and a fire suddenly blazed up.

"There you go," he said with an eager grin.

"Why don't you go change into something shorter so we have better access," Bella suggested.

Tia darted inside, and Alice turned to Bella.

"How about you? Are you in?"

Bella frowned and tugged up the leg of her jeans, eyeing the pale hair on her leg. "I don't know . . ." She wasn't a fan of pain, and she wasn't sure she was willing to put up with it for the sake of fashion. But it suddenly occurred to her that Edward was sitting right next to her, getting an eyeful of hairy leg, and she shoved her pants back into place. She peeked at him out of the corner of her eye, but he didn't look disgusted like she would have expected.

If she'd been human, her cheeks would have been burning with embarrassment.

"What's wrong?" Edward asked her.

She hunched her shoulders, tucking into herself. "Do you think it's gross?"

Edward laughed and tugged up one pant leg, showing off a much thicker growth of hair. "When I was human, most women never shaved their legs. Men still don't. The standard is completely arbitrary, and I honestly don't care one way or the other."

"I don't want to do it," she mumbled.

"Okay," Alice said with a shrug.

And just like that, the subject was dropped. When Tia returned, she and Alice moved a couple of chairs close to the fire and started working at Tia's legs, cracking, plucking, flicking tiny hairs into the flames, and Bella experienced a moment of disorientation. She had spent so long with Joham, having her preferences entirely ignored, being forced to do what he wanted regardless of the pain it caused her. She hadn't noticed the way the atmosphere had changed her, sinking into her skin, crawling through her veins, changing her understanding of herself and of the people around her.

She had actually expected to be forced.

She fought back the sudden urge to vomit. She hadn't always been this girl, too afraid to speak, spending her time hiding in corners and waiting to be dominated. She had always been quiet, but she had liked herself that way.

She didn't like herself now. She didn't like that she had to rally her nerve just to raise her head, or that she always wished she could sink into the walls and disappear. She didn't like the impulse that she had to run every time she was faced with vampires, or humans, or anything even remotely unfamiliar.

She didn't like the fear.

She peeked at Alice and Tia, who were chatting happily beside the fire, despite the pain that Tia was willingly subjecting herself to for the sake of . . . vanity, Bella guessed. It seemed like a high price to pay, but then, what was a little pain to a vampire? Bella had suffered far worse on a daily basis under Joham's care, and that had been in a much more fragile state. The fear of pain suddenly seemed a little bit irrational.

As did the fear of Jasper. She glanced at him and found him watching her, his expression blank, though the angle of the setting sun threw his scars into a sharp relief and added a sinister quality to his face. They still elicited a visceral response in her, those scars, but rationally she knew that Jasper wasn't half as dangerous to her as he looked. He *could* be, but he had chosen not to be. He had prevented her from killing two Quileute men, an action that would surely have gotten her killed by the wolves, and then had brought her back here to a house full of strangers who had been nothing but kind to her. When Charlie came to visit, Jasper stood guard to make sure she wouldn't do something she would regret. When she had asked for help finding her son, it was Jasper who had called on his connections to begin the search.

He could be vicious. That fact was literally etched into his skin. But his actions spoke at least as loudly as his countenance did, and Bella was regretting her stubbornness regarding him.

She thought of Alice devoting so much thought to creating a room that Bella would feel comfortable in, of Esme holding her as tenderly as any mother could, of Rosalie's wry humor and her determination to back up her words with action.

She thought of Emmett and his energizing smile. Neither he nor Carlisle had held her lapses in judgment against her. She had attacked both of them, and they had forgiven her without a moment's hesitation.

And then there was Edward. Solid and patient, with a smile that could replace the sun. When Bella was tied in knots, Edward loosened them. When she felt adrift, he anchored her. Whatever she lacked, he became, and he did it with a warmth that almost made her feel like she was worthy of his efforts.

For the first time, Bella looked around her and saw her situation for what it was. She was *safe* here. Aro and Amun were dangerous, and the jury was still out on Tia and Benjamin—and yet, despite their presence, Bella realized she had nothing to fear. She was among friends, and they were strong.

She was distracted from her thoughts by the sharp, deliberate rap of a stiletto heel on wood. It was a sound that was designed to demand attention, and Bella looked inside where Esme stood at the top of the stairs.

Her jaw dropped.

Esme was dressed in a long, red dress that draped and clung in the most tantalizing of ways. She had pulled her hair over one shoulder, emphasizing the smooth, bare column of exposed throat on one side, and she graced the men below her with a sultry, seductive smile.

Carlisle went still, his only movement a slow parting of his lips as he drew in a shallow breath.

"Carlisle," Esme murmured, slowly blinking her smoky eyelids. "Take me dancing."

His only answer was a dazed nod and the flicker of his eyes as he took her in from head to toe. Esme shifted, letting the slit of the skirt fall open and expose one long, slender leg, and Carlisle

gulped.

"My, my . . ." Aro murmured. "You are a *lucky* man, Carlisle."

He swallowed hard.

Esme's lips, stained a deep red, pulled into a pretty pout. "You'll take me, won't you darling?"

"Absolutely." His answer came out as a reverent whisper, and Esme rewarded him with a pleased smile.

Bella gawked. *That* was what she wanted. She was sick of pathetic, mousy little Bella. She wanted to be able to command attention with a single step and hold it with the curve of her spine and the set of her shoulders. She wanted eyes that kept secrets and lips that promised to tell them. She wanted the strength and self-assurance that she saw now at the top of the stairs.

Amun, however, seemed less impressed. "Really, Carlisle? You're going to let your woman lead you around by the nose?"

"Absolutely," he said again, his eyes fixed on Esme's legs.

"Darling?" Esme prompted. "Don't you think you should change clothes?"

Her request seemed to snap Carlisle out of his reverie. He raced up the stairs and past his wife, and returned in less than a minute dressed all in black. He swept Esme up in his arms, eliciting a bright, gay laugh, and carried her down the stairs.

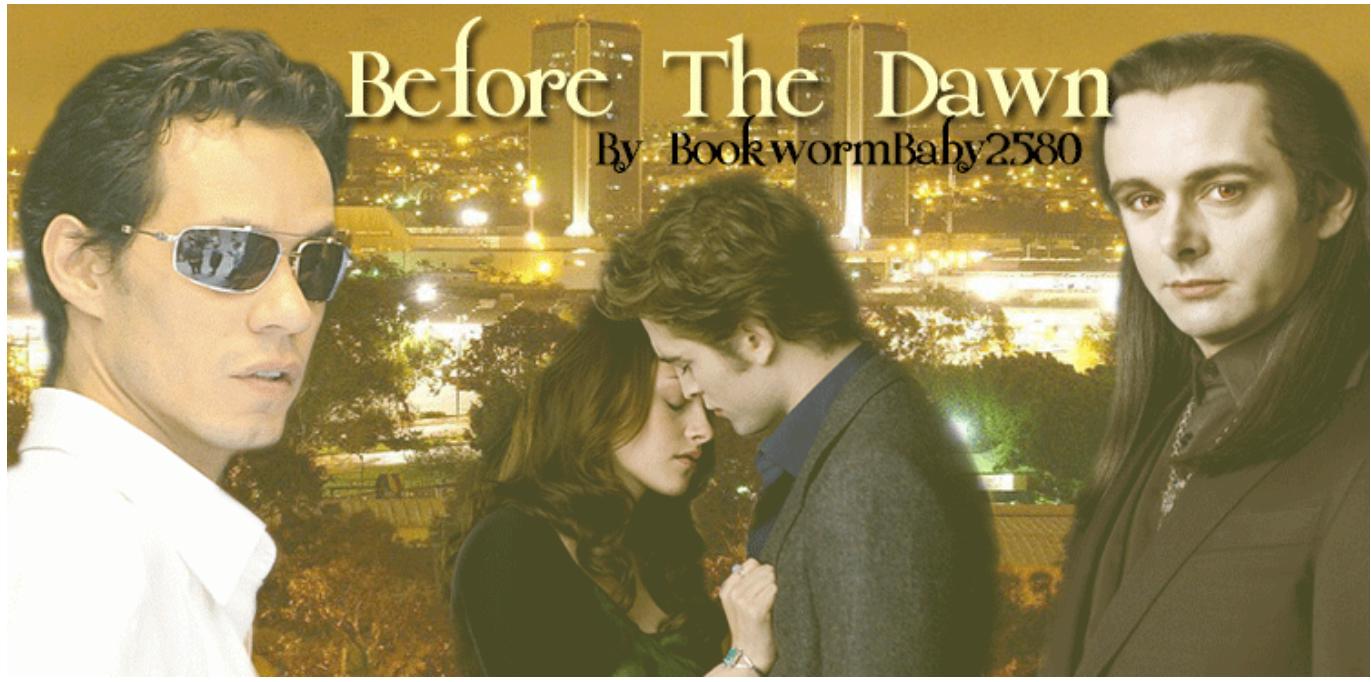
"Jasper, keep those two from killing each other while I'm gone, won't you?" he said over his shoulder, and then rushed Esme out the door.

Everyone on the porch with Bella laughed, and Bella cast a surreptitious glance at Edward. As usual, just the sight of his smile made her stronger. She lifted her chin and smiled back, not hesitantly or shyly, but with a delight that matched his.

She didn't have Esme's strength yet, but a determined little seed had been planted. One day it would be her standing there with Edward in her thrall, her confidence revealed in every move the way Esme's had been. She wasn't sure how she would get there, but she knew one thing for certain: she wasn't going to manage it if she was worried about hair.

"I changed my mind," she told Alice. "I want to do my legs, too."

These Women



Carlisle and Esme stayed out until after sunrise, and when they returned they were freshly showered, wearing different clothes than they'd had on when they left.

And they were glowing.

"Well, Bella," Carlisle said after greeting the others, "I think we've kept your poor mother waiting long enough, don't you?"

Bella jumped up, wide-eyed.

"Come on. Let's get you set up, and then Esme and I will head over to your father's house and show your parents how to contact you."

"Make-up!" Alice cried, darting up the stairs. "I'm sorry, Bella, but you look too beautiful to convince anyone that you're sick." She reappeared with a make-up bag and followed Carlisle and Bella into the office.

Bella listened to Carlisle's instructions on how to use the webcam while Alice dulled her lips and smudged dark rings around her eyes. She slicked Bella's hair back and wound it up in a bun behind her head, then handed her a fresh pair of colored contacts.

"You'll have to replace these if you talk for very long. If you feel them starting to get thin, make an excuse to duck out of range of the camera and put new ones in."

"Got it."

"And don't sit so straight. Slump your shoulders like you're tired. You're supposed to be tired."

Bella slumped her shoulders.

"Oh, and I've got something for you to wear," Carlisle said.

Alice's eyes glazed over for just a moment, and she stiffened. "No!" she cried, but Carlisle had already returned and was holding a thin hospital gown out toward Bella.

Wild panic erupted inside of her at the sight of it and she staggered back, colliding with the wall. She felt the sheetrock crumble behind her, heard the splintering of the wood, and then she was tumbling out the other side of the wall onto Esme's clean, white carpet.

Before she could get up, Edward was at her side. He gathered her up into his arms and pulled her into his lap, rocking her back and forth. His soothing whispers eased her terror, until Carlisle moved toward her, peering at her through the hole in the wall, the hospital gown still clutched in his hand.

"No!" Bella screamed, trying to scramble out of Edward's grasp.

"Shhh, just relax. No one is going to hurt you."

"I don't want it!" she begged. She grasped at him since he wouldn't let her go, her fingers tearing his clothes as she tried to find an unbreakable grip. "Please, please, please, please!"

"What is it, Bella? I don't understand?"

Carlisle frowned down at the gown in his hand, and then left the office and strode out onto the back porch. He moved to the fire pit that Alice had used the night before and tossed the gown into the ashes.

"Benjamin, would you mind?"

By now, everyone in the house had gathered around to see what was wrong, Benjamin included. He nodded, and flames erupted in the fire pit, burning the flimsy fabric to ashes in seconds.

Bella's terror drifted away with the smoke, and she collapsed against Edward. She buried her face in the crook of his neck as dry, heaving sobs shook her body.

"It's okay," he whispered over and over again. "I've got you. You don't have to be afraid."

It was several minutes before she had calmed down enough to fully realize her position. Edward was holding her in his lap with his arms wrapped around her, pressing her firmly against his hard body while he whispered comforting words in her ear. As she calmed down, his lips trailed down the line of her jaw, awakening every nerve with their soft, tentative explorations.

Their audience all drifted away, leaving them in relative privacy, and in that moment she wanted him more than she had ever wanted anything. There was no justification for this. They were breaking Charlie's rules now, without a doubt. But if he just understood how much she needed Edward, surely he wouldn't object.

Edward's lips drifted toward her chin. "We're not supposed to be doing this," he whispered, a hint of mischief beneath his words.

"No," she agreed.

"We're supposed to be waiting."

"Yes."

She felt him smile before he placed a very careful kiss right at the corner of her mouth. "Don't tell Charlie."

She grinned, and he released his hold on her, his warm smile soothing away any lingering anxiety. At least, it did until she looked up and saw the damage she had caused to the office. She gasped and stared at the ragged plaster and splintered boards.

"I broke the wall!" she wailed.

Edward started laughing, a full, free sound that helped to ground her again. It couldn't wash away the guilt she felt at causing *more* destruction, though, and she turned to him with a troubled frown.

"I keep ruining your house!"

He shook his head, still laughing, and nudged her off of his lap so he could climb to his feet.

"Don't worry about it," he said, pulling her up with him.

"But I put a hole in the wall!"

"So we'll fix it." He wrapped an arm around her waist. "You wouldn't believe how many walls I destroyed when I was a newborn. Carlisle and I got very good at rebuilding them."

Bella peered up at him. "Just like that? You break walls and fix them?"

He shrugged.

"That's weird."

"When your body is harder than your house, it's not that weird."

Bella giggled. "Now you're just bragging."

Edward snickered and kissed the top of her head. "Come on, beautiful. Let's go upstairs and see if we can find you something a little less fashionable to wear for your conference with your mother. Most hospitals don't stock Alexander McQueen."

Bella sighed and looked down at yet another ruined blouse. *She* may have been harder than the house, but her clothes weren't, and the splintered wood had snagged the delicate fabric and blighted the weave. And hers wasn't the only one. She had left a handful of tears in Edward's shirt, though he was gracious enough not to mention them. He just took her hand, and the two of them went upstairs to change.

Bella searched through her closet until she found a sleeveless cotton top that could almost pass for simple hospital clothing if you didn't look closely at it. By the time she emerged from her bedroom again, Carlisle had relocated the webcam to the library and was moving some furniture around so that, once again, she would have nothing more than a bare corner showing behind her.

"There we are," he said. "How's that?"

Bella gave him an awkward shrug. "Sorry. Again."

"It's my fault. I didn't realize that would upset you." He hesitated, then reached out and squeezed her shoulder. "I apologize."

The contact still felt a little uncomfortable to Bella, but she was learning to recognize the good intentions behind it. She took a step closer to let him know she didn't mind, and allowed him to tuck her under his arm.

"It seems like such a stupid thing to get worked up about," she muttered.

Carlisle shook his head. "Sometimes the smallest things trigger bad memories. I wish I could tell you that there was a way to prevent it, but there isn't. It's your mind's way of coming to terms with what happened."

"I'm sorry I damaged the house again."

He chuckled. "It's all right. After you've spoken with your mother, you and Edward can work on repairing the wall."

"Okay."

He dropped his arm and stepped back. "Are you ready?"

She nodded.

"All right. Esme and I will be on our way. Wait for our call."

Bella had Alice help her touch up her smudged make-up and put in her contact lenses, and then sat behind the desk in the library and fidgeted. She jumped when the alert sounded that signaled an incoming connection, and she quickly accepted the call. After a few seconds of loading, a grainy image filled the screen of her computer. Renée was leaning forward, peering at the computer with an expression of eager befuddlement on her face, while Charlie sat beside her, grinding his teeth.

"Renée, it has to load. If you keep hitting buttons, you'll—"

Bella didn't hear the end of his sentence, because the screen suddenly went black. Renée had done exactly what Charlie had been trying to warn her not to do.

She giggled, imagining the exasperation on her father's face as she sent her own summons to connect with them on video chat. After a few seconds more, the image of her parents appeared on the screen again, but this time Renée was sitting back on the couch while Charlie leaned forward to fiddle with the computer.

Bella reminded herself to slump her shoulders, and she forced her smile into something that looked a little weaker.

"Hi," she said, giving the camera a little fluttering wave.

"Bella?" Renée raised her hands to cover her mouth, and then promptly burst into tears. "Baby, is it really you? We've been so worried! You never answered my calls, and then you weren't there, and I didn't know what to do . . ." Her mother's voice trailed off into a high-pitched wail and she turned and buried her face in Charlie's chest.

Bella was torn between guilt over the worry she had caused her mother and amusement at the expression on Charlie's face. He had never been comfortable with emotional displays, and from the weariness in his eyes, Bella imagined he'd had to put up with a lot of them lately.

"So, Dad," she said, forcing herself not to smile, "are you enjoying having Mom staying with you?"

He rolled his eyes in silent answer and urged Renée off of him. "Honey, come on, Bella doesn't want to see you crying. She wants to talk to her mother. Here, use a tissue, not my shirt."

Bella waited patiently while Charlie helped Renée pull herself together. When she was finally composed again, she turned and peered closely at Bella. It felt a little strange, since the webcam sat to the side of the computer, so when Renée peered at Bella, it looked as though she were staring off to one side of her. The video chat thing wasn't quite as natural as face-to-face communication.

"Look at you," Renée whispered. "You're so thin! You look like you haven't had a bite to eat since I last saw you!"

Bella smiled awkwardly. "It's the ultimate diet plan. Celebrities would pay big bucks to pick up an immune deficiency."

Renée let out a soggy laugh.

"But don't worry. I'm getting plenty to eat now, and I've stopped losing weight. I'm feeling a lot better."

"Well, you look . . . just beautiful."

She snorted. "I look terrible, and you know it."

"No you don't! I mean, you look tired, but all that weight you lost makes you look older and . . . I don't know, elegant."

"Elegant?" Bella giggled. "Talk about false advertising."

Renée sighed sadly. "What happened, baby? Where have you been all this time?"

So far Bella had gotten by with merely stretching the truth, but now it was time to lie. She didn't like lying, especially to her mother, and she knew she wasn't very good at it. *What would Esme do?* she asked herself. *What would she say to make this believable?*

Bella pictured Esme in her mind, trying to channel the sweet, familiar earnestness, the way she held her head, the tone of her voice. And she thought of Jasper and how easily he had lied to Mike. He'd avoided any specific details and then deflected attention back onto Mike.

She could do that.

"I don't really remember very much," she told her mother. "I must have been really sick, because it's all kind of hazy. But what about you? You guys must have been freaking out."

It worked like a charm. Renée groaned and launched into a monologue about how worried she had been when Bella hadn't answered any of her calls, and all of the things she and Charlie had done to try and find her. Guilt festered, tying Bella's stomach in knots as she listened to her mother's tale of woe.

"Phil's manager gave him some time off," Renée was saying, "but he had to go back after about a month. He wanted to be here so bad. He said to say the word as soon as we could visit you, and he would fly up."

"He doesn't have to come up. I can video chat with him as easily in Phoenix as I can in Washington."

"But we want to *see* you."

"Mom, you can't. Immune deficiency, remember? I have to be in a sterile environment."

"I'm not sick. I won't infect you with anything."

Bella heard Carlisle's voice through the computer, but she couldn't make out what he was saying. It obviously didn't please Renée, though, because she scowled at him.

"That's the way it is, Renée," Charlie muttered. He looked tired, and Bella felt a pang of sympathy for him. Renée could be relentless, and it took a lot of energy to put up with her sometimes.

Renée pursed her lips and looked back at the computer screen. "Well. Maybe after you're feeling better."

Bella let it go and was grateful for the reprieve.

"So what do you do all day in this hospital of yours?"

"Not much," she said, affecting a rueful grimace. "But now that I have a computer, I'll be able to do pretty much what I always did before. Curl up in bed and read for hours on end."

"What about school? You can't just quit school, can you?"

"What's the point of going to school now?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Bella. You can't give up your education. What kind of future can you have if you don't even finish high school?"

Bella frowned. "Mom . . . you get what this is, right? I'm not here so I can get better and get out again." She peered at her mother's face, anxiously gauging her reaction. "I thought Dr. Cullen explained that to you. I can't leave the hospital, and even in here . . . I don't have that much longer."

Renée stared silently at the computer screen for several long seconds, and then she stood up and stalked away.

"Mom!"

"I'll handle it," Charlie said with a sigh, and followed Renée off camera.

Edward appeared in the doorway and Bella looked up at him, wanting nothing more than to go to him and let him hold her and help her forget all of the hard things she had to deal with. But she didn't. She stayed and waited for her mother, and she drew strength from the fact that he would be there for her when she was finished.

Esme's face appeared on the computer screen, and she gave Bella a bracing smile.

"You're doing great," she whispered. She glanced off camera, where Bella could hear muffled arguing, and then leaned forward. "I know that was hard, but it was exactly the right thing to say."

Bella forced an unconvincing smile. She really hoped that this wasn't doing more harm than good.

Esme glanced off camera again, then blew Bella quick kiss and scooted out of the way.

Renée took her place again, her lips pressed into a hard line.

"Isabella Marie Swan, I've had enough of this."

Edward widened his eyes dramatically from the doorway. "*She middle-named you,*" he whispered. "You're in trouble."

Bella bit her lip to keep from smiling.

"You listen to me," Renée said. "I know the last few months have probably been very confusing for you, and maybe you're even a little resentful that I got married again."

"What?" Bella stared at her computer screen in bewilderment. "What are you talking about? I love Phil."

"It's okay, Bella. All the books said you would feel betrayed and act out in some way or another. I won't pretend it doesn't bother me that you called your father instead of me, but I understand it."

"That wasn't—"

Renée's withering glare stopped her.

"Whatever it was, it's forgiven. But now it's time to tell me the truth."

"I don't understand what you mean."

She let out an irritated sigh. "Do you remember Sarah Black?"

"What?" Bella shook her head, confused. "No, not really."

"We used to spend a lot of time with her. Charlie and Billy would go off fishing, and you and I would spend the day with Sarah and her kids. And you all used to love it when Sarah would take you out to the beach and tell you stories. Only she didn't tell you about Little Red Riding Hood or the Three Little Pigs. In her stories, the wolves were the good guys." She arched an eyebrow at something off camera. "I spent enough time listening to Sarah's stories to recognize a pair of Cold Ones when I see them."

Bella's jaw dropped and Edward's eyes widened in genuine surprise. Several moments passed in silence, but then Renée crossed her arms over her chest.

"I'm waiting. I don't know what happened, but I know your doctor is a liar. Now tell me the truth, and I don't want to hear another word about that ridiculous immune deficiency. Where are you?"

Bella was torn between denying everything and confessing everything. She wanted more than anything to come clean to her mother, but she recognized the threat. Renée simply wouldn't be able to keep quiet about this.

"Well." Edward strode into the room and dragged a chair from another desk over next to Bella. He plunked down into it and dropped an arm over her shoulders. "This puts us in kind of an awkward position."

"Hands *off*, Cullen," Charlie's voice growled from off camera.

Edward let his arm fall to his side.

"The thing is," he told Renée, "we're very invested in remaining anonymous. Carlisle is the best doctor that Forks has ever had, but can you imagine what would happen if people knew a vampire was working at the local hospital?"

"How do you think I feel, knowing that vampire is keeping me from my little girl?"

Edward glanced at Bella and shrugged. "She has a point."

So Bella told her a truncated version of events. She told her about stopping in Tijuana and about meeting Joham, but she skipped over everything to do with Alexander. That, she decided, she simply couldn't talk about. At least not yet. Not unless she could get him back.

But she told her mother about being turned into a vampire, and about running away and swimming to avoid the temptation to kill. She told her about finding Jasper in the woods and all that the Cullens had done for her, and by the time she finished, her mother was crying.

"Honey, what are you saying?" she asked, sniffling into the tissues that Charlie had handed her. "You're not one of them. You don't look at all like they do. Sure, you're pale, but that's just because you've been sick."

Edward wordlessly passed Bella a handkerchief, and she began wiping away the make-up Alice had so carefully applied. With each stroke of the cloth, Renée's eyes widened.

She cleared her throat. "You were awfully committed to lying to your mother, weren't you?"

"I was just trying to protect you. This is a dangerous secret, and you're not very good at keeping secrets."

"Well . . . so what if I'm not?"

Bella rolled her eyes, but Renée continued.

"Who cares if I can't keep a secret? Nobody ever listens to me anyway. I'm just gullible old Renée who believes every crazy story she's ever heard—and now might be a good time to point out that, as it turns out, some of those crazy stories are true. But that's not the point. The point is, if I slip up and say something about vampires, who's going to believe me?"

Bella considered that, and shrugged. "Okay, that's probably true."

"Of course it's true. Now apologize to your mother for lying."

"I'm sorry, Mom. You're right, it wasn't fair."

"And you're not dying, are you?"

"No. Actually, just the opposite. I'm not going to get any older."

"What?" Renée's mouth dropped open. "You're going to stay a teenager forever? Baby, you're so lucky!"

Edward snorted. "Yeah, it's a real treat."

"How old are you?" Renée asked.

"A hundred and three."

Renée laughed in delight. "It's like Peter Pan! You never have to grow up!"

Bella wasn't half as excited about that prospect as her mother was, but she only smiled.

"Bella? Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Um . . . yeah. This is Edward Cullen." She glanced at him. "He's Dr. Cullen's . . . son. Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"We're family," Edward explained. "We live together, and I pose as his adopted son."

"But you aren't really related?"

"We are in a way that matters to our kind. Loyalty means at least as much to us as blood relationships mean to humans."

Renée looked abashed. "Of course. I didn't mean to imply . . ."

"It's all right," Edward said with a chuckle, shaking his head. "We're an unusual family, both to vampires and humans."

"I can't believe you figured it out from Sarah's old stories," Bella said.

"Yeah, well . . . Karen Newton also mentioned that she'd seen you in her store the other day."

Bella's jaw dropped again. "*Karen* Newton? But I thought the only ones there were Mike and that lady buying swimming suit."

"Karen was in the back doing inventory," Edward muttered. "I wasn't even paying attention to her."

"Nice catch," Jasper drawled from downstairs.

Edward glowered.

"Karen was always such a sweetheart," Renée was saying. "She hosted my baby shower when I was pregnant with you, and I used to take you for play dates with her little boy all the time."

"With Mike?"

"He was so cute. He used to follow you around like a little puppy. If you were happy, he was happy. If you cried, he cried."

Edward glowered harder.

"Anyway, baby, I don't really know what to do. I want to see you, but if it's really that hard for you to smell blood . . . but you were in Karen's store . . . I just don't know, honey. Tell me what to do."

"The blood is *really* hard to deal with," Bella told her. "But I've been able to see Charlie for short visits."

Bella realized that was probably the wrong thing to say about the time that her mother's face started turning red.

"CHARLIE SWAN!" she yelled. "YOU'VE BEEN TO SEE HER? YOU KNEW ALL ALONG WHAT WAS HAPPENING AND YOU SAT THERE AND LIED RIGHT TO MY FACE?"

"Crap," she muttered. "It's not his fault. It's mine; I made him lie."

"I'VE BEEN A COMPLETE WRECK!" she said, leaping to her feet. "AND YOU DIDN'T SAY ONE WORD, NOT *ONE WORD* TO LET ME KNOW THAT SHE WAS PERFECTLY FINE ALL ALONG!"

Bella knew she needed to distract her mother before she had a chance to build up a good head of steam. "You should come over now." She glanced quickly at Edward to make sure it was okay, and turned back to Renée when he nodded. "You can see my room. Alice decorated it to remind me of home."

It worked. Renée dropped back into her seat, still breathing hard but with curiosity showing on her face. "Who's Alice?"

"She's Edward's sister. They have kind of a big family."

"And you're living with them now?"

"Yeah. Seriously, you should come over. It's beautiful here."

"Really? You don't mind?"

"No, not at all. I've missed you so much, Mom."

"I've missed you, too! I can't wait another minute. I'll be there before you know it!" She jumped up and hurried away, and a moment later Charlie appeared on the computer screen.

"That woman's going to give me an ulcer," he muttered.

Bella giggled. "Are you coming along?"

"Is that okay?"

"Of course. When she gets too crazy, I'll deflect attention off of me by reminding her that you spent the last few days letting her suffer."

"Great. Thanks."

Bella grinned at him.

"We'll see you in a few minutes," Charlie said, then reached forward and turned off the webcam.

Bella changed into a pair of shorts and a slightly more stylish top to meet her mother. She felt the contact lenses dissolving in her eyes as she covered herself in scented product, but opted not to put in a second pair. There was apparently no need to hide now. She wrapped another one of Jared's bandanas around her neck and then wandered down to the river and waded out into the shallows.

Edward and Jasper joined her there, always ready to protect her from herself, but this time Benjamin and Tia followed, too.

"Your mother is coming to visit?" Benjamin asked.

She nodded.

"Do you mind if I stay and watch?"

She blinked in surprise. "You . . . you want to watch me talk to my mother?"

"Unless you don't want me to."

"You can, but it might be kind of boring."

"On the contrary, I find human relationships fascinating. Family behavior, in particular, is very strange."

"It is?"

He cocked his head. "Don't you see how odd it is that you allow humans to chastise you and tell you what to do? When you're so much stronger than they are?"

She just shrugged and let the river's current catch one foot and tug it away from the other. Her legs looked a lot better after her grooming session with Alice and Tia, she thought, and she rubbed her foot against the back of her other leg, absently enjoying the smoothness of her skin.

"It's not as much about power as it is about love and respect," Edward told Benjamin. "It's one of the reasons we choose to live like humans, actually. We value that dynamic."

"You enjoy answering to humans?"

"Sometimes, sure. It makes us part of the community. There's give and take for all involved."

"Fascinating."

They heard a pair of cars turn onto the gravel drive in the distance, and Tia and Benjamin leapt across the river and climbed up into a tree near the banks. Bella wandered up out of the water and took her place beside Edward and Jasper. Edward kissed her temple and winked at her before stepping away to leave a Charlie-approved amount of space between them.

Renée was the first to reach them. As soon as she caught a glimpse of Bella through the trees, she started squealing and threw herself at her daughter. Bella was careful to cushion the blow, and she let Renée squeeze her as tightly as she could and rock her back and forth.

"So," she said when she finally released her. "Tell me all about it. Do you raid blood banks in the middle of the night? Do you turn into a bat?"

Bella giggled. "We drink animal blood. And so far I haven't turned into anything except an out-of-control idiot."

"You?" Renée kicked off her shoes and started rolling up the cuffs of her capris. "I don't believe a word of it."

The others caught up with them then, but didn't join the conversation. Charlie, Carlisle, and Esme sat down on the large rock on the edge of the riverbank while Bella and Renée waded into the shallows, chatting about what it was like to be a newborn vampire. Bella told Renée about her frustrating lack of impulse control, and Renée started laughing.

"It serves you right for being such a grown-up kid!" she giggled.

Bella kicked a spray of water at her.

"So what about the night life? Are there exclusive clubs that cater to vampires?"

Bella raised her eyebrows. "Exclusive clubs?"

"You know, like on that show on HBO. They're always going out to vampire bars and getting in fights."

Bella snorted. "No. No vampire bars."

Talking with her mother wasn't like talking with Charlie. Charlie was solid, sensible, and exactly what she needed with her life so out of control. But Renée was the one she could share the crazy minutia with, and who could make her laugh by coming up with things like vampire night life. With every laugh and roll of her eyes, she could feel the little broken pieces of herself fusing back together.

"So," Renée said after about a half an hour, "let's get to the good stuff. That boy." She raised her eyebrows and looked pointedly at Edward, who was skipping stones with Jasper a few yards away. "He's cute."

"Yeah." Bella ducked her head and laughed. "He is. He can also hear us."

"He can?" She looked at Edward again, and he winked at her. "Well. That doesn't change anything. He's still really cute."

"He's off-limits," Charlie growled from his rock.

Carlisle sighed. "I wish you'd reconsider. They're good for each other."

"Reconsider what?" Renée demanded.

"The two of them," Charlie said, gesturing between Bella and Edward. "Living together and . . ." He waved his hand and grimaced.

Renée's eyes went wide. "And what? Bella! Is he your boyfriend? You've never had a boyfriend! This is so—"

"No!" Charlie interrupted. "He most certainly is not her boyfriend."

"Why not?" She looked over at Edward again, and then back at Charlie.

"Oh, for god's sake, Renée. Do you really think it's a good idea for your sixteen-year-old daughter to be living with her boyfriend?"

"Oh." She twisted a toe in the mud at her feet. "Well, when you put it that way . . ."

Charlie huffed.

Renée looked at Bella apologetically, as though she thought her admission might be some kind of betrayal. "It's probably best to listen to your father. He's usually right about these things." But she leaned in close and whispered in Bella's ear, "He'll come around."

Bella grinned and met Edward's eye. He grinned back, but it was short lived. After a moment he was distracted by something back at the house, and he turned to stare intently through the trees.

"We've got this," he murmured to Jasper. "Go."

Jasper didn't hesitate, and he didn't bother to hide his speed. He darted back to the house, and a moment later Bella heard a low, aggravated curse.

"You've got to stop this," he growled. When he didn't get an answer, he raised his voice. "Damn it, Alice, I mean it!"

"Carlisle is counting on me," Alice said, her voice low and distracted.

"What's going on?" Renée asked. "What are you all looking at?"

"Nothing." Bella turned away from the house and waded a little deeper, until the water nearly reached her knees.

"He's counting on you to gather supplies," Jasper was saying. "He doesn't expect you to prevent every possible problem."

"Oh, dear," Carlisle said. He stood, but hesitated, his eyes on Bella and Renée."

"Esme and I can handle her," Edward told him.

Carlisle smiled gratefully and then turned and jogged back toward the house.

"What's wrong?" Renée asked.

"Alice is upset about something," Bella said, deciding a full explanation of the upcoming caucus would probably be a little too much for her mother's nerves. "They're just trying to make her feel better."

"Which one is Alice?"

"She's Jasper's wife."

"*Wife?* He's *married?* But he's so young!"

"He's a hundred and sixty," Edward said with a grin.

"Right." She pursed her lips and nodded. "No more aging. That's going to take some getting used to."

"Tell me about it," Edward agreed. "Do you know how many times I've graduated from high school?"

Renée laughed, and then turned to Bella. "Speaking of which . . . what are we going to do about school for you? I guess you're probably not coming back home. What do we do about truancy and all that?"

"Carlisle will help us get a medical waiver for her so she can stay home for a year," Esme said. "If she's up to it, maybe she can return next fall."

"And what about you?" Bella asked. "Classes start for you at the end of the month, don't they? Is your classroom all ready?"

"Oh, well." Renée looked away. "I thought maybe I might resign, actually."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're *here*."

"And, what, you thought you'd move to Forks to be close to me? You tried that once, remember? It didn't end well."

"That was different."

"But you still hate it here."

"Well . . ." She shrugged. "Who doesn't?"

Bella laughed. "I don't, actually. I'm learning to appreciate the rain, if you can believe it."

"Impossible. My daughter adores the sunshine."

"Yeah, well, your daughter now sparkles in the sunshine."

She gasped. "You do? Not *really*?"

Bella nodded. "Sometime when it's not so overcast I'll have to show you. It's . . . well, it's weird, actually, but I'm getting used to it."

"If you can get used to that," Renée said resolutely, "I can get used to Forks."

"What about Phil? He's not going to give up baseball to come live here."

She sighed. "I can't leave. I've tried living without you, Bella, and it doesn't work. I'm a complete mess."

"Don't you think it will be different now, though? I mean, now that you know where I am and you don't have to worry about me?"

"So sensible," she muttered, and pulled Bella close to kiss her cheek.

It was a little too much. Bella had kept the thirst at bay fairly well, but at her mother's close proximity it flared up, burning her throat, making her whole body tremble from the temptation of it. She jerked out of her mother's embrace and dove down into the water, letting the heavy flow insulate her from the scent she craved so badly.

Esme and Edward were at her side in an instant, both still fully clothed, both gripping her arms, just in case.

"What's happening?" Renée asked in alarm. "Bella? What's wrong?"

Esme explained Bella's favorite trick to quell her bloodlust, and Bella let herself be soothed by the pride she heard in Esme's voice. It reminded her that she was doing something right, that there were things she wanted more than blood. She took a moment to cement that thought in her head, then surfaced and brushed the hair out of her face.

"Sorry," she said, wiping at the water dripping from her face. "Being a newborn sucks."

"It's time to go," Charlie said, standing up.

"No!" Bella spun to face him, craving just a little bit more time. "Please don't go yet. I haven't even shown you guys my room. It's so pretty. And you have to meet Alice. Please? I'm not ready for you to go."

Charlie relented. "As long as you're up to it."

"I am. I totally am. Just . . ." She tugged at the bandana around her neck. The river water had dulled the scent, and she *really* needed a new one. "I just have to change this, and I'll be all set. Please stay? I'll be right back."

Renée and Charlie stayed another hour, and oohed and ahhed appropriately when Bella showed them her room, the wall she had recently destroyed, and her skin sparkling in a ray of sun that peeked out from behind the ever-present ceiling of clouds. Renée wanted to take pictures, but Carlisle quickly stepped in to remind her of the importance of discretion. She dutifully waited until the sunlight was gone, and then snapped a few pictures of Bella to take home to Phil.

"We can still video chat online," Bella promised her. "In fact, it will be a lot easier for me."

"Yes, but who will go with me to cake decorating classes? Or recreate Paris in the living room with cardboard boxes and watercolors? Who will learn Esperanto with me?"

Bella laughed and shook her head at some of the crazy things that they had done together. "You'll just have to talk Phil into it, I guess. And just think. He's not such a klutz, so you could probably even get him to go spelunking with you."

"Ooh, spelunking . . . I've wanted to try that for so long. You know, I heard there were a ton of old Spanish mines in Sycamore Canyon . . ."

"See? You should definitely go exploring. Just be safe, okay? If you're splattered all over the bottom of some ravine, you won't be able to cash in all the mountains of Spanish gold you're going to find."

Charlie rolled his eyes. "Don't encourage her."

After Bella said goodbye to her parents, Aro, Amun, and Kebi all emerged from where they had been hiding out. Without really being directed to, the Cullens and their guests gathered outside on the porch. Benjamin immediately began peppering Bella with questions about cake decorating and lost Spanish mines, but Aro had something more serious on his mind.

"She guessed what you were," he told Carlisle quietly.

Carlisle nodded.

"If she could, what's to stop others from guessing?"

"Nothing. On very rare occasions, people recognize that there's something legitimately different about us. They rarely guess correctly, which I believe we can attribute to the absurdity of their vampire stories, but there are a few who have understood that we're not quite human."

"There have been others?"

"Yes. Edward's mother, for example. Before she died, she made it clear to me that she knew I could keep Edward from dying. I'm not sure she realized what she was asking, but she *did* ask me to do what others couldn't."

"And yet you continue to live among humans? Jeopardizing our anonymity?"

Amun snorted. "Don't be a hypocrite, Aro. You've had plenty of your own dealings with humans. Don't think we don't know about your business ventures. You made obscene profits by intimidating crime lords and captains of industry. Do you think they never guessed that your minions were more than human?"

"They never guessed we were vampires," Aro argued.

"Renée wouldn't have either, if not for the chance repetition of an old legend."

"Yes," Aro murmured thoughtfully. "It's not the woman who's the problem. It's that tribe . . ."

"Don't threaten my friends," Carlisle said, his voice low and warning. "I won't stand for it."

"Threaten? No, no, of course not. But suppose we could reach an agreement with them? After all, you've convinced them to abide by this treaty of yours . . ."

Aro trailed off, staring sightlessly into the trees as his mind continued to work.

"Leave them alone. Their land is off-limits to all of us."

"Of course, of course. I wouldn't dream of breaking a covenant with them."

Aro was still thinking, but Carlisle let it go. Bella didn't, though. The hungry look in Aro's eyes made the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. She found herself hoping that the political race wouldn't come down to Aro and Amun, because she wasn't sure she could stand either one of them having any power over her life.

Sixteen days after they left, Emmett and Rosalie returned. They were optimistic about the contacts that they had made in Russia and Australia, but they weren't as certain of their success in India. They had met three nomads, but none of them would commit to making the trip. Each had promised to pass the word along, though, so there was some hope that there would be at least a small Asian presence at the gathering.

The following day, Tanya and her sisters arrived from Alaska. The Cullens greeted them on the front porch, and Bella couldn't help but feel a little twinge of jealousy when Edward hugged Tanya hello.

They kept their embrace brief, however, and then Tanya turned to Bella, holding up a leather thong with a little stone lion's head dangling from it.

"I brought you a gift," she said. "It's an Aleut charm. The lion represents strength of will and familial ties. Considering your recent changes . . ." she gestured to Edward, and then to the other Cullens, "I thought it seemed appropriate."

Bella took it from her and inspected the intricate carving in the stone. "It's beautiful."

"The Aleut people used to believe that an amulet would be more powerful if it was carved from a stone taken from the stomach of a sea otter."

Bella's eyes went wide, and Tanya smiled.

"Not the tastiest of creatures, sea otters."

"You *actually* found a sea otter with a stone in its stomach?"

"It took me a few tries."

Edward peered at the stone over Bella's shoulder. "It really is beautiful. But rough. You didn't carve it, did you?"

"What kind of Aleut talisman would it be if it had been carved by a Russian vampire? I took it to an old man in Juneau who sells novelties to tourists. He carved it for me."

"This is really amazing," Bella said. "Thank you, Tanya."

"Let me help you put it on," Edward told her.

Bella lifted her hair and let him tie the leather behind her neck. He gave her shoulders a squeeze when he finished, and Tanya turned away with a knowing smile.

Aro stepped out onto the porch then, and Bella immediately felt the atmosphere grow frigid.

"Tanya," he said, his voice dripping with deferential charm. "How very nice to see you again, my dear."

Tanya flashed what was obviously a very forced smile and inclined her head minutely. "Aro."

"Irina, Katrina," he went on, seemingly oblivious to their chilly reception, "it's a pleasure to meet you under such amiable circumstances. Perhaps this time we will have the opportunity to get to know one another better."

No one answered, and an awkward pause fell over the group for a moment. Finally, Carlisle pushed the front door open and guided the three newcomers through.

"Have you heard from Eleazar and Carmen?" he asked as they all filed inside.

"Their flight lands in Seattle this afternoon," Tanya told him. "They'll be here by this evening."

"Well, well, what have we here?"

Amun was descending the stairs with his coven in tow, and he smiled broadly at Tanya and her sisters. "These must be the lovely Denali women I've heard so much about."

Carlisle made the introductions, and Tanya greeted Amun with far more warmth than she had Aro. Amun took her hand and brought her fingers to his lips, and Bella grimaced. She wondered if Tanya knew what kind of man she was getting so friendly with.

Amun was surprisingly well-behaved that day. He spoke to the girls in an unctuous tone that just missed being oily, and deferred to their opinions on nearly everything. Aro tried to be just as companionable, but his efforts were invariably met with stony coldness.

But that didn't stop him from trying. Both he and Amun kept up a steady stream of conversation with the three women, and they reminded Bella of television dating show that Renée had liked to watch. Everyone was trying to appear at ease, but there was an underlying current of tension that made the whole situation feel awkward and forced.

The girls from Denali were all but forgotten, though, when Carmen and Eleazar arrived. Everyone filed outside to greet them, and Aro was off the porch and heading toward them before Eleazar had even pulled the rental car to a stop. He pulled open Eleazar's door, and Eleazar was already lowering himself into a deep bow as he stepped out of the car. He offered his hand to Aro, who began peeling off his gloves.

Carlisle cleared his throat, and Aro replaced his gloves with a quiet growl.

Eleazar looked surprised, but accepted the gloved handshake that Aro offered. "I was so relieved to hear that you were safe," he murmured.

"Old friend." Aro dropped his hand and gripped his shoulders. "Thank you for searching out the others. I only wish I could have done the same."

"I regret that I have only limited information to share. It seems most of the survivors have done their best to disappear."

"I can hardly blame them, after what we suffered. I came here seeking protection myself."

"And you'll have it."

Bella heard Tanya growl softly.

Carlisle had moved to Carmen's door to help her out of the car, and he escorted her up the porch steps.

"Carmen, Eleazar, I'd like you to meet my old friend Amun and his mate, Kebi."

Amun moved forward to greet them with the same ingratiating civility that he had displayed with Tanya.

"And this is Benjamin," Amun told them after he had clasped each of their hands in turn. He reached back to take Benjamin's elbow and steer him forward.

Eleazar looked at him for a long, silent moment, one eyebrow arched curiously. "A pleasure," he finally said, then turned to Carlisle. "Have you seen . . . ?"

"I've seen a little," he replied with a smile. "Benjamin has been helping Bella and Edward dig an amphitheater behind the house."

"Mm." Eleazar went back to studying Benjamin. "But you can do more than move dirt around, can't you?"

"Much more," Benjamin confirmed with a wide smile. "Though it took some practice to get the hang of shaping the earth into the form I want. The detail-work actually takes more concentration than whipping up a thunderstorm."

Carmen's eyes widened. "Whipping up a thunderstorm?"

"He's an elementalist," Eleazar explained. "I've never seen a vampire with this particular gift. It's . . ."

"Powerful," Amun said smugly.

"Sublime," Aro added with a reverent sigh.

Eleazar frowned. "I would have thought your sire would have advised you to be a little more tight-lipped about such a potent talent."

"He did." Benjamin shrugged and gestured around at the crowd of vampires. "But you know how it is. Eighteen can keep a secret if seventeen of them are dead."

Eleazar let out a hard laugh and then nodded toward Tia. "And who is your lovely friend."

Tia looked pleased to be acknowledged. Not flattered, Bella thought, but approving. She smiled at Eleazar and stepped forward to offer him her hand.

"This is Tia, my mate," Benjamin told him.

Carmen took her turn greeting the girl, and she leaned forward with a conspiratorial smile. "I bet a lover's quarrel between the two of you is literally earth-shattering."

Tia laughed, but Benjamin shook his head.

"Tia and I never quarrel. We have an understanding. She's always right."

Everyone chuckled at his joke. Or at least, everyone except Amun and Kebi. Amun sniffed disdainfully, but Bella wasn't sure if anyone else noticed. Benjamin had successfully, if inadvertently, monopolized the attention of nearly the entire group, and they all ignored Amun as Carlisle led them back inside. Once in the living room, though, Amun re-asserted his position by

taking a seat next to Eleazar and posing earnest questions to him about what leads he had found in his search for the surviving members of the Volturi.

The rest of the night was spent in hearing about Eleazar's search, rehashing the attack on Volterra, and mulling over various speculations on the possible motivations behind it. Bella found it all dull and repetitive, and passed the time with a stack of novels. She couldn't seem to keep a part of her mind from following the tedious conversation, however, so she couldn't have been happier when sunrise brought a distraction with it. As the first rays of morning light streamed in through the glass wall at the back of the house, Carmen stood up and moved to look out at the clear sky.

"I need some sun," she declared. "Who wants to go down to the river with me?"

A chorus of happy agreement followed, and most everyone, Bella included, rose. Only Carlisle, Eleazar, Aro, Amun, and Kebi remained where they were.

"Not coming along?" Esme asked Carlisle, lacing her fingers through his hair and scratching lightly at his scalp.

"You go ahead. I may meet you out there."

Tanya and her sisters had brought along their own bathing suits, but Alice had to shop in various different closets to find things for Carmen, Benjamin, and Tia. Once clothes were procured, though, the girls all crowded into Bella's room to get changed.

Bella tugged on the tankini that Alice had bought for her and eyed herself in the mirror. The girls hadn't stopped with their legs when they had done their hair removal project, and she was glad now to have bare underarms and a tidied bikini area. She glanced at Tia, who was also inspecting her newly-hair-free underarms.

"I'm not used to it yet," she said. "Does it seem weird to you?"

"I used to shave, so I actually think it feels nice."

Tia eyed her reflection. "I keep comparing myself to the magazines in Alice's room."

"That's not fair to the models," Carmen said with a laugh as she tied the strings of a scandalously small bikini top behind her neck.

Bella looked around at the others. Almost all of them were in bikinis, though Rosalie and Irina had both donned stylish one-piece suits. Bella examined the strip of skin bared by her top and considered changing, but she finally decided that she was unlikely to draw much attention, given the company she was in, so it probably didn't matter what she wore.

She could hear the boys talking together at the top of the stairs, and she looked around again. Rosalie was twisting her hair up into a bun and Carmen was tugging at her nearly-nonexistent bikini bottoms, but other than that it looked like they were all ready. A few moments later, they were filing out of her bedroom, and Bella eyes immediately sought Edward.

He didn't meet her gaze, however. He was looking at Tia, his eyes narrowed, and suddenly he smirked.

"Think it'll work?" he asked quietly as she walked by him.

She shrugged and shot him a dazzling smile. "It's worth a try." She headed down the stairs and when the others started to follow, Edward put an arm out and stopped them for just a second, letting Tia get a head start.

The effect she had was immediate. The men in the living room glanced up when they heard her come down, and Amun's jaw dropped.

"Tia!" he hissed, his horror plain on his face. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going swimming." Bella could hear the false cheeriness in her voice, and she peered at Amun as she descended the stairs with the others.

"Get back upstairs and put on something decent!" Amun said, his voice a deep, vicious growl.

"What's the matter with what I'm wearing?"

"I think she looks wonderful," Benjamin said, coming up beside her and slipping an arm around her bare waist.

"She's dressed . . . like a *slave girl!*" Amun spat.

"Oh," Tia said with a smile, "so the way Kebi used to dress? It seems you'd like it, then."

Amun shot to his feet, looking livid. "BENJAMIN!" he roared. "GET CONTROL OF YOUR WOMAN!"

Benjamin stiffened. "I don't control Tia."

"You had better start, before she brings further shame on this coven!"

A low growl issued from Benjamin's throat, but Eleazar interrupted by quietly clearing his throat. His posture was relaxed, one leg crossed over the other as he leaned back in his chair, but there was something about him that made him seem dark and dangerous.

"Do you, then, believe my wife brings shame to me?"

Amun's eyes shot between Carmen and Eleazar, and he choked on his words.

"Gentlemen," Eleazar said, addressing Aro and Amun, "let's get something straight. I know what you want from me, and I might be persuaded to give it. But I've spent the happiest portion of my life living with four strong, capable women, and as a result I have very little patience for misogyny. This," he gestured to where Kebi was kneeling at Amun's feet, "wins you no points with me."

Amun ground his teeth and lowered himself back into his chair. "I think you do me an injustice, Eleazar. I take especially good care of my women. Kebi's desire to stay close to me is simply a result of her trust in my protection."

"Kebi is perfectly capable of taking care of herself—or she would be, in your absence. I'm unimpressed with romantic chauvinism, Amun. Don't try to pass off your disdain for women as anything but unenlightened ethnocentrism."

Aro chuckled smugly. "You *are* rather devoted to your old ways. Maybe it's time you let go of the past."

"I wouldn't be so quick to criticize," Eleazar told Aro sharply.

Aro looked shocked. "Old friend, I'm insulted. You were a part of my coven. You saw that I gave no preferential treatment based on sex."

"No? Where is Sulpicia? Have you hidden her away somewhere, refusing once again to allow her to stand with you? Your lack of faith in her has turned her into more of a prisoner than a partner. Is that what you call enlightenment?"

Aro snapped his mouth closed and pursed his lips.

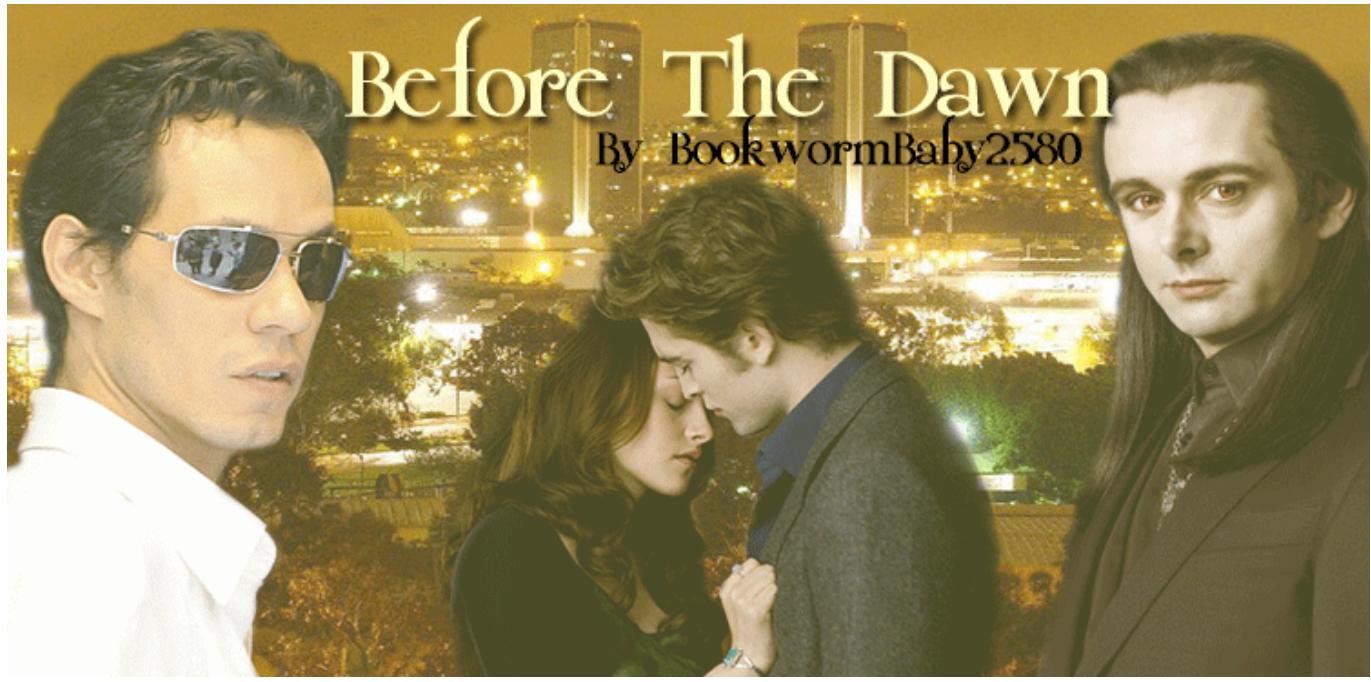
"Both of you have shut yourselves away from the world for so long that you've stopped evolving with it. Right now I don't think either one of you is up to the task of governing a modern society. If you want my help, you would do well to update your sensibilities, and unless I see a marked improvement I will withhold my support." He uncrossed his legs and pushed himself to his feet. "Come on, Carlisle. Our wives look beautiful and our families want to have some fun. I think it's clear how we ought to be spending the day."

Carlisle took Eleazar's proffered hand and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. "We'll be right behind you," he said to his family, and then he and Eleazar headed upstairs to change.

"See you at the river," Tia said sweetly. She hooked her arm through Benjamin's and headed outside.

Edward watched her go with a slow shake of his head. "That girl," he whispered to Bella, draping an arm over her shoulders, "is a force to be reckoned with."

Beautiful Upon the Mountains



The rest of the day was sunny and warm, and the following day was just as bright. The Cullens and their guests passed the time alternating between enjoying the river and teaching an enthusiastic Benjamin as many games as they could think of.

Carlisle rarely joined them during the day. He had taken a leave of absence from work for all of the month of August, and now he was working double shifts, staying at the hospital from sunup to sundown and telling his colleagues he wanted to give them a little bit of a break before they had to start covering for him. During the night games, though, he was as enthusiastic a participant as any of them.

Bella, however, was not. As each day passed with no news about Alexander, she grew more and more agitated. Peter called once to tell Jasper that he had met a vampire who had once whiled away a couple of hours with Joham in New England. The pair had found one another amiable enough, until Joham had begun talking about children. The vampire had been alive during the chaos surrounding the immortal children, he'd explained to Peter, and he'd wanted nothing to do with the whole mess. He had made an excuse to Joham and moved on.

Bella had gotten her hopes up, until she discovered that this conversation had taken place more than fifty years before. Jasper, however, didn't seem discouraged.

"We're creatures of habit," he told her. "Peter and Charlotte have been traveling the same circuit for decades, with only occasional variations. Maybe Joham has, too." He'd spread a map out on Bella's bed and marked it with the month and year of the conversation. He hoped, he told her, to establish a pattern.

But as the days passed with no new information coming, Bella's anxiety mounted. Every idle thought was of her son, replaying the moments with him, worrying over whether he was safe. She paced and fretted, and snapped at anyone who tried to tell her to be patient.

Edward wisely refrained from offering such advice. He simply stayed near her, lending his silent support.

Bella was torn over whether to question Tanya and her family about Joham. She was beginning to see how heavily the issue of immortal children had affected the vampire race, and the girls from Denali had deep, personal scars from the loss of their mother. They wouldn't be her allies, Bella decided. They would be first in line to try and destroy her son.

Still, as time marched on and no new information surfaced, she found herself reconsidering her decision. If there was *any* way to get information about Alexander, shouldn't she try?

The specter of Aro loomed in her mind, but she refused to allow herself to consider him. He was a mind-reader, which meant he had nearly limitless information available to him, but he was also obviously power-hungry. Bella doubted there was anything he wouldn't do to claw his way back to the top. She wasn't going to let him use her son as a political pawn.

But Tanya . . . surely Tanya would have *some* sympathy for her. She was a friend of the Cullens', after all.

She was sitting on the sidelines of a game of what Emmett called "berserker dodgeball" when Alice cleared her throat.

"Pause," she said, and everyone stopped playing. "Carlisle, if we head back to the house now, we'll get there before our guest arrives."

Carlisle's face lit up. "Who is it?"

"Come and see," she told him with a smile. "You can leave the balls. He'll want to join the game."

Carlisle led the way and the rest of the group followed. Bella brought up the rear with Edward at her side, and she was reminded of the deer she chased down on her hunting trips. Was this what it was like to be a herd animal? If so, she was in prime position to be picked off by a predator. As absurd as the notion was, it made her uncomfortable. She quickened her pace, rushing ahead of Amun and Kebi; let *them* be the weak, sick animals to be culled from the herd.

Carlisle and Esme slowed to a walk when they neared the house, and the others fanned out around them, meandering their way past the amphitheater that now dominated the space where a stand of trees had once been. The grass was already encroaching on the exposed soil that had once supported giant trees, and Bella guessed that once they filled in the amphitheater, the grass would take over and leave a broad, flat field that swept down from the house to the river. They all made their way to the bank, listening as the night-stalking creatures of the forest fell silent in the wake of the approaching predators.

A few moments later, a tall man emerged from the trees across the river, moonlight illuminating sandy hair gathered into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. He wore jeans and a Rolling Stones T-shirt, and would have been able to blend easily in with a crowd if not for his crimson eyes and startling good looks. He broke into a broad grin when he saw Carlisle, and he threw out his arms expansively.

"You brought me a whole welcoming party!" he declared. He leapt the river and strode purposefully toward Carlisle, but at the last moment he brushed him aside and gathered Esme up into his arms.

"My darling, you look lovelier than ever," he said, spinning her away from Carlisle. "When are you going to run away with me?"

Carlisle caught Esme's hand and twirled her out of the newcomer's grasp and back into his own.
"Will you *please* stop trying to talk my wife into leaving me?"

"Only if you stop being such an old bore. What do you say, Esme?"

Esme laughed brightly. "I'm sorry, Garrett, but an unemployed drifter just can't compare to a billionaire doctor. A girl's got to protect her interests."

Garrett let out a loud guffaw and threw an arm around Carlisle's shoulders. "You're a lucky dog, Cullen. Come on, introduce me to all your friends."

Garrett, as it turned out, hadn't seen Carlisle in even longer than Aro had. The last time they'd gotten together, Carlisle's family had been limited to Esme and Edward. He beckoned the others forward now, and began the introductions.

"This is Rosalie," he told Garrett. "She joined our family shortly after Edward."

Garrett eyed her with a hungry smile and bowed low to kiss her hand. "It is my very great pleasure," he murmured, stepping closer to her as he straightened.

Emmett cracked his knuckles.

"And this is her mate, Emmett," Carlisle said with a grin.

"Ah. Delighted." Garrett fell back again and shook Emmett's hand. He nodded politely to him, but leaned close to Rosalie and whispered, "Any time you want to have a little fun, sweetheart, you just come and see me."

"And this is Bella," Carlisle interrupted. "She's recently joined our coven."

"Well, well." Garrett sidled close and brought her hands to his lips. "Aren't you the most delicious little treat?"

"Careful," Edward said in a low voice. "She bites."

"So do I," Garrett said, flashing Bella a wide grin.

Carlisle shunted him along down the line. "And Jasper," he said, gesturing.

Garrett stiffened when he saw Jasper. "Ah. I see. I told everyone they were crazy for thinking you were recruiting yourself a second Volturi, Carlisle, but he's enough to give even me second thoughts."

The corners of Jasper's mouth pulled up minutely as he inclined his head to Garrett.

"And Jasper's mate, Alice," Carlisle finished.

Garrett's grin was back, but before he could take Alice's hand, Jasper growled, "Make a pass at my girl and I'll rip your ears off and shove them down your throat."

Garrett dropped his hand and stepped back, bowing low to Alice. "Between you and me," he told her in a conspiratorial whisper, "I prefer blondes."

Alice giggled. "It's nice to finally meet you, Garrett. We've heard so much about you."

"All lies, no doubt. Carlisle has always made me out to be a far better man than I am." He turned his attention farther up the banks, and his eyes widened. "Good lord," he breathed. "These beauties could only be the sirens of Capreae." He strode over to Tanya, Irina, and Kate, gazing at them in reverent admiration. He reached out and touched a lock of Tanya's hair, letting it slide through his fingers before shaking his head regretfully. "Eyes as golden as your hair," he said with a sigh. "Carlisle has obviously gotten to you. Honestly, man, can't you leave any for the rest of us?"

Carlisle chuckled. "You can't blame the girls' habits on me, I'm afraid. They've been vegetarians for longer than I've been walking the earth."

Tanya flashed him a coy smile. "We decided humans are more fun to play with than to eat."

"A warm body is so pleasant to cuddle up with," Kate added. "I'm not sure I could go back to being with vampires."

Garrett's eyes darkened, and he grinned. "Careful, lovely Ligeia. I might just take that as a challenge."

Kate just smiled a pretty, dismissive smile, and tossed her hair.

"I do hope you'll say hello to an old friend before these ladies distract you too much," Aro said.

Garrett turned to him and barked out a mocking laugh. "If it isn't the ancient tyrant, finally turned out of his castle. I confess, Aro, I'm pleased to see that you're finally getting your comeuppance."

"Still fighting your revolution, are you?" Aro moved forward and clapped one gloved hand on Garrett's shoulder. "One of these days, my friend, you'll have to learn that government provides stability."

"What you call government, I call despotism."

"What you call freedom, I call anarchy."

Garrett chuckled. "You're a stubborn fool, Aro."

"At least we have that in common. You remember Eleazar, don't you?"

Garrett took Eleazar's hand, frowning as he peered at Eleazar's golden eyes. "Good lord, you've gone mad as well. Is it contagious?"

"It just might be," Eleazar replied with a smile.

Carlisle finished the rest of the introductions, but Garrett was losing interest by the time he got through them. His gaze kept straying back to the trio of blondes standing off to one side, and when he had paid his respects to Amun's coven, he wandered back in their direction.

"I noticed the tents on my way in. Is that where we'll be staying for this little shindig?"

"That's the idea," Irina said.

"Lovely. If you'll just show me where yours is, my darling, I'll see about finding a spot as near to you as possible."

Bella watched the two of them leap the river and then wander into the trees with Tanya and Kate close behind. The four of them disappeared together, weighing the relative advantages that one tent might have over another.

She smiled to herself when she felt Edward's fingertips brush her palm. He didn't take her hand—he was trying very hard to stay true to his promise to Charlie—but he couldn't seem to help the occasional little touch, and Bella found that she greatly appreciated the little reminders that he was close.

"We should choose our tents, too," he murmured from behind her shoulder.

She turned to look back at him. "We're not staying in the house?"

"You can if you want to, but Carlisle thought it would be nice if we were out here with everyone else."

The thought of camping with Edward had a certain appeal to it. "Maybe we should share one," she whispered. It wasn't for sleeping, after all. Charlie could hardly be upset about them sitting together in a tent surrounded by a horde of other vampires.

"I'd like that."

The two of them headed across the river, walking close enough to occasionally bump shoulders. They wandered among the tents, eyeing them, but only idly considering stopping.

"Do you want to hunt after this?" Edward asked. "Just you and me?"

Bella nodded and smiled to herself. "I'm pretty sure Carlisle promised Charlie that you and I would always be chaperoned."

Edward laughed. "Yeah, I was pretty angry about that—until Carlisle reminded me that Alice is pretty much *always* watching."

"So Alice is the chaperone?"

He nodded. "Which is convenient, considering how preoccupied she is with the caucus . . ." He winked at her and she smiled back, but she couldn't hold it for long. The weight of Alexander's absence was growing too heavy to bear.

Edward sighed quietly as she turned away from him. The situation was frustrating for him, she knew. He wanted her attention, wanted her to live in the moment with him, but she couldn't. The hollow place inside of her where Alexander belonged demanded more of her attention every day. She worried that Edward's patience would run out, and yet, there was nothing she could do. Lately she simply couldn't focus on anything other than her son.

Something had to be done.

It was the disappointment in Edward's eyes that made up her mind for her. She couldn't tiptoe around the issue any longer. Tonight, after their hunt, she would start asking questions. She would even ask Aro, if nobody else had answers for her. No stone could be left unturned.

Dawn was approaching when Bella finally got around to her questions. She had hunted and changed, and Emmett's game of dodgeball had ended—though the occasional taunt still rang out in the forest. There had been a brief argument between Amun and Benjamin over whether they should claim space in the house or choose tents, but Benjamin had prevailed and the four of them had chosen a spot next to Eleazar. Edward had suggested that he and Bella share a little pop-up tent on the east side of the grouping, in the hopes that their location on the fringe would keep her from feeling too crowded.

Emmett was now giving Benjamin and Aro lectures on how to camp the way humans did, and the Denali sisters were doing the same for Garrett. The girls were sharing a roomy tent close to the river, and Garrett had claimed himself an even larger one, explaining with a wink at the sisters that he needed the space for entertaining.

"Campfires?" he was asking the girls skeptically as Kate arranged sticks inside a ring of rocks. "Do you really think it's a good idea to have little fires burning everywhere with this many of our kind around?"

Kate smirked at him. "It won't be a problem, as long as you can keep from provoking anyone into tearing you to pieces."

"It's not me I'm worried about, sweetheart. But a hungry vampire who gets his feelings hurt by someone less charming than I," he inclined his head pointedly at Kate, "could become a real danger."

She snorted and turned back to her fire. "Don't worry your pretty little head about me. I can take care of myself."

Tanya and Irina were sitting in camp chairs watching the two of them with amusement, and Edward pulled over another pair of chairs from nearby and settled next to them.

"Catch anything good?" Irina asked.

Edward grimaced. "Mountain goat."

"Ah. That's a no."

Bella watched Kate and Garrett bicker over fire-building techniques as she gathered up her nerve. "Tanya," she finally said, hoping her voice wasn't trembling the way her insides were, "have you ever met anyone named Joham?"

She frowned. "I don't think so. It's kind of a strange name, isn't it?"

Bella shrugged.

"Is this someone you know? Human or vampire?"

"Vampire. He, um . . . he kind of . . . changed me." It wasn't exactly a lie. It was more of an indirect truth.

"No, I haven't met him. At least, not under that name. Has he ever used a different one?"

Bella blinked at her. "Do people do that?"

"Sure, all the time. We try to fly under the radar, you know? If he attracted too much human attention under one name, he might have changed it to avoid being recognized."

"Oh. Um, well, he's maybe five-nine or five-ten. Kind of wiry. Dark hair, Spanish, maybe?"

She laughed. "Sounds like Eleazar."

"Longer hair. And, you know, red eyes."

"It's not ringing any bells."

Irina shook her head in agreement.

"I've met him." Garrett shifted so he was leaning back on his hands. He stretched his legs out in front of him, giving Kate what was probably meant to look like an inadvertent kick in the process and ignoring the low growl she sent his way. "It was maybe . . . six months back?"

Bella drew in a sharp breath. "Where?"

"In a library in Raleigh. I was reading up on the Declaration of the Rights of Man, and he was stalking a pretty little shelver. Must have lost interest, though. She was still there a week later when I went back, though Joham had cleared out by then."

"Did you talk to him? Did he say where he was going?"

"No, he didn't say. He mostly just talked about the girl. She was a little too high profile for my tastes, but he didn't listen when I told him that. At least, I didn't think he was listening at the time. But after all, she's still alive."

"Is she?" Bella asked. "Still?"

"What, you think he went back for her?"

"Did you get her name?" Edward asked.

"Her badge said Sawyer. That's all I know."

Edward put a hand on Bella's knee. "Alice is looking her up." He paused for a few moments and then nodded. "Yeah, that's the same girl. She died in February—unspecified medical complications."

Bella felt an unpleasant twisting in her stomach. She had an idea she knew what kind of medical complications weren't being specified.

"Maybe that's why he passed her over," Garrett suggested. "Some condition that soured her blood, most likely."

Edward nodded, but said nothing.

Bella was barely listening. In her head, she was picturing the map that Jasper had placed on her bed upstairs, and she mentally added a second date and location. She was one tiny step closer to finding her son.

The next day, four more vampires showed up. Three of them arrived in a group, led by a tall, striking woman named Siobhan who greeted Esme with the warmth of an old friend. The fourth was Jonathan, an affable nomad who apparently had no prior acquaintance with the Cullens but had passed an evening or two with Garrett in recent years. All four of the newcomers were startled to find themselves so suddenly in Aro's presence, but Esme performed the introductions with a guileless diplomacy that left them all somewhat comforted. And of course, when Carlisle returned from the hospital, he charmed them all into complacency.

Bella questioned all of them about Joham. None of them had met him, but the little redhead coven-mate of Siobhan's, Maggie, watched her with sharp, suspicious eyes throughout the conversation.

Bella decided to give her a wide berth.

After that, the stream of newcomers was steady. Though more than a week before Carlisle had officially scheduled the beginning of the gathering, they appeared one-by-one or in pairs, apparently giving no thought to the possibility that they might not yet be welcome.

Most vampires, Bella was learning, didn't live by calendars. They came and went as they pleased, and a good number of them were pleased to arrive early and survey the company as they arrived. The tents that Alice had placed quickly filled up, and she set up more behind them. Each space was accompanied by camping gear that would go practically unused, but the tents, as it turned out, were appreciated. Esme had been right when she'd predicted that the Cullens' guests would be more comfortable with a patch of land to claim as their own. Nomads who had never bothered with ownership laid their scents heavily around their camps, and the air was frequently peppered with warning snarls emitted when a stranger came too close to encroaching on another's claim.

Bella had no problem understanding this. It did her good to see others behaving as territorially as she felt, in fact. The Cullens, with their refined civility, had a way of making her feel like a savage.

Still, she found that the circumstances made her more grateful to them than ever. Every visitor, no matter how genial, represented a threat, and the safest place to be was in the company of her golden-eyed family. She was starting to see just how valuable Carlisle's finesse could be, and Jasper's presence was more reassuring than menacing these days.

By the first day of August, the beginning of Carlisle's leave of absence from the hospital, more than fifty vampires had gathered in the forest outside of Forks. The day was sunny, so there was nothing to do to pass the time but mingle, and Carlisle took full advantage. He wandered among the campgrounds, chatting, accepting the usual ribbing for his singular lifestyle, and generally easing the tensions that tended to build among a large group of predators. Esme and Emmett went with him to lend their own congeniality to the mix, while Edward and Alice inspected the amphitheater with Bella, trying to decide if it needed to be bigger.

"It will seat them all," Alice mused, "but we don't want to crowd them in there."

Edward snorted and shook his head. "Give them as much space as you want, Alice, but don't expect them to ever have enough. A group this big will feel cramped in anything smaller than a good-sized ballpark."

"Still, it wouldn't hurt to add a little elbow room. Do you think Benjamin could—" She stopped suddenly and her eyes went unfocused for a moment before she stiffened and screamed. "Jasper!"

Edward and Alice broke into a sprint, heading southeast past the encampment, and Bella could only follow, the panic in Alice's voice still lingering in her ears.

Bella didn't know what she was seeing, but Edward obviously did, and he tore off through the trees at a pace only a newborn could have a prayer of keeping up with. Both of them outdistanced Alice easily, but Bella heard her struggling behind them, her breath coming in ragged, terrified gasps.

"What's happening?" Bella asked Edward as she grabbed branches and pushed off of them, using them to enhance her speed.

"I don't know. I just—I don't know." His own voice was heavy with anxiety, but it was the uncertainty in it that frightened Bella. She was used to Edward's quiet assurance, the palpable sense that he knew everything about what was going on around him. With his mind-reading and the frequent company of Alice and Jasper, he was constantly on the receiving end of a wealth of circumstantial information. But now something was happening that had caught him by surprise, and the fear of it crept under Bella's skin and raised the hairs on the back of her neck.

Her anxiety made the seconds lengthen to interminable periods. Yard after yard, mile after mile passed under her feet, and she searched the trees for Jasper's golden hair and scarred skin, listened for the sounds of fighting or a cry of panic, sniffed the air for anything unfamiliar and threatening.

And suddenly he was there, standing still as a statue beneath a mossy spruce, his eyes fixed on a point off in the distance.

Edward skidded to a stop and grabbed Bella's hand, and the two of them moved quietly up behind him. Edward was staring now, too, and Bella followed his gaze through a break in the trees to a spot maybe a hundred yards away. A figure crouched on a limb high up in a towering tree, muscles rippling beneath his dusky skin, his dark eyes narrowed at the three vampires who now regarded him. His black hair was pulled into a thick braid that currently draped over one shoulder, and he held himself with a leonine grace that was all too familiar to Bella.

She drew in a startled breath, and Jasper spared the briefest of glances for her.

"Friend of yours?"

"Um—" Her voice came out as a whisper, and she swallowed. "I don't know."

"But you've met him?"

"Not exactly."

Jasper's voice lowered to a tense whisper. "Come on, kid, give me some information here. What *is* he?"

The question was a fair one. The man was close enough that his heartbeat could be heard, faint and quick, sending blood pulsing through veins. But he *wasn't* human. The ease with which he moved through the trees and the unusual scent carried on the wind revealed that much. He resembled the shape-shifters from La Push more closely than he resembled humans, but his scent was entirely different. He smelled . . . sweet. Appealing.

"I'm not sure," Bella murmured, "but I think that's Joham's son."

Jasper arched an eyebrow.

"Not—not *my* son. A different one. They seemed . . . estranged, maybe? Nahuel wouldn't come when Joham wanted him."

The figure in the tree uncurled from his crouched position and dropped off of his branch, swinging himself down from the tree with inhuman grace until he dropped to the forest floor. He straightened and started walking toward them, his pace steady and unhurried, but his expression revealed an undercurrent of anxiety.

Alice caught up with them then. She came tearing out of the trees toward Jasper, and he shifted toward her without taking his eyes off of the stranger and caught her up in his arms.

"Get out of here, Jasper!" she hissed, her voice weak with fright. "Get away from him!"

"Tell me what you see," he breathed in her ear.

"Nothing! Everything is gone! We have to leave!"

Jasper considered her suggestion, but then shook his head. "He's not going to take us all on by himself."

"Jasper, I can't *see*!" She wriggled out of his arms and dragged at his wrist, trying to pull him away from the approaching figure.

"A talent, maybe. He could be blocking your visions the way Bella blocks Edward."

The visitor was moving steadily, eating up the distance between them, and Bella's mind was racing. Had he followed her here? How? Had she somehow left a trail that could be tracked? If so, could Joham and Serena do the same? Fear gripped, her, but hope did as well. If they could track her, couldn't she track them? Couldn't she find them and get her son back?

"How did you find me?" she asked Nahuel.

He stopped about twenty yards away from them, his lip curling into a sneer. "I did not look for you."

"Have you come for the gathering?" Jasper asked him.

Nahuel looked at him blankly. "I know of no gathering."

"Well, then. What brings you to Forks?"

"I seek the yellow-eyes. You are Carlisle?"

"Jasper. Bella tells me your name is Nahuel."

He inclined his head in response, but eyed Jasper's scars warily. "You are not the coven leader?"

"Carlisle's not far away. Are you alone?"

He nodded.

"And you're Joham's son? Biologically?"

He grimaced, but nodded again.

"Do you know where he is?"

"I do."

"Come on." Jasper turned, wrapping an arm around Alice's shoulders and jerking his head in an invitation for Nahuel to follow. "We'll take you to see Carlisle."

Nahuel ran to catch up with them and fell into a jogging step beside Bella. He cast her a sidelong glance, but otherwise ignored her.

Bella swallowed down a lump in her throat. "Is Alexander . . . I mean . . . how is he?"

Nahuel sniffed.

"Please. I need to know if he's safe."

"Then perhaps you should not have left him," he replied stiffly.

Edward snarled low in his throat, but Jasper glanced back and shook his head.

"Might as well let them have it out," he told his brother.

Edward scowled, but fell silent.

"I know I shouldn't have left," Bella mumbled. "I tried to go back, but they were gone."

Nahuel pursed his lips and said nothing.

"Please? Just tell me if he's okay?"

"What do you think?" he snapped. "The boy is being raised by his father. Is that what you want? For him to be molded into a copy of Joham?"

Bella shuddered. The thought of her beautiful, curly-haired darling in Joham's harsh care was frightening enough, but it was so much worse to think about what it would mean for him as he grew older. Would he learn to be cruel like Joham? Bitter and waspish like Serena?

"But you know where he is?" Bella asked.

Alice cleared her throat. "Maybe you two should table this discussion after all. We don't need anyone overhearing."

Nahuel gave her a sharp look, and then focused past her into the trees. "How many are gathered?"

"Fifty-three, so far," Jasper told him, "and more on the way. It's not the most convenient time to come looking for Carlisle's help."

"But you believe he will grant me audience?"

"I do. I can't make any promises about what he can do for you, or when, but he'll listen."

"I am grateful," Nahuel murmured.

"Don't bother with gratitude. I have a feeling he'll want something from you in return."

"Such as?"

Jasper smiled and shook his head. "Let's just see what he says."

The rest of the run was silent. They were close to the encampment now, and Bella could hear Nahuel's already racing heart begin to beat faster. He obviously hadn't been expecting to encounter such a daunting cluster of vampires, and his muscles pulled taut with tension every time a new scent drifted their way. He pushed himself along, though, and didn't shy away even when Jasper slowed to a walk and plunged into the midst of the tents.

"Carlisle," he called, weaving between trees and camping gear and following the sound of Carlisle's laugh. Every head turned as they passed, and the pale-skinned vampires sniffed the air and eyed Nahuel suspiciously. One woman even started to growl, but Jasper hissed at her in warning and she backed away.

Carlisle didn't leave the group he was with—a pair of lanky Australian aborigines with tightly curled hair and chalky skin. He waited for Jasper to make his way to their tent, then turned a curious eye on Nahuel.

"Jasper, will you introduce me to your friend?"

"This is Nahuel." Jasper gave him a significant look. "Nahuel *Johamez*. He'd like a word with you."

Carlisle's eyebrows shot up. "I see. Would you excuse me?" He nodded to the pair he had been speaking with and moved to shake Nahuel's hand. "Welcome to our home. If you'll accompany me to the house, we can speak in my study. Bella, will you join us?"

Bella accepted the hand he held out to her and let him tuck her fingers in the crook of his elbow. The three of them set off toward the house, but Bella couldn't help but notice that Jasper, Edward, and Alice all followed behind them.

Once at the house, Bella mounted the stairs with Carlisle and Nahuel and stepped into Carlisle's office. He closed the door behind them, and then guided Bella into a chair facing his desk while offering the other one to Nahuel. He rounded the desk and took his place behind it, then leaned forward and fixed his attention on Nahuel.

"Are you comfortable speaking in English?"

"Yes."

"All right, then, what can I do for you?"

"I seek assistance," he replied. "I had intended to ask it of the Volturi, but—"

He stopped, and Carlisle nodded. "I know of the Volturi's fall. Aro is here, in fact, if you require his specific skills."

Nahuel shook his head. "Only strength. I am told your coven is strong?"

"We're no Volturi, but yes, we have our advantages."

He glanced at Bella. "Your friend has told you of my father and his proclivities?"

Carlisle nodded.

"He thinks of himself as a scientist," Nahuel said. "He decided long ago that he wanted to breed a new race—stronger than humans, but able to walk among them, to act on behalf of vampire kind. He began more than two hundred years ago, but my father . . . he is easily distracted. Until now, the extent of his work has been picking out the occasional pretty girl and leaving her with child. Most of them died before carrying to term."

"What changed?"

"I don't know." Nahuel shook his head. "He tried to gather the family, and he started taking girls and keeping them with him." He nodded toward Bella. "Like her."

Bella shuddered.

"He thought he could keep them healthier and make them more likely to survive until the birth."

"Are there more like Bella, then?" Carlisle asked.

"He has had . . . setbacks. No other girl has survived long enough to give birth, and that frustrated him. So he decided to expand his experimentation to stronger girls."

Carlisle raised his eyebrows and waited for Nahuel to go on.

"My sisters," he said quietly. "Joham has enlisted two other vampires to help him, and has compelled my sisters into his service."

"Compelled."

Nahuel nodded.

"How many?"

"Two," he said. "The eldest left him when she discovered his intentions, but he tracked down the younger two and forced them to join him."

"I see."

"I've come to ask your assistance in freeing my sisters." He hesitated. "I'm willing to offer . . . ten years of service to your coven in trade."

Carlisle sat back, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair as he regarded Nahuel. "Ten years? That's your offer?"

He swallowed hard. "I'm willing to negotiate."

Carlisle's gaze shifted to Bella, and he stared at her for several long seconds. Finally, he looked back at Nahuel and leaned forward again, tenting his hands in front of him.

"The boy, Alexander. Is he still with Joham?"

"Yes."

"And you know where they are?"

"They are nearby. Less than a thousand miles."

"Good. I have a counter-offer. Instead of ten years of service, I would like you to meet with those of us who have gathered to discuss the future of our government. I want you to explain what you can about your paternity and your biological development, and to answer what questions are put to you. If you'll do this for me, and if you'll lead us to Joham, I and my family will do all that is in our power to liberate your sisters."

Bella couldn't quite keep her mouth from falling open as she realized what Carlisle was doing. He was clearing the way for her, not only to find Alexander, but to bring him back to a gathering of vampires who would understand him, who would be able to mark the differences between her son and an immortal child.

Nahuel was surprised as well, but only allowed it to show for a fraction of a second. "That's all you ask?"

"Unless Bella would like to add anything?"

Nahuel turned to her, and she shook her head. Carlisle's plan seemed to solve her most pressing problems.

"Very well. Are we in agreement?"

"Yes," Nahuel breathed. "Thank you, *ngen*."

"Doctor," Carlisle corrected with a smile as he stood. "If you must use a title."

Nahuel stood as well, and bowed to him. "Thank you, Doctor."

"It's my pleasure to do what I can for my friends. We'll meet at the amphitheater at sundown. Edward, Alice, spread the word, please, and then gather the family."

He hadn't raised his voice, but the two of them had obviously been outside with Jasper, listening to everything that had been said. Bella heard their footsteps hurrying off toward the river.

"Bella," Carlisle continued, "would you be so kind as to show our guest to your room to get cleaned and rested up? And see if you can find him some clothes, won't you? Maybe something of Edward's. Meet us downstairs when you've got him settled. We have some details to arrange with the family."

Bella guided Nahuel up to the third floor, but he stopped her with a light touch on her elbow before she made it as far as her room. She turned back to him, meeting his dark, intense gaze.

"You tried to return to Alexander?"

She wrung her hands in front of her. "I went back to Mexico, but they were gone. I didn't know where else to look."

"You intend to remove him from his father's care?"

She nodded.

"Joham will not be easily persuaded to let him go. Are you prepared to kill for him?"

Bella shuddered and looked away. "I'll do whatever I have to."

"I can take the boy. I know how to evade Joham and discourage his pursuit. I will raise my brother, if that is what you wish."

"No!" Bella shook her head vehemently. "You can't take him away. I need him."

"You will raise him here?" he asked. "Among the yellow-eyes?"

She nodded.

"Will they give their protection?"

"They . . . have a soft spot for children."

Nahuel laid a warm hand on her shoulder. "It is enough. We will go to Joham. I will free my sisters, and you will leave with Alexander."

Bella nodded her agreement. She didn't know quite how to respond, so she turned and headed through the bedroom to the bathroom.

"Feel free to use anything in the shower," she said, remembering when she was the one on the receiving end of this invitation. "Clean towels are over there. We still have a couple of hours until sundown, so if you want to sleep—um . . . you do sleep?"

He nodded and gave her a small smile.

"If you want to sleep for a little while, you're welcome to use the bed."

"Thank you, *mailen*."

Bella gave him an awkward smile and excused herself to give him some privacy. She found him some fresh clothes and left them beside his door, then followed the sound of Jasper's voice out to the edge of the amphitheater where the rest of the family had assembled. The cousins from Alaska had joined them, and Bella couldn't help noticing that almost the entire encampment had made their way to this side of the river and were watching them with unveiled interest.

"I don't like it," Jasper was saying. "Splitting up the family right now is a bad idea."

"I don't see any alternative. Nahuel's situation can't wait, and we have more guests arriving here every day."

"What about sending someone else to handle Joham? Call in favors, pay some people off."

Carlisle grimaced. "It's not my first choice."

"Would you care to leave Esme here with them, then," he gestured to the listening crowd, "while you take everyone with any particular talent for combat with you?"

"I see your point, of course . . . but I'm uncomfortable commissioning someone else to do the duties I promised Nahuel I would perform."

"Carlisle."

The imposing, raven-haired friend of Carlisle's extracted herself from the crowd and stepped forward. Her mate and the suspicious redhead followed.

"Would you trust us to welcome your guests and look after your interests here?"

Carlisle turned to her, a smile brightening his face. "Darling Siobhan, would you really do that for me?"

"What wouldn't I do for you?" she asked indulgently.

Carlisle turned to Jasper with raised eyebrows, and Jasper eyed Siobhan speculatively.

"You think you can prevent hunting in the territory?"

She flashed him a smile that bared gleaming teeth. "Do you think I can't?"

He turned back to Carlisle and nodded. "Works for me."

"Thank you, Siobhan. Your assistance is invaluable."

"We're all going, then?" Esme asked.

"We're in," Tanya said.

"Us as well," Benjamin spoke up from the group, raising a hand linked with Tia's. Amun hissed his name, but Benjamin shot him a reproachful look and turned back to Carlisle.

"Is there room for one more?" Garrett asked from the back of the crowd, striding toward Carlisle.

Carlisle looked around at the volunteers in bemusement. "Thank you all for your support, but it's not really necessary. It's a simple challenge we face."

"You have a dispute with a small coven?"

This was spoken by Harlan, a vampire turned in his mid-teens. He had died his hair blue and wore ill-fitting clothing, but his appearance belied a quiet and thoughtful nature, and Bella had decided that she liked him almost immediately.

Carlisle turned to the boy. "That's right."

"This creature . . . Nahuel. He came to you because of the void the Volturi left, didn't he?"

"That's right."

"So you'll be acting as an enforcer of law?"

Carlisle shook his head. "I agreed to help my new friend in part because I have an interest in his business. This is a personal matter."

"Will you kill them?" Harlan pressed.

"Not if I can see any way to avoid it."

"Then we should come." He looked around, addressing the other guests. "We're here to discuss government and the rule of law. Carlisle has earned a prominent place among us because of his unusual methods of conflict resolution." He smirked. "After all, can anyone here say they have as many allies as Carlisle has?"

Murmured laughter rippled through the crowd.

"I think we should come and observe," he continued, "if Carlisle will allow it. It could prove educational."

Carlisle looked at Jasper, who shrugged.

"It's all right with me," Carlisle told Harlan. "The only problem I foresee is a logistical one. Will you all be comfortable traveling a thousand miles by automobile?"

He made a face. "That's certainly a drawback."

Alice moved to Carlisle's side and pushed up onto her toes, tugging him down to whisper in his ear. Carlisle listened thoughtfully, then straightened and looked down at her.

"It will draw attention."

"I can make it work."

"How long?"

"We can be ready by tomorrow afternoon."

"What do you need?"

"Rosalie, Emmett, and your black card."

"Done." He pulled out his wallet and passed her the card before turning back to his gathered guests. "How many would like to come?"

Most of them raised their hands, and Alice did a quick head count. "Got it," she said with a satisfied smile. She skipped to Jasper's side and stretched up to kiss him. "You'll have to call me if you need anything. I'm flying blind."

"Watch your back." He gave her a pat on the rear and released her.

"Emmett, Rose," she said, linking her arms through theirs and steering them in the direction of the garage, "let's go shopping."

"Why do you need me for this?" Emmett grumbled.

Alice grinned. "Trust me, you're going to enjoy it."

"While Alice is out," Carlisle told the crowd, "I'll bring you all up to date on what's going on, starting with Nahuel. I know many of you are curious about him, so I've asked him to come and speak with us about his remarkable situation. Anyone who is interested is welcome to gather here at sunset to hear his story."

It wasn't until the spectators turned away, buzzing with curious chatter, that the weight of what had just happened settled on Bella's shoulders. The air grew thick and difficult to breathe, and a tremor rippled through her body.

Edward was next to her in an instant, one wrapping around her waist and holding her against his body.

"He knows where they are," she said, her wonder solidifying into conviction. "We have to go. We have to go *now*."

"Now? We can't. We don't have what we need to get this many of us—"

"I don't care about them!" she burst out. "They can come later if they want, but I can't wait. What if Joham leaves again? What if we lose him?"

Edward hesitated. "I understand what you're saying, but think it through. Suppose you and I go, right now—"

Jasper growled at him, but Edward only shot him an annoyed look and continued.

"—and tried to take on Joham and his new recruits ourselves. Our odds are fair, but not great. Waiting one more day means showing up with our family, Tanya's family, and a handful of other people who are loyal enough to Carlisle to stand with him. That's not even a gamble; you're guaranteed to get Alexander back with that kind of strength behind you."

"She has a point, though," Jasper admitted. "Joham is slippery. Maybe I should call Peter . . ."

Fury swelled so suddenly in Bella that it burst before she could even think twice. She let out a roar and lunged at Jasper, but he sidestepped her and employed a tricky little maneuver that sent her sprawling in the grass at his feet. The flat of his boot came down on the back of her neck, pinning her to the turf.

"Settle," Jasper ordered.

She growled low in her throat, furious with him and frustrated with herself. How did she keep forgetting how unnervingly efficient he was at this?

"Hear me out," he told her. "I'm not willing to split up our family, but Peter and Charlotte can move faster than we can. I recommend getting Joham's location from Nahuel and sending them out to keep an eye on things."

"Don't you dare," she hissed. "I don't want that *animal* anywhere near my son!"

"Animal?" Jasper released her and helped her to her feet. "Kid, you've got Peter all wrong."

"He tried to kill me!"

"He recommended killing you—that's not the same thing. Peter's a soldier. He's got a sharp eye and a cool head, and he doesn't pull punches when it comes to sizing up a situation. But he also follows orders."

"Please," Bella whispered. "He wants Alexander dead."

"He did. But now that I've seen Nahuel, I can assure him that this isn't what he thinks it is."

"He's paranoid."

"He trusts me."

"I don't trust *him*!" she cried.

Jasper sighed. "Trust Charlotte, then. I'll ask her to rein him until we can get there."

Bella wavered, twin horrors warring inside of her. Could she really entrust her son's safety to Jasper's savage friend? But what if she didn't, and Joham disappeared again? Nahuel was the only real hope she had of finding him, but what if he relocated again, when Nahuel wasn't there to follow?

She looked back at Edward, who was quietly waiting for her decision. He would go with her, she knew, if she insisted. But he was right, it was an iffy prospect. What if she found Joham but failed to liberate her son from him? What if her impatience got Edward and herself both killed?

"I've known Peter and Charlotte a long time," Jasper said quietly. "Neither one of them has *ever* let me down."

She stifled a whimper. "You're *sure* they won't hurt him?"

"I'm sure."

She nodded and stepped into Edward's embrace again, hiding her face in his shirt. "Okay."

"Good girl." He tugged at a lock of her hair affectionately, then headed into the house and hurried up the stairs to talk to Nahuel.

Edward held Bella close and kissed the top of her head. "We're going to get him back," he whispered. "I know the waiting is driving you crazy, but it's almost over."

"Tell me again why we have to wait," she said, her voice sounding small and frightened even to her own ears.

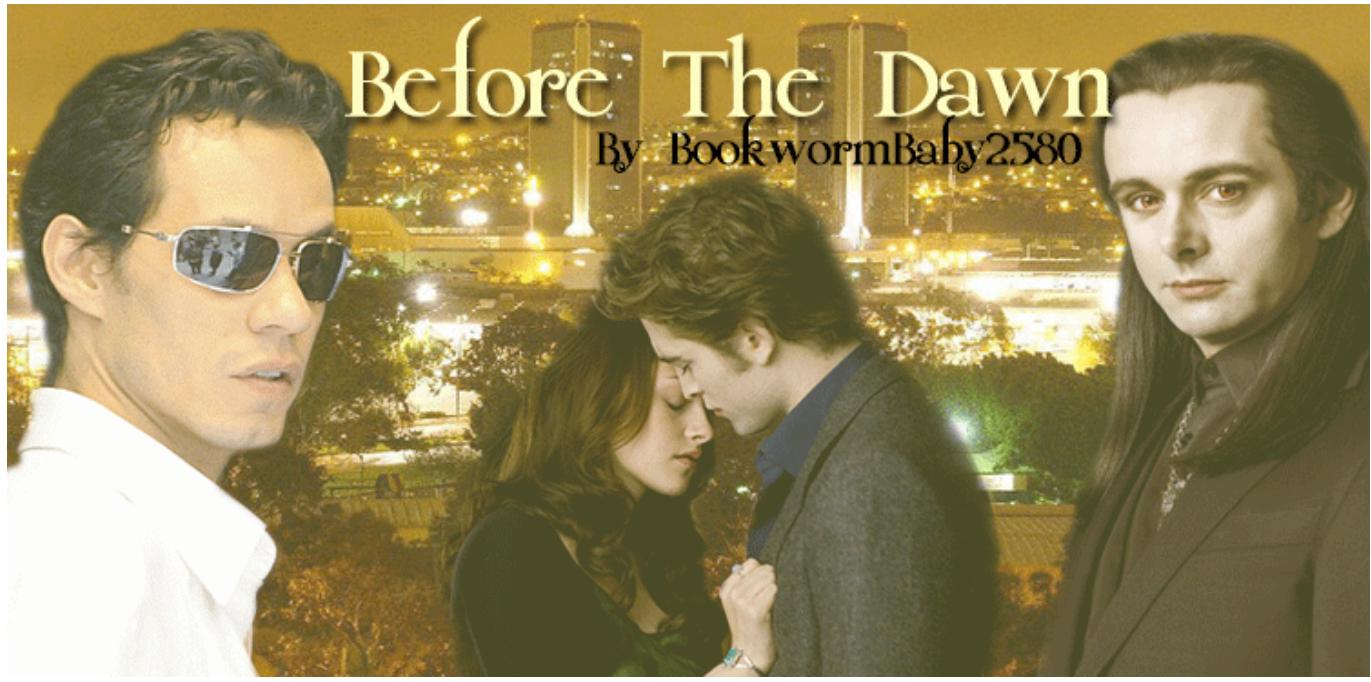
He stroked her hair and whispered reassurances in her ear. "Just imagine it," he breathed. "Facing down Joham with twelve vampires at your back and a dozen more watching from the sidelines. Think of what he put you through when you didn't have the strength to resist him. And think what you can do now that your strength so far outstrips his."

A smile pulled at her lips and she turned her head to press her cheek to his solid chest.

"One more day," she said. In twenty-four hours, they would be on the road. Twenty-four more could see an end to all of this.

Edward nodded. "One more day. I'll be with you every minute."

Larkspurs



Before The Dawn

By BookwormBaby2580

The discussion with Nahuel took about two hours. He only spent a few minutes on his history, telling his eager audience about his naive mother, Pire, and the vampire who had charmed her into bearing his child. He told them about Huilen, the protective sister who distrusted Joham, and who had cared for Pire after the vampire abandoned her. And he told them how, as a newborn child, he had bitten Huilen on instinct and then fed on the blood of his newly-deceased mother while he waited for his aunt to complete the change.

The rest of the time was spent answering incredulous questions. Yes, there were others—children of Joham as well, though he did not know whether Joham was the only vampire to have produced biological offspring. No, he had never tried to reproduce himself. It had taken him only seven years to reach maturity, but he had been self-aware even before his birth and he had learned to understand speech and body language within days of his birth—though it had taken longer to be able to reproduce them properly. No, he did not know if he was immortal, but he had been alive and virtually unchanged for nearly a hundred and fifty years. No, he had never been sick, but he had been injured, and had discovered that he healed far more quickly than humans did.

One question that came up again and again, no matter how thoroughly Nahuel answered it, was about his accountability for his actions. He assured them that he had been able to understand the concepts of choice and consequence from the cradle, but his audience seemed to have a hard time accepting his claim.

"I lacked only experience," he told Aro when the ancient vampire questioned him about it for the third time. "Experience gives wisdom and helps a man understand the impetus for prudent choices, but when my aunt explained her reasoning to me, I was able to understand and comply with her wishes."

"But you *did* require supervision?" he pressed. "You'll admit to that, at least?"

He nodded, conceding Aro's point, though he seemed confused by the man's determination to make it. Bella thought she understood, though. Accountability was important to a man who had made a

career out of crime and punishment. He was considering the legal ramifications of offspring produced by vampires. Who was at fault if an immortal toddler exposed their all-important secret? Who would pay for the infraction?

When the presentation dissolved into a buzz of speculation and debate, Carlisle claimed Nahuel's attention for another hour, quizzing him on his health and physiology. He recorded blood pressure, body temperature, and heart rate during active and resting periods, and collected samples of skin and hair. Nahuel sat through it all with patient perplexity, clearly puzzled by Carlisle's enthusiasm for his biological processes. When he discovered that Nahuel was in need of a hunt, Carlisle volunteered to accompany him and drove off with him in the Mercedes, still quizzing him about metabolism and elimination of waste.

While Carlisle and Nahuel were out, the others were making preparations for their upcoming trip. Alice had made a handful of calls from the road, giving various orders, and now Edward was in the living room snapping digital photos of each guest in front of a drop cloth. Every now and then he would stop and run the camera upstairs to Esme, who uploaded the pictures onto one of the computers in the library and started digitally enhancing them. Jasper was up there with her, though what exactly he was doing, Bella wasn't sure.

Bella had been given a task as well. Alice had called, huffing with irritation, to ask her to go through the camp and take measurements of all those who would be accompanying the Cullens on their visit to Joham. Her usual method for shopping, Bella learned, was to pick out an item and search for a future that included the recipient wearing it. If it didn't fit, she adjusted the size and tried again. Nahuel's presence interfered with her visions, however, and she was frustrated to discover that she had to size her choices the old-fashioned way. She found the whole thing extremely inconvenient.

Bella couldn't help being frustrated that Alice was delaying the trip to go shopping for clothes, but she decided it would be faster to do as Alice asked than to try and convince her to come back.

She discovered the reason for the shopping before long, though. The following morning, two large diesel-fueled trucks pulled off of the highway and onto the long, winding driveway, and the crunch of gravel and clang of metal echoed through the woods. Bella spun on her heel and started toward the river and the sound of them, but Edward caught her elbow and pulled her back.

"It's just Emmett and Rose."

Curious, she followed Edward around to the front of the house with the residents of the campsite across the river making their way in behind her. They all watched as Rosalie and Emmett disembarked from the cabs of two giant semi-trucks, and headed to the back of the one Rosalie had been driving. They threw open the rolling door, and Emmett extended a long ramp from the back of the trailer to the gravel below. Rosalie disappeared inside, and when she emerged again she was wheeling a sleek, red Harley Davidson.

A window opened upstairs and Jasper leapt out, landing almost silently on the grass in front of the house. A broad grin split his face as he admired the motorcycle. "Dearest sister, please tell me that's for me."

Rosalie laughed and shook her head. "Nope."

"Come on, now. Don't play games with me."

"Alice was very specific. This isn't for you."

Jasper narrowed his eyes at her. "Tell me the truth. There's no way my girl bought that for someone else."

"Sorry, sweetie, but it's true." Rosalie shrugged her shoulders and then grinned. "Yours is the silver Ducati."

He let out a laugh and sprinted toward the trucks to help Emmett and Rosalie unload them. A few minutes later, the trucks were empty and thirty-eight motorcycles of varying models, colors, and wear, were lined up in front of the house. Jasper stood next to his, running a hand over the leather seat.

"What do you think?" Emmett asked him. "We ought to be able to make the trip well enough with these, wouldn't you say?"

He nodded. "We'll make a spectacle of ourselves, though."

"Don't worry, Alice has got that handled."

"We couldn't get quite as many bikes as we wanted on such short notice," Rosalie said, "but this should be enough if coven members double-up, and if we can talk Garrett into riding with one of the Denali girls." She shot him a wink. "You wouldn't mind, would you, Garrett?"

He grinned back. "It would be my great pleasure, if one of them will have me."

"Oh, don't worry," Kate replied airily. "I'm sure Tanya will. She's never been very picky."

Garrett's smile morphed into a scowl, and Tanya and Irina giggled.

Bella heard Esme's SUV approaching, and a few moments later it skidded to a stop next to the delivery trucks. Alice hopped out and scanned the crowd of onlookers.

"Oh, good! You're all here! That makes this easy." She rounded the car and popped open the hatch, then started calling out names.

"Charles and Makenna!"

The pair in question made their way forward, exchanging puzzled looks. When they reached Alice, she shoved three large, somewhat crumpled shopping bags into each of their hands.

"Jonathan!" she called out before they had even had a chance to look at what they'd been given.

A steady stream of people headed toward Alice as she called each name, and they left again with shopping bags in their hands. On the grass in front of the Cullen house, parcels were opened and their contents revealed: jeans, leather coats, helmets, gloves, and riding boots.

Tia held up her helmet. "Alice, sweetie, did you forget that we're not quite as fragile as your human friends?"

"It's the law. Besides, we're going to need sparkle-proofing if we're riding in the daytime. Carmen and Eleazar!"

They came forward to accept their bags.

"I'm sorry if the fit isn't right," Alice said, thrusting the bags into their hands. "I just . . . I can't see a thing!"

Carmen waved a dismissive hand. "I'm sure it's fine." She kissed Alice on the cheek before moving away to leave room for the next in line.

"Carlisle and Esme!"

The two of them appeared at the window Jasper had come through, and Carlisle climbed out and dropped to the grass. He moved to Alice and pressed a kiss to her forehead before taking the things she had brought him.

"What's your plan for deflecting attention?"

"Simple. We're not going to." She reached inside the SUV and pulled out a large, folded banner. "We're going to make as big a scene as possible."

He raised his eyebrows, but helped her unfold the banner and smiled. He held it up so everyone could see, and Bella eyed the large lettering. She could tell it was hand-painted and not professionally printed, though she doubted that human eyes would be able to pick out the difference with the lettering done so precisely.

The bulk of the banner was taken up with thick blue letters that read "MDA", and then below them, in smaller print, "Muscular Dystrophy Association: Ride for the Cure". Beneath that was a row of logos, displaying companies that had supposedly sponsored the ride.

"Alice, that's brilliant!" Esme said from her perch in the window. "What about traffic? Will we have to clear it with the city?"

"Charlie's taking care of it," she answered, closing the hatch of the now-empty SUV.

Edward cleared his throat and slung an arm over Bella's shoulders. "Al, did you forget somebody?"

"You two don't need riding clothes. You're driving the support vehicle." She took the banner from Carlisle and started tying it up on the back of the SUV.

"What? Come on, Alice, don't mess with me like that."

She rolled her eyes. "Someone's got to do it, and Bella needs the extra buffer between her and the humans."

Edward let out a huff and grumbled something Bella didn't quite catch.

"Don't be such a baby," Alice told him. "You can have one of the motorcycles when we're done with them, if it means that much to you."

Edward scowled, but didn't argue.

Alice turned to face the group of people still looking over their new clothes. "Okay, everyone, get changed and figure out who's doubling up! We've got to be out at the highway and ready to go by one o'clock!"

"Go to the bathroom *before* we leave!" Emmett added with mock severity. "We're *not* stopping on the way!"

His order earned a giggle from Rosalie and several puzzled looks from the crowd.

The thought hit Bella all at once: they were leaving soon. They were getting ready to go—where, she still hadn't even bothered to ask—and before long she would be with Alexander again. She told herself not to get her hopes up, that there were still things that could go wrong, but her body didn't listen. Almost before she had thought about it, she had darted across the lawn and thrown her arms around Alice.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you." She just kept whispering it over and over, her whole frame trembling with gratitude, as Alice hugged her back.

"I still have a little left to do," Alice told her as she eased herself out of Bella's embrace. "You're going to need more scarves, so I'm taking Jasper and running out to meet Jared. Get ready to go and help Carlisle get everything organized, okay?"

But Carlisle didn't really need any help. The excursion was something of a novelty to the territory's visitors, and they were all in high spirits as they changed into their new clothes and selected their transportation. Carlisle claimed a bulky Gold Wing and maneuvered Esme onto the front of it, taking the rear seat for himself. He leaned forward and whispered in her ear, and Bella looked away quickly when she realized that his hands had crept beneath the leather jacket at Esme's waist.

Her gaze fell on Emmett and Rosalie, who had chosen a Harley Davidson that had obviously seen some hard use.

"I'm driving first," Emmett declared, flinging a leg over the bike and straddling its bulk.

"Like hell you are. This baby's *mine*."

"Too slow. I'm already on it."

She smiled sweetly. "Then I guess you'll have to get off."

They stared at each other for a long moment, before Emmett finally said, "Odds and evens. I'm odds."

They both made fists in front of them, and on Rosalie's count of three, flashed their fingers.

Emmett pumped his fist. "Yes! Back seat, baby."

She huffed, but slid onto the back of the bike.

Garrett, meanwhile, was working his charms on the Denali girls. He was flirting with all three of them, trying to persuade first one, then another, that he was a better riding partner than her sisters. They all seemed to be having a fine time of it, except possibly Kate, who Bella thought looked a little more defensive than the other two. Her stance was stiffer, and her teasing remarks a little sharper. Bella had to wonder if Garrett had said something to upset her.

The discussion ended with Irina and Garrett astride a bike together while Tanya and Kate took the other one. Tanya looked as though she honestly couldn't care less, but Kate seemed a little too triumphant about the whole thing.

Still, they had figured things out in a timely manner, as had the rest of the group. All around her, Bella could see individuals and pairs testing out their motorcycles, getting a feel for the balance and the engine capacities. By the time Alice and Jasper returned on the silver Ducati, all that was left to do was head up to their starting point.

Bella performed her usual scent-deflection ritual, and then climbed into the SUV with Edward while Carlisle herded the rest of the group into a line. Esme moved along the train then, passing out driver license cards, and Bella suddenly understood what she and Jasper had been doing in the room upstairs.

"You can make driver's licenses?" she asked Edward incredulously.

He shrugged. "In a pinch. They won't hold up under close inspection, but they'll do for now."

Motorcycle engines fired to life, the roar echoing through the woods, and then they were finally moving, making their way out to the highway, experimenting with the range and limitations of their new machines as they went.

Charlie and four other police officers met them at the highway. Charlie looked uncomfortable, but his anxiety eased a little when he spotted Bella in the passenger seat of the SUV. He had never been much of a fan of motorcycles, Bella knew, and he still seemed a little fuzzy on the details of her new indestructibility. He raised a hand in greeting, then turned to the rest of the group and started issuing reminders about traffic laws and safety regulations. He checked licenses and made sure everyone had helmets, then waved the other officers into their squad cars.

"Looks like we'll have a police escort through town," Edward said. "That was a nice touch, Alice."

Alice turned to look back from her perch on the back of Jasper's motorcycle. Her face was covered by her helmet, but Bella could hear the smile in her voice when she replied, "Thanks, brother mine."

The cruisers fell in line at the front and rear of the caravan, and they began to move.

The procession through town was *slow*. As Alice had promised, they all made a huge spectacle of themselves. They hollered and waved any time they saw a pedestrian, and the commotion drew many people out of the businesses that lined Main Street. Tanya checked the cloudy sky and then whipped off her helmet and took up an impromptu collection for the MDA, hitting people up for a dollar here, a handful of change there, and thanking them with broad smiles and the occasional flirtatious kiss. She made almost enough of a show to distract the citizens of Forks from the semi-familiar face peering out the window of the "support vehicle."

But a few people noticed Bella, and a buzz of gossip sprang up behind them.

"Isn't that Charlie's daughter?"

"I thought she was missing."

"Did they find her?"

"Is she back?"

"Charlie never said anything."

"I could have sworn I heard Karen Newton talking about her."

"It is her, isn't it?"

Bella focused on the rancid scent of the scarf around her neck and tried not to care about the attention being paid to her. It looked like the word was out that she was in Forks. She and Charlie would have to come up with some excuse as to why she wasn't seeing anyone.

But that was a relatively minor worry and could wait for another time. Right now there was only Alexander. The police cars left the caravan at the edge of town, and once they were out of sight, Carlisle fed his bike some gas and urged it up to well over the legal speed limit. The rest of the crowd was all too eager to follow suit.

Despite the speed of the motorcycles, though, they didn't make any better time than Edward and Bella had on their trip to Mexico. There was still traffic to consider, and they had to rein in their speed when Edward called out warnings about upcoming speed traps. Plus, the bikes required more frequent fuel stops. Bella squirmed in her seat and found herself wishing she could fly. She wanted to break free of the pack and race ahead of everyone, to get to her son as quickly as possible and let the rest of them catch up, if they could. She dug her fingernails into her thighs and forced herself to remember all of the reasons that she had decided to wait for them.

Edward did his best to reassure her. Every now and then he would tell her how many miles they had traveled and how far they had to go until they reached Tonopah, the small Nevada city where Nahuel had directed them. As the numbers ticked away, though, Bella only grew more anxious. Dread sat like a lead weight in her stomach, warring with the part of her that couldn't stand to be kept away from Alexander. She was dealing with the prospect of seeing Joham all over again, and the fear of it made her feel unsteady and light-headed.

It was only Edward's hand in hers that made it bearable.

They drove all day and through the twilit hours of the evening, and finally, somewhere near midnight, Carlisle and Nahuel led the procession off of the freeway. Jasper must have made a phone call Bella wasn't aware of, because when they all pulled their motorcycles into the gravel parking lot of an old clapboard casino, Charlotte was waiting for them. She was leaning against a lamppost, with a bored expression on her face and a lit cigarette held lightly between her fingers. She flicked it away once they all pulled up, then pushed off of the post and strode toward Jasper.

"Subtle," she said, eyeing the line of bikes. "You'll have to leave them here. We're on foot the rest of the way."

"Probably won't be much quieter," Jasper said, looking around him with a grimace.

"You're the one who decided to bring a goddamn army."

"Peter's still there?"

She nodded.

Bella pushed out of the SUV and hurried to join them. "How's Alexander? Is he okay?"

Charlotte's lips pursed for a moment, and then pulled into a little smirk. "He's okay. Peter's taken a liking to him."

"Did you speak to him?" Jasper asked sharply.

She arched an eyebrow. "We're good little soldiers, Major. We followed orders. Got close enough to listen, though, and you were right about one thing. Y'all are in way over your heads."

"Good to know." He turned back to the others and jerked his head in a command to follow. He didn't have to explain what was going on. Everyone had been following his conversation with Charlotte, and had already climbed off of their motorcycles and pulled off their helmets.

"Should we leave these?" Tia asked, holding hers up.

Jasper glanced at Alice, who shrugged apologetically.

"Right," he muttered. "Sorry." He turned back to Tia. "I'd hang onto them. There's no telling whether we'll be back by sunrise."

Charlotte had already turned away, and Jasper took Alice's hand and headed after her. Bella followed, and she let out a sigh of relief when Edward caught up to her and took her hand, too.

"How far is it?" she asked Charlotte.

The girl didn't turn around. "About twenty miles as the crow flies. It's all sand and hills, though, and we'll have to skirt around one of the mines. Should take us about an hour, if we're trying to be quiet."

Not at the pace we're going, Bella thought to herself. They were walking at human speed toward the dirt and brush beyond the city limits, and at least while they were in view of a city full of humans, they couldn't really do any better. They already looked suspicious enough. The temptation to break away and run to Alexander was greater than ever, and it was all Bella could do to resist. She squeezed Edward's hand to anchor her focus and forced herself to walk behind Charlotte until they were safely out of view of humans and had the cover of darkness.

Charlotte looked back, eyeing the distant lights of the city and the last stragglers of the group, and then gave a satisfied nod. She faced forward again and broke into a jog until she was sure everyone was following, and then quickened her pace into an all-out run. She was fast—not as fast as Bella, but fast enough to satisfy Bella's desperate need to run. And she had a knack for sticking to the softer ground which, while slowing them down, *was* quieter. Still, she doubted their approach would be much of a secret by the time they made it to wherever Joham had holed himself up.

The sparse terrain turned Bella's stomach. There was a time when desert landscape hadn't bothered her—had even appealed to her—but this all looked a little too much like Mexico. She'd suffered too much trauma in the midst of sagebrush to ever be fully comfortable there again.

They crested a hill, and what looked like a trailer park came into view in the distance. Charlotte turned northward and made a wide arc around it, but a pale figure burst out of the shadows of the park and angled toward them. It took a moment for Bella to recognize the tall, lithe frame as Peter's. He hardly glanced at the group, but he gave Jasper a nod and grabbed Charlotte's hand when he reached them. A minute later he was slowing down, and Bella wanted to scream in frustration.

Peter beckoned Carlisle and Esme forward for a quick, whispered conference, and Nahuel joined them.

"We're nearly within hearing distance," he told them. "If you're leaving anyone behind, do it here."

Carlisle looked back at the group, but there didn't seem to be anyone who preferred to stay. He shrugged and turned back to Peter.

"Just over that next hill is a road, with a little turn-off that leads back to a half a dozen mobile homes arranged in a circle. He's keeping a human girl in one of them, and in two more he's got half-breeds. Alexander gets free rein, though I'm not sure how much longer that will continue."

"Why?" Bella demanded, irritated by the exclusion from the conference.

Peter looked over at her and grinned. "Because he's a little hell-raiser, and Daddy ain't known for his patience." He stepped back to make room for her, and she and Edward joined the ring.

"Other vampires?" Carlisle asked.

"Two. Weak ties. They won't give us much trouble."

"I'd like to talk to them. Keep them from leaving, if you have the opportunity."

"They'll hear us coming," Peter warned. "You'll probably want to send some people around to the back to head them off if they run."

Carlisle nodded and scanned the crowd, but Edward drew Bella's attention to himself when he pulled her close and started running his hands up and down her sides. He dragged them up, cupped her face, and then slid his fingers through her hair and blew softly, letting his breath filter through the cascading strands.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Making a statement. I want him to know."

"Know what?"

"That I'm with you." He ran his hands back down her arms until his fingers linked with hers. "That if he has a quarrel with you, he has a quarrel with me."

Bella shivered as he brought her fingers up to run through his hair. His scent was heavy here, and she leaned into him and breathed deeply as she painted her hands with it. It felt so *good* to know that she wouldn't be facing Joham alone.

"Tanya," Carlisle said, still scanning the faces of their entourage, "do you think you and your coven —"

He stopped abruptly when Joham's angry voice drifted to them on the wind, yelling Alexander's name.

A shrill little voice screamed "No!" in response.

Bella's head snapped up. She had never heard her son speak, but the sound of his voice resonated right down to the core of her being. It was *him*.

No amount of self-restraint could hold her back now. She darted away, only vaguely aware of the hisses behind her, of the hand that had made a grab for her and just missed. Joham was yelling again and Alexander was protesting, and Bella had to get to them before that degenerate monster laid a hand on her little boy.

At the top of the hill she caught sight of them, still at least three miles away. Joham was standing with his back to her, his fists clenched, squaring off with—could that really be her Alexander? He looked so much older; if she'd had to guess she would have thought he was nearly a year old. But even from here she recognized his glossy black curls and the warm brown eyes, screwed up now in childish anger. He stood in front of the door of one of the mobile homes, and every time Joham moved to either side, Alexander angled himself to face him.

"Get out of my way!" Joham hissed.

"No!" Alexander yelled again.

"I'm warning you, boy," Joham growled. "I won't go easy on you this time."

"I hate you!"

Joham hissed again and stooped, rising with a large rock in his hand. He drew back and launched it at Alexander, and before Bella knew it she was yelling, an ear-splitting, echoing roar that was far more animal than human.

Joham whipped around, and his eyes widened at the sight of her.

She pushed herself harder than she realized she could, running as fast as the soft ground would allow her to, kicking up clouds of dust behind her. She growled in frustration at the sandy ground and tried to pick out rocks and hard-crusted earth in her path that she could use to propel herself forward, while still keeping Joham in her sights.

"Alexander, *come*," he demanded, turning back to the boy.

"No!"

"Right now! *Come!*"

"No!"

The distance between Bella and Joham was closing rapidly, and she could see the fear in his face as he turned back to look at her. He gave up on Alexander and ran, slipping between the mobile homes and out into the vast expanse of desert behind them.

He wasn't fast.

Edward was fast. Emmett and Jasper were strong, and that made them fast. But chasing Joham now, Bella could see that he wasn't a man gifted with physical abilities. He could subdue a human with only the slightest effort, but Bella wasn't human anymore. She wasn't just a vampire, either. She was a newborn, and her strength far surpassed Joham's.

Within seconds she had closed on him, and with the help of a protruding stone, she kicked off of the ground and launched herself at Joham. She slammed into his back and the two of them crashed to the ground in a gritty puff of dirt.

Bella attacked. She bit and slashed and tore at whatever was in reach. Joham struggled beneath her, but she was stronger and had the advantage of leverage. She had torn a handful of flesh from his shoulder and a mouthful from his neck before he managed to wriggle onto his back.

It didn't give him an advantage, though. Looking into the intimately familiar face only refreshed Bella's rage. He swiped at her with one hand—the hand that had held her down while he poured cold, clotting blood into her mouth—and she sank her teeth into his wrist and wrenched it off. He tried to shove her aside with his arm—the arm that had left bands of bruises around her back each time he forced her in his bed, and she bent and twisted it until it, too, broke away from his body. The teeth that had left the scar on her neck sank into her fingers as she tore off his jaw. Her fingers stung and stiffened, but Bella didn't even pause. Joham was on the bottom now, at her mercy, and she ripped off limbs and gouged out chunks in a frantic haze of fury. She tore at him until he was incapable of fighting back, and then she tore at him some more. She could have gone on for hours, and she might have if a firm hand hadn't gripped her shoulder and pulled her back.

"That's enough, kid," she heard Jasper say, and she spun around, ready to attack. But next to him was Edward, grinning widely, his golden eyes shining with pride, and Bella felt the rage ease out of her. He opened his arms and she collapsed into them.

The crowd of vampires was gathering around them, chuckling appreciatively at the writhing mess that Bella had left on the ground. Peter and Charlotte marched forward, a broad-shouldered vampire with a buzz-cut held between them, and Emmett wasn't far behind them, his fist wrapped around the long blonde hair of a shirtless vampire who wouldn't have looked out of place on a California beach. Neither of them struggled, but they both looked anxious and cagey.

Carlisle met the gaze of the man with the buzz-cut. "You may help him, if you like," he said, nodding toward Joham.

Bella hissed, but Carlisle put out a calming hand. "We need to speak with him, Isabella."

"We need to burn him," she snapped.

Carlisle looked pointedly back toward the ring of mobile homes, now at least a hundred yards away, where a tiny figure perched on top of one of the roofs, staring at them with wide eyes.

Bella gasped. "Oh! Alexander!" She looked back at Joham, a sudden panic overtaking her. She had torn him apart with her son watching. What must he think of her? And how did he feel about his father? How damaging was it for him to see what she had just done?

The boy met her gaze and straightened up, clenching his little fists at his side. He stamped his foot on the roof of the mobile home, and the metal dented beneath him. "I'm *very* angry wif you, Mother!" he called across the space between them.

"He's—he'll be okay," she called back, gesturing to where the vampire with the buzz-cut was fitting Joham back together. "He's not dead. He'll be all right."

"*I know that,*" the boy said scornfully. "*I'm not stupid.*"

"Oh . . ." Bella clutched at Edward's arm, at a loss for anything to say.

"You *left* me!" the boy yelled, stamping his foot again. "I made you a god, and you left me because you din't love me!"

"No! Alexander, that's not true! I *do* love you—more than anything."

"Leave him alone!" Joham growled behind her. Buzz-cut had managed to get his head affixed properly, and was now working on his limbs. "You ungrateful little bitch! I should have killed you before you completed the change!"

"No!" Alexander screamed from his rooftop, his rage raising the pitch of his voice. "She's *my* mother, and you can't kill her unless *I* say!"

Bella felt a cold chill creep into her at his words. "I missed you so much," she said. She took a step toward him, and Joham hissed again.

"Stay away from him. The boy belongs to me! This is *my* coven!"

Edward put out a hand to stop Bella, steering her back toward Joham. "Let's do this formally, then," he said, his voice low and calm. "I challenge you for the leadership of your coven."

His words seemed to be a signal for something. Emmett released the blond-haired surfer and moved to stand behind Edward. The rest of the Cullens did too, as did several others. Tanya's family joined them, with Garrett in their midst and Peter and Charlotte behind them. Benjamin and Tia fell in with them too, which brought a reluctant Amun into the mix with Kebi. Aro joined, clearly reluctant to be outdone, and a handful of others hovered at the rear of the group. Meanwhile, the remainder of the crowd eased back, giving them all room.

The vampire with the buzz-cut finished assembling Joham and then stepped back—way back.

"I didn't sign on for this," he muttered.

The blond gave Joham an apologetic shrug and retreated as well, which left Joham squaring off alone against nearly thirty vampires.

"Do you think you can intimidate me into surrendering my family?" he hissed.

"If this is how you treat your *family*," Edward growled back, "they're better off with you dead."

Joham looked over his shoulder at his two companions, who had joined the crowd of onlookers. "Are you going to just stand there and let them destroy all we've worked for?"

Buzz-cut didn't respond, but the blond threw up his hands. "This is cool and all, but I'm not into it enough to become a martyr for the c—"

Joham took advantage of the temporary distraction he provided and lunged to the side. But Edward was a mind-reader and Jasper was . . . well, Jasper, so he didn't get very far. The two of them had him pinned to the ground within seconds, and then Rosalie crouched down in front of him and drew a lighter out of her pocket. She held it up, inches from his face, and lit the flame.

"Concede," she said quietly.

Joham let out a breath and bit back his fury with some effort. "I concede."

Buzz-cut stepped forward, his head lowered. "Do you require services from us?"

"No," Carlisle answered, "but I would like you to stay nearby for a little while. I'll want to speak with you after I've attended to more pressing concerns."

Buzz-cut nodded.

"Let Joham up, but Jasper, keep an eye on him, please." Carlisle turned to Nahuel and nodded toward the ring of houses. "Let's go take a look at your sisters."

"No!" Alexander was still watching them from the roof of his trailer. "You're not allowed! Leave my sisters alone!"

Alexander. Bella could feel his presence like an itch beneath her skin where she couldn't reach it, couldn't scratch. She wanted to hold him more than anything, and with Joham no longer a threat she turned her full attention on him. She hurried after Carlisle and Nahuel, anxious to be near him.

"Stay *away!*" he ordered, pointing at them. "I din't say you could come here!"

Carlisle slowed to a stop about halfway to the trailers. Bella didn't intend to stop at all, but he caught her elbow as she passed him and held her back.

"My name is Carlisle Cullen," he told the boy. "I'm a friend of your mother's. Is it all right if I come closer so we can talk?"

The boy scowled. "I know who you are," he said, pointing. "You're Nahuel."

"That's right," Nahuel answered. "And I know you've been doing your best to protect our sisters. I've come to help you."

Alexander sat down on the edge of the roof. "Father is angry wif you."

"I'm angry with him," Nahuel replied. "For the same reasons you are. What he's doing to our sisters is reprehensible."

"Carlisle is a doctor," Bella added. "Do you know what a doctor is?"

He cocked his head curiously. "Of course I know, but only humans are doctors. Vampires don't get sick."

"I look after humans," Carlisle told him. "And in this case, half-humans. From what Nahuel tells me, your sisters would benefit from medical attention."

Alexander poked his thumb into his mouth and sucked on it while he eyed Carlisle. After a few seconds he pulled it out again.

"Mother, is he nice?"

She smiled at him and nodded. "I think he might be the nicest man I've ever met."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

He turned around and wriggled his way off of the roof until he was only holding himself up by the elbows, and Bella couldn't help but think that there was something odd about the way he moved, or the way that the clothes hung on him. Something other than the fact that a child his size should never have been able to move as confidently or speak as articulately as he did. It wasn't until he pushed off of the roof and dropped gracefully into the dirt below that she realized that his clothes were made for a child wearing a diaper. Alexander clearly wasn't wearing one, and his pants sagged at the back where they had been cut to allow room for extra bulk.

Alexander turned back to Carlisle. "On'y you and Nahuel and my mother," he said imperiously.

Carlisle smiled. "Thank you."

The three of them advanced again, and when they drew near, Alexander raised his arms to Bella. She scooped him up and held him close, relishing the feel of his soft, warm skin as he snuggled down into her sweater.

"I'm still very angry wif you," he said, tangling his fingers in her hair.

"I know, sweetheart. I promise I'll never, ever leave you again."

"Go wif them, mother," he said, watching as Nahuel directed Carlisle into one of the houses. "We hafta stay on the porch and make sure nobody else goes in and hurts Jennifer."

"Is that how you protect your sisters?" she asked him.

He nodded. "It makes Father very angry. He says they're not being mean, but they are. They make Jennifer and Maysun cry."

The idea of little Alexander standing between Joham and the girls made her shudder. "You don't have to do that anymore," she told him. "We're going to take care of everything."

They reached the steps that led up to the first trailer, and Bella glanced inside the open door. There was a long table taking up most of the main room, and on it was a girl who looked about Nahuel's age, with the same dark hair and bronzed skin. She was dressed in a thin hospital gown and was strapped to the table with what looked like several lengths of steel cable twisted together. Carlisle was in the process of peeling them back while Nahuel crouched next to the girl's head, murmuring in her ear. She was crying, and as soon as Carlisle removed the last of the cables, she leapt up and threw her arms around Nahuel. She hugged him and sobbed into his shoulder with Carlisle looking on, frowning darkly at the spots of blood that stained the back of her gown.

Bella held her breath. Jennifer's blood wasn't nearly as tempting as a full human's blood, but she didn't want to take any chances.

"I'm sorry I took so long," Nahuel was telling Jennifer as he held her close. "My search was difficult, but I found someone better than the Volturi. He is Doctor. He will help you."

Carlisle began his examination then, peeling the bloody shirt gently from the wounds on the girl's back, asking her tactful questions about the possibility of pregnancy.

"I felt it in my stomach," Bella told him as he was examining Jennifer for symptoms. "Like a hard knot. That and the nausea were the first things I noticed."

Carlisle had Jennifer lean back against Nahuel while he gently prodded her stomach. "I don't feel anything. Honestly, I'm not sure you're physiologically capable of bearing a child."

"Maysun . . ." she whispered.

Carlisle frowned and nodded. "We'll keep an eye out for symptoms, and we'll get these bedsores cleaned up so they can heal properly. Are you injured anywhere else? Any pains?"

She shook her head.

"All right. Let's go take a look at Maysun."

Bella moved out of the way to allow them to pass, then followed after them to the second trailer. This time it was Jennifer who offered comfort while Carlisle removed similar bonds, but Maysun didn't respond. She just stared dully at the ceiling, even after she had been freed.

"Maysun, will you look at me?" Carlisle asked her.

Her eyes focused on his face for just a moment before sliding away again.

"My name is Carlisle Cullen. I'm a doctor, and the head of a large coven. Nahuel brought me here to help you."

"You can't help me," she mumbled. "It's too late."

"Why is it too late?"

"They already did it." Her hand drifted down to press against the hospital gown where it lay over the soft swell of her stomach. "It's going to kill me."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," Carlisle said gently. "Look there, in the doorway. That's Alexander's mother."

Maysun's eyes rolled toward Bella, blankly at first, but then with increasing interest.

"She was human when she conceived. If she survived, I think you have a fair chance of it."

Maysun pushed herself up on her elbow. "You survived it?"

She nodded.

"I'm going to do everything in my power to see to it that you do as well," Carlisle said. "That is, if you'll allow it. Will you come back to Washington with us and let me look after you until you've carried the child to term?"

She looked back at him again, her brow furrowing. "What if . . . what if I want to get rid of it?"

Carlisle hesitated, his hand hovering over her abdomen. "We'll consider it. I'd like to do a full medical exam with proper instruments before any decisions are made, but we'll talk about the possibility."

She sank back onto the table. "You'll get me out of here?"

"Of course. You may consider yourself under the protection of my coven."

She let out a long breath, then rolled onto her stomach and started to cry.

Carlisle patted her shoulder. "Look after her?" he said to Nahuel and Jennifer, and when they nodded he headed back out the door.

The rest of the vampires had found their way back to the ring of trailers, Joham and his cronies among them. When Carlisle headed for the third occupied trailer, Joham darted forward to stop him.

"That one is mine," he said, his voice low and menacing.

Carlisle arched an eyebrow as Jasper and Edward strode up behind him.

"You ceded control of your coven," Jasper reminded him.

"That girl isn't part of a coven. She's human. She belongs to me."

"I'm taking her from you," Carlisle said. "If you have a problem with that, feel free to try and stop me."

Joham let out a frustrated roar.

"Step aside."

Joham hesitated, but a low growl from Jasper finally convinced him to back away and let Carlisle pass him. Carlisle climbed the steps to the trailer, and as soon as he had let himself inside, an shrill scream pierced the air.

Alexander tugged at Bella's sleeve, but he seemed unfazed by the scream. "Mother, who are those people?"

Bella glanced around at the large crowd that had come along to watch the spectacle and get a look at her son. They were all staring curiously at him now, and whispering among themselves.

"They're . . . friends and acquaintances. Some of them came along to help us find you."

"I never saw so many vampires in one place before," he said frankly.

The screaming inside the trailer started to quiet down, and Bella could hear Carlisle's voice beneath it, murmuring reassuring words.

"Bella?"

Bella glanced at Rosalie, who was inching her way closer with Emmett in tow.

"Can I meet him?"

"Of course. Alexander, these are my friends Rosalie and Emmett."

Alexander's eyes widened when he looked at Rosalie.

"Mother," he whispered without looking away, "is she nice?"

"Yes, she's very nice."

Alexander wriggled out of her arms and leapt to the ground, darting to the side of one of the trailers where a handful of wild larkspurs were growing. He plucked a stem of them and returned to Rosalie, reaching up to her. She picked him up and he tucked the flowers behind her ear.

"It's very nice to meet such a lovely girl," Alexander told her.

Bella shivered. The words and the cadence were familiar, something he had obviously picked up from Joham, and she fretted over the likeness.

Rosalie, however, was charmed by him. She laughed brightly and thanked him, her fingers moving to stroke his glossy black curls.

"What's up, little man?" Emmett asked, holding up a fist.

Alexander flinched back and threw up his hand. Emmett suddenly stiffened, then collapsed to the ground.

"Emmett!" Rosalie gasped. She fell to her knees and released Alexander, who darted back to his mother.

"He's okay," Eleazar called from the back of the crowd. He jogged forward, and Edward moved away from the trailer where he had been standing guard with Jasper. Each of them grabbed an arm and dragged Emmett a few paces away from Alexander before dropping him to the ground again.

Emmett's eyes blinked open almost immediately, and he shook his head as if to free himself from the lingering effects of what had just happened. "Whoa."

"Are you all right?" Rosalie asked, kneeling beside him again.

"Yeah . . . whoa." He grinned. "Alexander, that's cool as hell!"

"Don't cuss in front of him!" Rosalie admonished, but she threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly. "What happened?"

"Alexander is a shield," Eleazar provided. "Not mental, like Bella, but physical. He can disable an attacker."

Bella looked at her son in surprise. "Is that how you were protecting your sisters?" she asked him.

"I tried to, mother, but sometimes it's too hard."

"Oh, sweetheart." Bella cradled him close to her chest, rocking him back and forth. "I'm so proud of you for trying. You're such a brave boy."

Emmett took a step toward them, but Alexander threw up a hand again, baby fingers splayed. "Stop!"

He stopped, running a hand sheepishly through his hair. "Hey, little man, you got it. I'm sorry if I scared you earlier."

"You were going to punch me," Alexander accused.

"What? Nah, you got it all wrong. I just wanted a knuckle crunch."

His brow furrowed. "What's a knuckow crunch?"

"It's like this." He held his fist out to Edward, who bumped it with his own.

Alexander looked unimpressed. "Why did you do that?"

"Uh . . . it's a friendship thing, like a handshake. It's how you show someone you respect them."

"Mother, is he lying?"

Bella chuckled. "No, sweetie, that's true. He didn't mean any harm."

Alexander held out his fist, and Emmett moved forward to tap it lightly with his own. "'Atta boy.'"

Carlisle exited the trailer then, and Esme made her way to his side.

"I need the car," he told her. "We won't be able to take Maysun or Amelia back on the motorcycles."

"I'll get it. Charlotte, do you know the roads? Could you come with me to show me the way back?"

Charlotte agreed and the two of them took off running back toward Tonopah.

Carlisle moved to Bella's side and rested a hand on her shoulder. "I don't think it's wise to have you ride back in the car with the human girl. Will you be all right on one of the motorcycles?"

"Um . . ." She hugged her son to her chest. "Alexander?"

"He should ride in the car."

Bella cringed, repelled by the idea of separating from him, but she was sure she couldn't handle being trapped in an enclosed space with a human all the way home. She nuzzled the top of Alexander's head and nodded.

Carlisle squeezed her shoulder, and then beckoned Joham and his cronies forward. They obliged, and his voice took on a steely note.

"Which of you is responsible for the girls?"

Buzz-cut fell back a step and jerked a thumb at Joham. "That's all on him."

Carlisle's eyes darkened as they fixed on Joham. "You're telling me that you fathered your daughter's child?"

"Of course not," Joham spat in disgust. "Such a union would produce genetically inferior offspring."

"Well, then?" He fixed his gaze on the other two again, and the blond-haired surfer held up his hands.

"We agreed to help out with the conception, but everything else was up to him."

"I see. For the sake of having accurate information, then, which of you fathered those children?"

The blond scratched the back of his head. "Well, uh . . . the human girl's kid is Joham's. But Maysun's . . . we're not really sure."

For a long minute, Carlisle said nothing. The onlookers didn't either. The whole crowd was watching him shift uncomfortably under Carlisle's scrutiny. It was Edward's sharp breath that finally broke the silence.

"Carlisle, *no*." He stalked forward and wrapped his arms around Bella and Alexander, pulling them back away from Carlisle. "You *can't*."

"I have to."

"What?" Bella asked.

Carlisle drew in a slow breath. "Emmett, do you have any of those invitations left?"

Emmett's brows furrowed, but he pulled one of the invitations from his pocket.

"You're all free to leave here in peace," Carlisle told Joham and his friends, passing the invitation to the blond. "However, we've arranged a caucus of sorts, which is open to whomever would like to attend."

"*What?*" Bella demanded, even as Joham snatched the card from the blond boy's hand.

Carlisle squeezed his eyes shut. "Bella, I'm sorry—"

"You're *inviting* them to come back with us!" Her voice had turned shrill in her disbelief, and she shook herself free of Edward's embrace.

"What can I do? There are broad implications that need to be discussed."

"I don't care! He *tortured* me!"

"I know. And I'm so very sorry to put you through this, but try to understand. *This* problem, the issue of conceiving and raising children, is going to be among the most important topics we have to address at the gathering. To exclude the man who knows the most about it would be . . ."

"*Shit*, Carlisle," Emmett whispered.

Bella straightened, mustering up all of her courage. "Then I'm not going back with you."

"No! Bella, you have to!" Edward grabbed her shoulder and spun her toward him, wrapping her and Alexander up in his arms again. "Please, please, don't leave me."

Bella rested her head against his chest, wondering if she would be forever caught between Edward and Alexander. "Come with me," she whispered.

Edward hesitated and looked back at Carlisle.

"Edward, I need you right now," Carlisle said quietly. "And I need Bella, too. Joham believes in what he's doing. Do you really want him to have the last word on the subject?"

Bella shuddered.

"He has experience in this area, but so do you, Bella. We need you there to talk about what's wrong with the things he's been doing."

"I don't want him near Alexander."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Rosalie said, glaring at Joham. "He's ceded control of his coven, which means he no longer has any right to Alexander. And if he forgets that," she flashed a vicious smile, "I'd be happy to jog his memory."

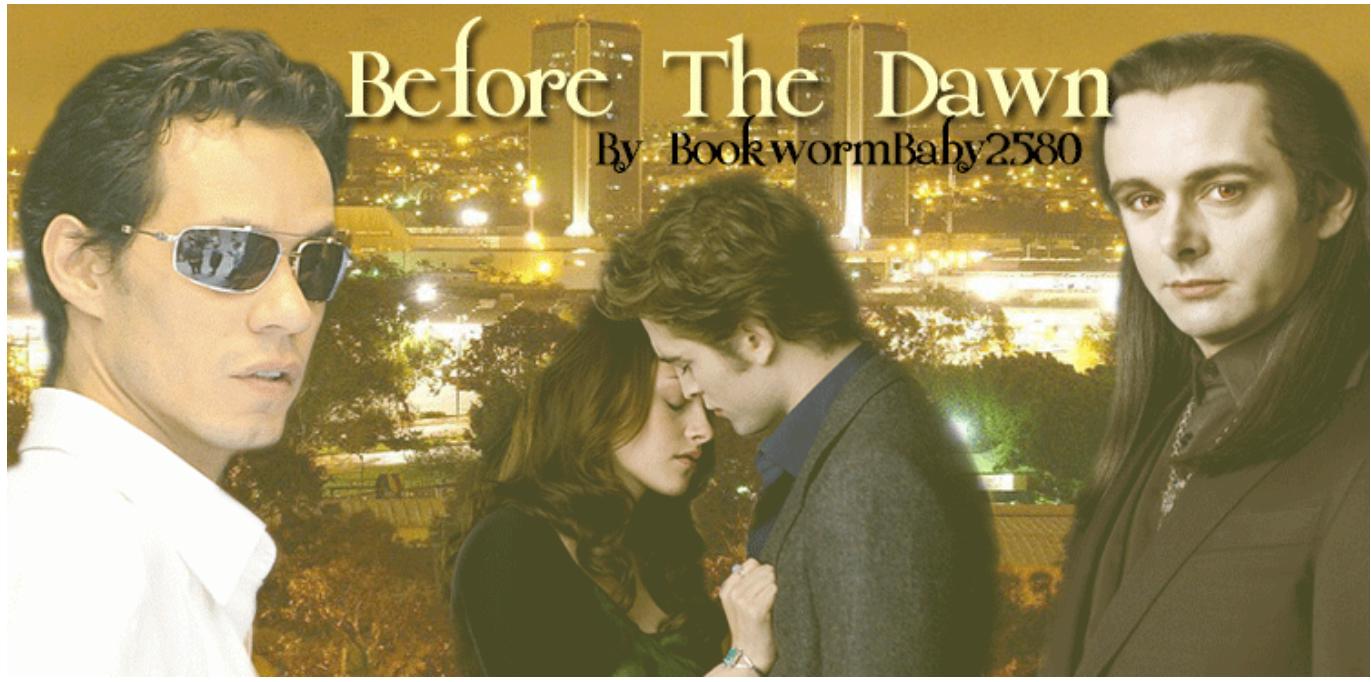
"We've still got your back," Jasper added. "The kid's too. Plus, we already know who's got the upper hand in a fight between you and Joham, don't we?" He winked at her.

"Please don't leave," Edward murmured. He leaned his forehead against hers and held her close. "I know it will be uncomfortable having him there, but it's not forever. Please."

Bella shook her head in defeat. "I'll stay. But if he comes anywhere near me or Alexander, I'll kill him."

Edward grinned. "Not if I kill him first."

Anamnesis



Bella didn't end up riding back to Washington on a motorcycle. With Joham in the mix, she couldn't bear the thought of allowing any distance between herself and Alexander. But Joham, as it turned out, didn't travel back by motorcycle either. Though Carlisle, Esme, and Nahuel all decided to ride in the SUV with the human girl and Nahuel's sisters, somehow there were still no empty bikes. Peter and Charlotte claimed one, and Tanya suddenly decided that she couldn't bear to share with someone for another moment. Sadly, that left no extras to offer the three newcomers to the group. Carlisle wanted to help, he told Joham, but of course his resources had already been heavily taxed. He was confident, however, that someone as clever as Joham could arrange his own transportation to Washington.

Still, even with Joham absent from the caravan, Bella wasn't comfortable separating from her son. Instead, she and Edward decided to run back to Tonopah with him and rent a car—with Carmen tagging along to help, since neither Bella nor Edward could pass for twenty-five.

It turned out to be an experience Bella wouldn't have traded for anything, starting with the run across the desert. Alexander was thrilled by Bella's speed, climbing onto her shoulders and then leaping into the wind and letting her catch him. Bella thought the laughter ringing out across the empty desert terrain had to be the most beautiful sound in the world.

Once in the car, Edward volunteered to drive and Bella slid into the back next to the child seat that the rental company had supplied for Alexander. He wasn't at all happy about being buckled in, and they'd barely made it out of the parking lot before he was squirming and tugging at the belts.

"I don't like it, Mother," he complained, only holding back from tearing through the straps at her stern instruction.

Carmen laughed softly from the front seat. "You can hardly blame him, Bella. If it were you strapped down like that, you wouldn't be able to stand it."

"But . . . it's for his safety."

"Do you honestly think a hunk of plastic will keep him safer than you will? Is there an accident you couldn't protect him from better than that seat can?"

Bella smiled and shook her head. She unbuckled the latch and pulled Alexander into her lap.

"I'm sleepy," he mumbled around the thumb poked into his mouth, but a few seconds later he was peering out the window at the scenery racing by. "I never been to Washington. What does it look like?"

"There are a lot of trees," Bella replied. "And moss grows up the trunks so you can hardly see the brown of the bark."

"How come we're going there?"

"That's where I live now."

"And Father? Is he going to live there, too?"

Bella winced, wondering how in the world she was going to get rid of Joham once the gathering was over. "I hope not."

"Why?"

"He's very mean to his children, sweetie. I don't trust him to keep you safe and healthy."

"Why?" He was still looking out the window, seeming more interested in the starlit terrain than in their conversation, but Bella was keenly aware of the questions he was asking.

"Look how he treated Jennifer and Maysun. If he would do that to them, don't you think he would do bad things to you?"

He looked at her then, his head cocked curiously. "Of course not, Mother. I'm a boy."

"Do you think that makes a difference?"

"Father says it does. Father says I'm special and I'm going to be a very important man."

Bella didn't know what to say to that. She stroked her fingers through his curls, trying to come up with an answer, but Edward spoke before she managed to think of anything.

"I'll tell you something my father used to tell me," he said to Alexander, looking at him in the rearview mirror. "You can learn all you need to know about a person by how he treats those around him. But not just the people he respects. His real character is revealed by how he behaves toward people who are subordinate to him."

Alexander pushed himself to his feet on Bella's thighs and leaned against the back of Edward's seat. "What's subordinate?"

"Someone who is subordinate is someone who has less authority than you do. Like your father and your sisters. He believes that they're beneath him, and the way he treats them tells you what kind of man he is." He turned on his blinker and changed lanes to pass a car in front of them.

"What's that?" Alexander asked, pointing to the lever.

"This? It's a turn signal. It's so other people on the road know what I'm going to do."

"Why do they have to know?"

"It helps avoid collisions."

Bella smiled. This was a much nicer line of questioning.

"Who taught you how to drive?" Alexander asked.

"Carlisle."

"Do you like Carlisle?"

He smiled and nodded. "I like Carlisle very much. He's my best friend."

"Am I your friend?"

"Of course. You're my newest friend, and I hope we'll be friends for a long, long time."

"Will you teach me to drive?"

Bella and Carmen both laughed, but Edward just pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"I don't think your feet would reach the pedals."

"There's pedals?" He pulled himself up on the back of Edward's seat and peered down at the floor.

Edward shifted his knees to let Alexander see better. "Yep. This one here is the gas pedal. It makes us go faster." He demonstrated by speeding up a little. "And this one is the brake pedal. What do you think that does?"

"Um . . . makes us go slower?"

"Exactly." Edward pressed it lightly and their speed decreased. "If I pushed it harder it would make us stop."

"What's that?" he asked, pointing again.

"It's the steering wheel. It's how I turn the car in the direction I want it to go."

"Can you push the pedals and I move the steering wheel?"

Edward's eyes met Bella's in the mirror, and she wavered in indecision.

"Just . . . be careful with him?"

"Of course, Bella." He smiled softly at her before turning a grin on Alexander. "Come on, short stack. Come sit on my lap."

For the next ten minutes Edward occupied Alexander with driving lessons, letting him feel how the car responded to turn of the wheel and showing him the lights, blinkers, radio dials, and everything else he could think of. But Alexander really must have been tired, because as soon as he had

exhausted his supply of new buttons to push and knobs to turn, he slumped back against Edward's chest and drifted off to sleep.

Carmen gently fingered one of his soft curls. "I can't get over how sweet he is," she murmured. She gave him a doting smile, then started climbing over the seat. "Trade me places, Bella. You should sit up here with him."

Bella found herself feeling grateful for her new grace while making the switch that would have been all but impossible for her clumsy human self. She settled into Carmen's vacated seat and reached out for her son, jostling him awake as she pulled him into her arms. He settled down again immediately, though, his thumb finding its way to his mouth and his other hand twisting in Bella's hair.

Edward smiled at her as he watched her cradle Alexander against her chest. "Look at you," he whispered. "You're all lit up inside."

"Lit up?" She gave a little huff of a laugh. "I'm in tangles. I don't have any idea what to say when he asks me all those questions."

He reached out and squeezed her knee in sympathy, but his expression showed only confidence. "You're doing fine. After all, he didn't put up a fuss about coming away with you, did he?"

"No." It was the first time she had considered that, and she looked down at the sleeping boy, wondering what she would have done if he had wanted to stay with his father.

"He already prefers you to Joham."

"But he's learned so much from Joham. If I try to convince him that those things are wrong, will he want to go back?"

Edward shrugged. "What would Carlisle do?"

"Carlisle?" She furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Carlisle is probably the most universally well-liked vampire in the world," Edward explained. "Which is significant, considering the fact that everyone thinks he's touched in the head. But whether they agree with him or not, they respect him for his tolerance and his thoughtful nature. If you try to answer Alexander's questions the way Carlisle would, he might not always like what you tell him, but he'll like *you*. And that means he'll stay with you."

"But . . . Carlisle would let him drink human blood if he wanted it."

Edward nodded. "I think he would, yes. But only after doing everything he could to convince him not to."

Bella brushed back a tangle of curls that had fallen over Alexander's forehead, wondering if she could be happy raising a son who drank human blood. It frightened her to realize that she absolutely could. There was literally nothing she wouldn't sacrifice for him, and that included human lives.

But she didn't *want* to sacrifice lives. She wanted Alexander to respect humans as much as he respected vampires. And she worried about how much her own ideals would be affected if she

frequently justified accommodations to Alexander's preferences.

And yet, behind all of her worries, there was a deep, saturating contentment. If Edward thought she looked happier, it was simply because she *was* happier. The separation from her son had been like a physical weight on her, forcing her down into melancholy, but now that they were together again she felt like the weight was gone. Like she could finally lift her head and take a full breath into her lungs. She did now, drawing in the sweet scent of her precious little boy and feeling the elation that came with it. She wondered if every mother felt like this—if each was sure that her own little creation was the most beautiful, the most remarkable, of any child that had ever been born. It was a nice thought, but they were all wrong. There was a certainty anchored deep in Bella's core that no other child ever had been or ever would be as perfect as her Alexander.

She let out a little laugh, and Edward raised his eyebrows in query.

"I was just thinking that I'm going to be one of those annoying parents who's always shoving pictures at people and telling them how brilliant her child is."

He laughed. "We'd better get to work taking pictures, then."

They caught up to the rest of the caravan near the Washington state border. Bella suspected that they could have managed it before then, but Edward didn't seem in any hurry to rejoin the group. Eventually, though, they all crossed paths at a gas station outside of Longview. It was full daylight now, but a heavy cloud cover made the company of vampires feel comfortable enough to strip off helmets and gloves while they refueled their motorcycles.

Bella changed the bandana around her neck for a fresh one, still thick with the foul wolf scent, but Alexander pushed open the door and sniffed at the air.

"I'm hungry mother," he said, pointing to the clerk inside the convenience store. "May I have that man?"

"Uh . . . no, honey. Remember what Edward said about treating your subordinates kindly?"

He nodded.

"Humans are our subordinates, too. Don't you think we should treat them kindly?"

"But humans are for food and making babies," he said with a puzzled frown.

She hesitated, but Edward's encouraging smile helped her find the words she needed. "That's what your father believes, but I don't agree with him. I think we should respect humans."

"But what do you eat?"

"In the Cullen family, we drink animal blood. "We go out and hunt them, and it's really fun."

"Do they taste good?"

"Well . . ." She gave him a sheepish smile. "Not very good, no. But you get used to it." She frowned at the terrain around them. "This probably isn't a very good hunting spot, though. Maybe we should get you some human food today."

"Does human food taste good?"

She shrugged helplessly. "Nahuel says it doesn't taste as good as blood. But I think it would be the smartest thing for now, until we get home."

"Okay."

"I'll go in and see what I can find," Edward offered, "but I can't vouch for the nutritional value of gas station food."

Which was another concern. Bella had no idea how to put together a properly-balanced nutrition plan for Alexander. Did he need human food? Did he need blood? Judging by how much she had craved it when she was pregnant, she suspected that blood wasn't something he could do without. But could he survive *only* on blood? It seemed that he had been, up to this point, but she didn't necessarily trust Joham to make the healthiest choices for him. She would have a lot of questions for Nahuel and his sisters when they got back to Forks.

She wandered over to the SUV, where Esme was pumping gas into the tank. Rosalie had one of the back doors open, and was helping the human girl ease herself down onto the asphalt.

"That's it, Amelia. We won't go far, just a quick walk around the parking lot to work your muscles a little."

Bella angled herself away from them and toward Esme, where the odor of gasoline overpowered most of the other scents.

"Where's Carlisle?"

"He and Emmett went to see if they could get some bags of donated blood." She cast a worried look at the vehicle behind them. "Amelia's not doing well, I'm afraid. She hasn't managed to keep any food down."

Bella grimaced and nodded, remembering the feeling all too well. "Yeah, it sounds like she needs blood."

"She does," Alexander confirmed confidently. "David was supposed to get her somebody, but he accidentally killed the man he brought home. Father was angry."

Bella shuddered.

"Mother, what's donated blood?"

"Um . . . sometimes humans go to these special places where they let people draw out some of their blood and store it in bags. The bags are kept for doctors to give to people who have been in accidents and lost too much of their own blood."

"Humans *share* blood?" he asked with wide eyes.

"Sometimes, if they need to."

"And Carwile is going to give donated blood to Amelia and Maysun to drink?"

"That's right."

"How come you don't drink donated blood?"

Bella didn't have an answer for that, but luckily, Esme did. "There's often not enough donated blood to fill the need for injured humans," she explained. "If we depleted those resources even further, we might end up being responsible for human deaths. It's not something we choose to do, since we have other options."

"Like drinking animal blood?"

"That's right." She smiled at him and ruffled his hair. "You sure are a smart kid."

"I know. Father says I'm very special."

Bella smiled and whispered in his ear, "When someone pays you a compliment, you should say thank you."

"Thank you," he said.

Esme beamed at him.

Edward emerged from the convenience store then, carrying a plastic bag. Bella and Alexander said goodbye to Esme, then met Edward at the car to see what he'd bought. He laid a paper towel out on the hood of the car, and Bella set Alexander down next to it.

"This," Edward said, producing the first item from the bag, "is a hot dog."

"It's a *dog*?" Alexander asked.

"No, that's just what we call it. This one is actually beef, which is from cows. Take a bite and see what you think."

Alexander nipped off some of the hot dog and bun, and chewed it thoughtfully. "It's good," he finally announced.

Bella sighed in relief.

"Humans like to put sauces and stuff on some of their food to give them a different flavor," Edward told Alexander, putting several little packets on the paper towel. "Do you want to try some?"

"What's that red one?" he asked.

"It's ketchup." Edward tore open a packet and squeezed out a little gob onto his finger. "Here, taste."

Alexander licked his finger and grimaced. "That doesn't taste like blood."

Edward laughed. "No, it definitely doesn't. Humans don't like the taste of blood."

"Why not?"

"Beats me, kid." He plucked up another packet and tore it open. "Here, try a little mustard."

Alexander let Edward squeeze some of the mustard onto his finger and he licked it off.

"That's good, Mother!" he said, showing her his licked clean finger. "I like mustard!"

"All right, let's put some mustard on your hot dog." Edward squeezed out a yellow line along the length of the bun, then picked up a third packet. "And this one is relish. Have a taste."

Alexander swiped a finger through the green chunks and poked them in his mouth.

"I like relish too! Mother, do you want to taste?"

She smiled and shook her head. "I used to like relish when I was human, but I can't eat it anymore."

"Only blood?"

"Yep. Only boring old blood for full vampires."

Edward finished adding relish to Alexander's hot dog and handed it to him. "Taste that."

Alexander took a bite and smiled around his mouthful to show that he liked it. He chewed energetically and swallowed it, then held his hot dog up in the air and called across the lot.

"Jennifer, do you want some human food?"

Bella looked around quickly to see if there were any humans nearby to hear him, but it was only their own party in the lot, filling up the tanks of one motorcycle after another.

Jennifer shook her head, smiling at Alexander. She and Nahuel were walking with Maysun, each with a hand under her arms to support her. "We ate at the last stop," she called back.

"Did you have mustard and relish? It's really good!" He didn't wait for an answer before refocusing on his hot dog and taking a big bite.

"I got you an apple, too, and some milk to drink." Edward pulled them out and set them on top of the bag on the hood of the car.

Alexander worked the big bite into his cheeks. "Can I put mustard on the apple?"

"Uh . . . I guess if you want. Humans don't. The flavors might not go well together."

Alexander chewed feverishly at his hot dog until he managed to swallow his bite, then bit into the apple. His face screwed up in discontent and he shook his head. "I don't like that."

"It's healthy, though," Bella said, cringing over the thought of him depending entirely on a suspicious gas station hot dog for his nutrition. "Sometimes we have to eat things we don't like because they give us important nutrients."

"What nutrients does the apple have?"

"It has vitamin C," Edward told him, "which is an antioxidant. Do you know what that is?"

He shook his head.

"It helps clean out all the bad gunk that your body picks up. And there are B-complex vitamins in there, too, which keep your brain nice and sharp. And apples have lots of fiber, which is important

to eat so your cholesterol doesn't get too high."

"What's cholesterol?"

"It's a fatty substance in your blood, and if you have too much of it, it sticks along the sides of your arteries and makes it really hard for your heart to pump blood. And that's bad, because if your heart has to work too hard, it might stop working altogether. That would be very inconvenient for any little boys who need their circulatory systems to stay alive."

"Do I have too much cholesterol in my blood?" Alexander asked.

"I hope not. Maybe when we get home, Carlisle can check."

Alexander nodded and took another bite of the apple. He grimaced, but Edward opened the milk and handed it to Alexander to wash the bite down.

He did, and then kept drinking and drinking—with only the occasional pause to suck in a hurried breath—until the bottle of milk was empty. He held the bottle out to Edward.

"May I have some more?"

Edward raised his eyebrows at Bella. "Alexander, have you ever had milk before?"

"I only had blood. But milk is really, really yummy. I like it better than blood."

"He hasn't had *any* . . ." Bella murmured.

Edward shook his head. "I think we need to make sure he gets plenty of it in the future. I'll be right back."

Alexander took another bite of his hot dog, his little tongue working to lick the mustard and relish from his lips. "I like Edward, Mother," he said through his mouthful.

"I like him too."

Edward glanced back as he pulled open the door to the convenience store. He caught Bella's eye and grinned at her.

The stop was a long one, and had they taken such a lengthy break on the way to Nevada, Bella would have been pulling her hair out in frustration. Now, though, fully engrossed in her son's welfare and enjoying his discovery of human food, she was perfectly content to wait as long as was necessary.

Edward reappeared with another, much larger bottle of milk, but Bella asked Alexander to eat some more of his other food before she let him have it. After eating most of his hot dog and a little less than half of his apple—with dollops of mustard squeezed onto each bite to improve the flavor—he declared himself full and pushed the food away. Bella scooped him up and gave him the milk, and he sipped contentedly at it.

"Looks like we're about ready to go," Edward said, gathering up the garbage. He jogged to a trash can to throw it out, and then everyone loaded into cars and onto motorcycles, and the whole crew got back on the road again.

Carmen rejoined Eleazar on his bike this time, so Edward and Bella were left alone in the car with Alexander. He amused them by showing off what he had learned in his lessons with Joham, reciting the all of the countries and their capitals, and then listing each country's major leaders in the last hundred years.

Bella was floored. She'd known that Joham had something of an obsession with the rulers of Ancient Greece, but she hadn't realized that he'd intended to familiarize Alexander with the political climate of the entire world. When quizzed, her son could classify a country by its major religion and economic philosophy, and then list mitigating caveats to each classification. At barely over a month old, he knew more about world politics than Bella had ever known.

It wasn't only Bella who was impressed. She began to notice that more and more of the motorcycle riders were lingering near the car, leaving space in front but clustering near on the sides and in back. All of the riders wanted to be near enough to listen to Alexander's recitations, and occasionally Bella would hear an appreciative laugh or a low whistle. It made her proud to know that her son was so fascinating to the others, but it made her nervous, too. What she really wanted was to be left alone to raise him in peace, and the more attention he garnered the less likely that seemed to be. She cradled him close to her as he spoke, her arms wrapped possessively around him, and silently promised herself that she would never let anything separate them again.

There was a police escort waiting for them in Forks again, which meant another slow procession through town. Remembering the curious stares from the first time around, Bella had Alexander hunch down in the wheel well at her feet so no one would see him. She wasn't going to be able to explain her fast-growing prodigy of a son to the people of Forks, so it was best they never knew anything about him at all.

Carlisle and Emmett had rejoined them by then, toting a portable cooler that they had strapped to the back of their motorcycle. Carlisle had taken it immediately to the SUV, while Bella tried to block out all thoughts of what was in the cooler and what was being done with it. It was surprisingly easy, now that she had Alexander to distract her. That had been nearly an hour before, and now that they were back in town, she peered curiously through the windows of the SUV to try to see it from the perspective of the people of Forks.

Of course, there was nothing suspicious to be found. Neither Maysun nor Amelia could be seen at all, and Nahuel and Jennifer affected an easy air, smiling and waving like all the others as Esme tapped the horn to draw attention. They made their way down Main Street feigning carefree happiness, until they finally reached the turn-off to the Cullens' house.

Siobhan was waiting with her coven to greet them when they pulled up out front. Carlisle jumped out of the SUV and took the time to give her a quick kiss on the cheek before moving to help Amelia from the car.

"Any new arrivals?" he asked her as he lifted the frail girl into his arms.

"A few." Siobhan nodded to the girl, and to where Nahuel and Jennifer were assisting Maysun out of the car. "I'll introduce you all when you're not so busy."

"Thank you, Siobhan."

Bella tucked Alexander against her side and got out of the car as well, while the rest of the entourage parked their motorcycles.

"Hey, Alexander," Edward said, "have you ever seen a human campground before?"

"I saw a picture in my books."

"Yeah? Did your books have any pictures of a giant group of vampires pretending to be camping humans?"

He giggled. "No!"

"Then you'd better come on back so you can see it for yourself," Edward said with a grin. He held out his hand to Bella, and with one arm holding Alexander and one hand linked with Edward's, she joined the group of vampires who were making their way back to the little patches of ground they had each claimed for themselves. Jasper and Alice fell into step beside them, and Alice slung an arm around Bella's waist, her face glowing with excitement.

"I've been making plans, Bella. You wouldn't *believe* the plans I've been making. We've got to buy Alexander a whole new wardrobe, and he grows so fast that we'll have to replace his clothes *constantly!* Do you have any idea how darling little boy suits are? You're just going to die! You're probably not ready for a department store—are you? I mean, if you feel like you're ready it would be great to try . . ."

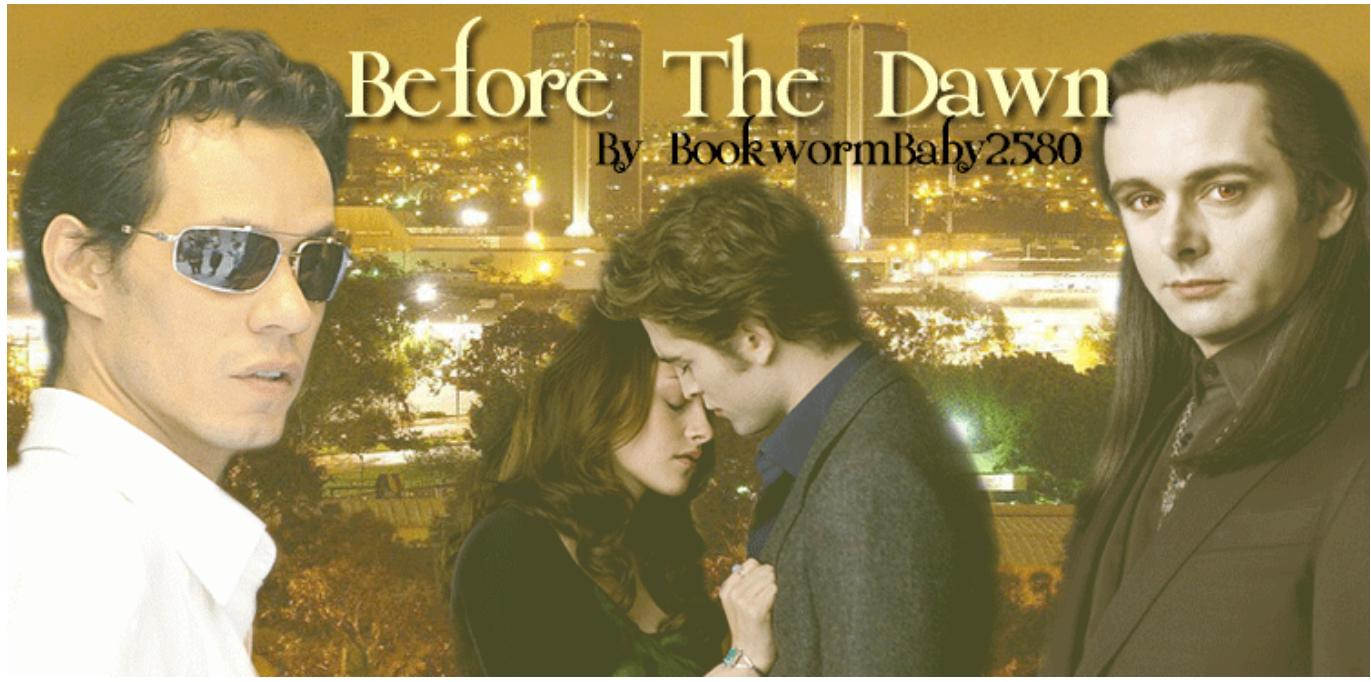
Bella smiled apologetically and shook her head.

"Okay, that's fine. We'll just take his measurements and I'll order his clothes. I'll have to alter them so they fit him properly at the hips anyway, so it won't matter very much if I have to do a little extra tailoring. This is going to be so much fun!"

Alice probably would have gone on, but Edward suddenly stopped. They had rounded the house, and Edward was staring hard at three vampires who were lounging in the amphitheater that had been prepared for the gathering. Bella's eyes were immediately drawn to the woman, who sported fiery red hair that she wore in long, wild curls. She was leaning against a rangy man with close-cropped, sandy hair, who would have been almost unnoticeable except for the predatory expression in his sharp, red eyes. The third had glossy black hair and a stocky build, with ropes of muscles rippling beneath sturdy, yet fraying hiker's clothes. He was watching the vampires passing by him with open curiosity, and he seemed as though he were about to rise to greet them, but the blond beat him to it. He untangled himself from the red-headed woman and stood up, his gaze fixed on Alice as he began to make his way around the amphitheater's tiered circumference.

"Why, little Mary Alice," he murmured, something dark and menacing lurking beneath his friendly tone. "What a pleasant surprise, running into you after all these years."

Here Be Legends



Alice turned to the newcomer with a puzzled expression. "Have we met?"

"You don't remember me?" He smiled, and amusement replaced the menace in his eyes. "I'm wounded."

"I'm sorry, I don't."

"How very ironic." He moved close to her leaning down to whisper in her ear. "The first time we met, you already knew me."

"Take a step back, friend," Jasper said quietly, his voice measured and non-combative.

The stranger raised an eyebrow, but complied. "Does he belong to you, Mary Alice? My, my, you *have* done well for yourself. A formidable mate, a powerful coven, and now here we are, in the middle of a gathering with a strict non-violence policy. The circumstances couldn't be more perfect if I'd arranged them myself."

Bella felt Edward's hand clench hard around hers, and she looked up at him. He was grinding his teeth, his expression murderous, but he apparently felt the need to keep whatever he was seeing to himself.

"Why do you call me Mary Alice?" Alice asked the stranger.

"That's still your name, isn't it?"

"I've always gone by Alice . . . that I know of. Did you meet me when I was human?"

"You really don't remember me?" His smile widened. "Or Sebastian?"

"I don't remember any of my human life."

"How tragic!" he said, but his expression was one of utter delight. "The Good Doctor would be heartbroken. Such a noble sacrifice, and no one to cherish the memory of it."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean."

He grinned and took another step back. "I think I've provoked your mate enough for now, but you and I will *definitely* have to find some time to catch up." With that, he turned on his heel and strode back to his companions. The man frowned at him, but the woman only smirked and slid under his arm again.

Bella turned to Edward, but he and Jasper were having what looked like an intense wordless conversation over the top of her head.

"Who's that man, Mother?" Alexander asked.

"I don't know, sweetie."

"Is he nice?"

"I don't know." She leaned down and kissed the top of his head. "I think it would be best to give him plenty of space until we find out more about him."

A window on the third floor of the house opened, and Esme leaned out.

"Bella, dear, we're trying to work out arrangements for our guests. Do you want your room for Alexander to sleep in, or will he be staying out in your tent?"

"I want to sleep in the tent!" Alexander chimed in. "May I, Mother? I never camped before."

She nodded and smiled up at Esme. "Go ahead and use my room for someone else."

"Thank you, dear." She disappeared back inside, and Alexander let out a whoop.

"I want to see the tent! Where is it? Is it there, where all those people are going?"

"Yep, we just need to cross the river." Bella strode down the recently-cleared land to the shore of the river, her hand still linked with Edward's. "What do you think? Should we jump it?"

Alexander pursed his lips in speculation. "I don't fink I can jump that far. You better carry me."

"Maybe we should throw you," Edward said with a grin.

Alexander's eyes widened, and he straightened up. "Yes! Throw me, Mother!"

Bella hesitated. "I don't know. It's a long way."

"I'll catch him," Edward promised. "Just like the eggs."

"Watch his neck, though. I don't want him to get whiplash from playing too rough."

"I won't get whiplash," Alexander promised earnestly. "Please, Mother?"

She bumped her forehead against his. "Okay."

Edward leapt across the river, and once he was set on the other side, Bella shifted her grip and started swinging Alexander back and forth. She counted to three and then launched him across the roaring current. Alexander squealed with delight as he flew through the air, and Edward caught him and spun him in a circle to decrease his momentum slowly. Alexander giggled and held up his fists in triumph.

"Do it again!"

Bella laughed and jumped over the wide river to join him. "There will be plenty of time for playing, I promise. Let's go see our tent, though."

They headed for their chosen space, but before they could reach the cover of the trees, two slight figures emerged from the woods. The first looked like teenager, maybe sixteen or seventeen, with thick black hair knotted up in a bun on the back of her head. She was small but had generous curves, and her pale skin was tinted lightly with mocha and marred with multiple crescent-shaped scars. Bella cringed at the sight of them and pulled Alexander out of Edward's arms and into her own, keeping him nearby where she could protect him.

Close behind the scarred figure was an older woman with gray-streaked brown hair and—Bella let out a little gasp—amber eyes. She smiled at Bella, but it was the other one who spoke.

"Are you the leader of the Cullens?" she asked Edward.

He shook his head. "I'm Edward; it's Carlisle you want."

"Are we not to be honored with a greeting from our host?" She raised her fine, dark eyebrows in reproach.

"Carlisle offers his sincere apologies and begs your patience while he handles a matter of some urgency. I assure you, he's very eager to meet all of his guests."

The woman's eyes flicked to Alexander, and then back to Edward. "It's been a long time since I've been to the West. It seems you have developed strange ways."

"A matter Carlisle intends to address. Meanwhile, may I introduce you to Bella Swan and her son Alexander?"

Alexander offered his hand to her, and after a brief hesitation, she took it. He leaned over to kiss it, and then gave her a winning smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet such a lovely girl."

His words drew a reluctant smile from her. "The pleasure is all mine, young one. I am Ulka, and this is Pythia." She beckoned the golden-eyed woman forward.

"What a wonderful child," Pythia breathed as she offered her hand to Alexander.

"Charmed, my dear," he said with a kiss to the back of her hand as well.

"A winning creature, certainly," Ulka said. She met Bella's gaze. "You say you're his mother?"

She nodded.

"He's human."

"Half," Bella said. "His father was a vampire. I . . . wasn't."

Ulka shook her head in disapproval. "Strange ways. Young man." She turned to Edward. "You'll tell your coven leader that we're eager to be introduced?"

"I'll bring him to visit you as soon as he's available. And you as well, Alistair." Edward didn't look up, but Bella glanced around to see if she could spot the person Edward was addressing. She didn't see anyone she hadn't met yet.

Ulka seemed satisfied by his promise, and she and Pythia turned and headed back into the trees, hand in hand. Edward and Bella followed after, angling toward the tent they had claimed previously. The campsites they passed were all starting to look lived in, with camp chairs set up around fire pits, simply, it seemed, for the novelty of roughing it like humans.

"How come there's no fire?" Alexander asked when they reached their own site.

"Do you want one?" Bella asked him.

"Yes, please."

She smiled down at him. "Okay. We'll dig a pit. We have to be very careful, though, to make sure that there's nothing around the pit that could catch on fire from a stray spark."

Bella and Alexander cleared a broad area of brush and debris, and were hunting for stones to create a ring for the fire pit when Carlisle crossed the river and called the family together. They gathered at the river bank, and Carlisle drew them into a tight circle, lowering his voice when he spoke.

"Alice, tell me what happened."

She explained her puzzling meeting with the newcomer who had seemed to know her. When she finished Carlisle turned to Edward expectantly.

"I haven't pieced together very much yet. His name is James, and he came across Alice in some kind of facility when she was human. She was his singer, but this Sebastian, whoever he is, kept Alice away from him."

"That shouldn't be an issue anymore, should it?"

"Shouldn't be, but it is. James is a tracker, and he likes games. He sees this whole situation as an interesting new challenge."

Jasper stiffened. "Sounds like a problem that needs to be taken care of before it gets out of hand."

Carlisle sighed heavily and shook his head. "Normally, Jasper, I'd leave that decision to you and Alice. Circumstances being what they are, though, I have to ask you not to move against anyone without clear provocation."

"Because?" He raised his eyebrow in challenge, and Bella fell back a step in response to the tension rising between them.

"Because we're about to overhaul the method of government for our entire race. We have an opportunity to create a more civilized arrangement here, but to advocate nonviolence when we've willingly destroyed James—" he glanced at Bella—"or Joham . . ." He shook his head. "It weakens our position. We can't allow ourselves to be hypocrites."

"Is that what your goal is?" Jasper asked. "You're trying to civilize vampires?"

"I'm trying to make an impact."

"What makes you think our kind are capable of a nonviolent existence?"

He smiled sadly. "Optimism. And experience. There was a time when no one imagined that vampires could appreciate the arts, but the Volturi started a cultural revolution that changed the perceptions of the entire race."

Jasper stared at him for a long time, but finally shook his head. "I'll play it your way for now, but you know my priorities."

"I've got an ear on him," Edward told Jasper. "I'll let you know if I come across anything that needs your attention."

Carlisle squeezed Edward's shoulder. "Thank you, son. Now, I believe we have some new arrivals to meet?"

"Siobhan is waiting to introduce us as soon as you're ready," Edward said.

At the mention of her name, Siobhan materialized from the shelter of the trees. She greeted the family and then took the lead, threading her way through the woods until she found the lot where Ulka and Pythia were tucking short sprigs of leaves into the flaps of their tent. At the approach of Siobhan and the Cullens, they put down their leaves and turned to greet them.

Jasper stopped short when he saw Ulka, and for a long time the two of them stared at each other. Their eyes raked over one another, measuring scars and sizing one another up.

"What are they doing?" Alexander whispered to Bella.

"Risk assessment," Jasper replied without bothering to keep his voice lowered.

Alexander wriggled out of Bella's arms and dropped to the forest floor, inching up behind Jasper. "Why?"

Jasper crouched down, his eyes never leaving Ulka, and put his arm around the boy's shoulders. "A vampire's skin can tell a story. See those bite marks? They're all different sizes and shapes, which means our friend over there has gone up against a lot of different vampires. And since she's the one standing here in front of us, she was probably the winner. That tells us she can hold her own in a fight."

"But she's only a girl."

Jasper gave Alexander a sidelong look. "Your father isn't doing you any favors by teaching you to underestimate women. Mark my words, kid, that girl is lethal."

Alexander turned to examine Jasper's skin.

"You have more scars than she does. Does that mean you're better?"

Ulka gave them a cool smile. "It means he allowed more opponents to get close enough to bite him."

"Occupational hazard in a newborn army." Jasper lifted Alexander into his arms and rose to his full height. He towered over Ulka, but her haughty smile never faltered.

"Southern vampire wars," he said. "You?"

"Personal bodyguard." She gestured to Pythia, who was watching her with wry amusement.

Jasper inclined his head to Pythia, and then bowed solemnly to Ulka. "I hope I never find myself at odds with you."

"The feeling is mutual," she replied with a soft laugh.

Bella sidled closer to Jasper and reclaimed Alexander from him. It made her uncomfortable for anyone—and in particular, a woman Jasper considered a threat—to be closer to her son than she was. She cradled him against her chest while Siobhan made the formal introductions.

"Ulka, this is Carlisle and his mate, Esme," she said.

Ulka surveyed Carlisle with interest before pressing her hands together in front of her and dipping her head. "Namaste."

Carlisle and Esme returned the gesture.

"I'm so sorry we weren't here to greet you when you arrived," Carlisle said, his voice warm and friendly. "Have you traveled far?"

"We make our home in India," Ulka replied.

Carlisle's face lit up. "Word of the gathering made it around, then? Are there others coming?"

"There are few of us there, and we are private people. We decided that a single delegation would suffice."

"I'll look to you to advocate for your friends, then." He beckoned the family forward and introduced each one in turn, and when he was finished, Ulka took her partner's hand.

"This is Pythia."

Carlisle raised his eyebrows. "Pythia? As in . . . *the* Pythia, the priestesses of Delphi?"

She laughed, her voice warm and musical. "Priestesses? No, my dear young man, there was only ever me. I am the Oracle."

"Forgive me. It seems I have my history wrong." He took her hand and pressed it between his. "The books say that there were women sent to the Oracle to be priestesses."

"The truth is simply that they were sacrifices."

He shook his head. "Your eyes tell me you're not a drinker of human blood."

"In the summer, I am not. It's Apollo's season. If I am to be his mouthpiece, I must take nourishment from the animals he has designated for me."

Carlisle was still holding her hand, gazing at her in profound interest. "Do you still commune with him?"

"Oh, yes. I have not forgotten him, and he has not forgotten me." She leaned close to Carlisle, stretching up on her toes to whisper in his ear. "He knows your question, and he will answer."

She released his hand and stepped away, reaching for Ulka's instead. "I hope you'll forgive me if I take my leave of you now. The river needs to be consecrated before the Washing."

"Of course. Do you need anything I can provide?"

"Not yet." She smiled. "Apollo speaks on the seventh day. A gift from you would be well received."

"It was a pleasure to meet you," Ulka said to Carlisle. Her eyes sought Jasper's and she gave him a nod before allowing herself to be led away.

Carlisle stared after them, and Siobhan let out a low laugh.

"I thought you'd enjoy meeting her."

"*The Oracle*," he murmured, almost to himself.

"Indeed." She hooked her arm through his and started walking, leading him away from the branch-decked tent. "I have to admit, I'm curious. What question do you have for Apollo?"

"I'm not sure. Something political, I imagine. Direction for the rebuilding of our government?"

Siobhan chuckled as she led the family through the woods again. "It seems appropriate that a god of the Greeks should take interest in our civic endeavors."

"It does. I'll be happy for the advice."

Rosalie snorted. "Advice from the Oracle of Delphi? You really *don't* know your history, do you Carlisle?"

"She's got a point," Emmett said, slinging an arm around Rosalie's shoulders. "Nations have fallen on her advice."

"Nations have fallen because people willfully misinterpreted her vague predictions," Jasper corrected. "Which, Carlisle, is exactly the sort of trap I can see you falling into. Be very critical of whatever that woman tells you."

Carlisle looked back and met his gaze. "Thank you, Jasper. I'll rely on you to help me keep my perspective."

Bella had been so absorbed in the conversation that she hadn't noticed Alexander's attentiveness, but now he tugged lightly at her hair as they walked.

"Mother, what's an Oracle?"

"Um . . . I think she tells the future. There are legends about ancient people visiting her for help."

"Alice tells the future too, right Mother?"

Alice let out a little huff. "Not lately."

"Which I don't see as much of a problem," Jasper growled, pulling her closer to him.

She gave him a reproachful look, but he set his jaw stubbornly.

"I can take care of this family, Alice. Advance warning is nice, but it's not worth what you have to go through to get it. It would be fine with me if your visions never came back."

"Is it really that hard on her?" Bella asked Edward softly.

He nodded solemnly. "Imagine seeing every accident or natural disaster before it happens and knowing you can't do anything to protect your friends without exposing your family to danger. Imagine going to high school every day and seeing the long-term consequences of the idiotic choices your classmates make." He shook his head. "She makes the best of it, but it *is* hard on her—and on me. I can't say I miss her visions."

"We could use them right now, though!" Alice burst out in frustration.

Jasper rubbed a soothing hand over her back. "That burden is mine to bear. Trust *me* to protect our coven."

She sighed and folded her arms across her chest. "I just feel so useless."

Carlisle stopped walking and turned to her, cupping her cheeks in his hand. "My sweet Alice. Don't ever imagine that your value to us is bound up in your visions." He leaned his forehead against hers, his voice dropping to a low murmur. "We need *you*. Your heart and your disposition do more for us than your predictions ever did. I couldn't get through this without you."

He kissed her forehead and started to step back again, but Alice threw her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. He chuckled and hugged her back, gently stroking the back of her hair with one hand.

Alexander cocked his head to the side and watched them curiously. For a moment he looked like he was going to say something, but then he poked his thumb into his mouth and leaned his head against Bella's shoulder. She smiled and ran her fingers through his soft curls, relishing once again the feeling of wholeness she had when she was with him.

"I hate to interrupt," Siobhan said, "but I really think you should pay a call to Laurent's coven." She gave Alice a significant look. "Whatever history you have there shouldn't be left to fester."

"Of course." Carlisle gave Alice a squeeze and then released her. "Lead the way, Siobhan."

She guided them to the far outskirts of the encampment, where a fire was already burning in front of a pair of small tents. A vampire with glossy black hair stood in front of the fire, and James and his redhead mate sat inside one of the tents with the door unzipped and hanging open. At their approach, a slow, dark smile spread across James's lips.

The black-haired vampire smiled too, a much more welcoming expression, and Siobhan introduced him as Laurent, the leader of the coven.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, beckoning the others out of the tent. "This is Victoria, and I believe some of you have already met James?"

"It seems so," Carlisle said. He shook each of their hands in turn, finally holding on to James's. "Rumor has it you knew Alice before she came to us. I'd like to hear the story, if you'll oblige me."

James arched an eyebrow and scanned the curious faces waiting for his response. "She really has no human memories?"

"I'm afraid not. Would you be so kind?"

James shrugged, but his casual front didn't quite hide the sharpness in his eyes or the way his gaze lingered on Jasper's scars and Emmett's prominent muscles.

"Mary Alice was in a home for the mentally ill when I met her. Her scent was so tempting that I wanted to tear the place apart, brick by brick, to get to her. I would have, too, if the asylum hadn't been under the direction of a vampire."

"Was it really?" Carlisle looked fascinated.

James smirked. "It was clever. Like keeping a well-stocked pantry. The old man could snack on his patients whenever he liked and no one was ever the wiser. Most of their families were happy to be rid of them, and even if the occasional visitor stopped in, who would believe Crazy Uncle Henry when he told them the doctor was drinking his blood?"

Carlisle couldn't quite hide the disappointment in his eyes. "I see. He kept you from Alice, then?"

"He tried. See, I thought I'd be polite and just ask him for the girl, but it seems he had a particular attachment to her."

Jasper pulled Alice closer and let out a low growl, but his reaction only seemed to please James.

"Whatever the reason, he refused my request. But I couldn't have that. She smelled *so* good." He shrugged and gave Carlisle a sheepish look. "And I have to confess, I do enjoy playing with my food."

"I stayed nearby, visited Mary Alice at her window on occasion, and I found it fascinating how she could know things before they happened. How she knew that I was going to kill her, and there was nothing she or her patron vampire could do about it."

"What happened?" Carlisle asked. "What prevented you?"

James's expression darkened. "The doctor found my scent outside her window and decided to run with her. I caught up with them, of course, but by the time I did, he had bitten her and ruined her blood."

"Well," Carlisle said, his voice smooth and placating, "I confess, I'm glad that particular situation didn't work out the way you had hoped. Our family simply wouldn't be the same without our Alice."

"I imagine it wouldn't." James smiled at Jasper. "You take good care of her, you hear? It would be just *awful* if something happened to her."

"Believe me," Jasper replied with a low growl, "she's well protected."

Laurent stepped between them, breaking their eye contact, but it was Carlisle he addressed.

"I'm impressed with the life you've created for yourself here. Siobhan tells me you have a human profession?"

Carlisle started telling Laurent about the challenges and rewards of living like a human, but Alexander was growing restless in Bella's arms.

"Mother, can I go play?"

"No, sweetie, I want you to stay with me."

"Can we build our campfire?"

"Not yet. I think we still have someone else to visit."

Carlisle paused in his conversation with Laurent and smiled at her. "You don't need to stay. Alistair won't care to visit with the whole family. But Bella . . ." He reached out and touched her elbow. "You should think about calling Charlie. The two of you have a lot to talk about."

She pressed her lips together and nodded. She didn't know how she was going to tell him about Alexander, but it really couldn't be put off any longer.

Carlisle turned back to Laurent and Bella started away again, but Edward grabbed her arm.

"Wait," he whispered.

"What?"

He didn't answer her. He and Jasper were scanning the forest around them, their faces lifted to sniff at the breeze.

"Ulka and Pythia?" Jasper asked quietly. "Are they burning something?"

Edward shook his head.

"What is it?" Esme asked. "What's wrong?"

"Smell," Jasper said.

Bella sniffed at the breeze, trying to understand what had them so worked up. At first she couldn't pick out anything in particular, just an amalgamation of forest scents mixed with the musk of dozens of vampires. But then a breeze blew in from the south and she caught it: a sharp, unpleasant spice that she wouldn't have even noticed had she not been searching for something unusual.

"What is that?" she asked.

Edward shook his head while Jasper searched the trees to the south of them. Jasper started walking slowly into the trees, but Edward hissed quietly and shook his head. He raised his eyes to the branches above them, frowned, and then turned toward the north and looked in that direction. Still unsatisfied, he crouched down low and stared up at the trees above them.

"Up?" Jasper asked.

He shook his head and spun around, still crouched low. "Down. The perspective is low—really low."

"You can see it?"

Edward nodded.

"Not an animal, then."

"No . . . well, maybe . . ."

"What's going on?" Rosalie asked, her voice tense.

"Something—" Edward broke off when a rat darted out from beneath a tree root, and he took off running after it. Bella barely had time to find it strange that a forest animal would venture so close to a gathering of predators, and that Edward and Jasper would care about it, before Edward snatched it up and held it out in front of him. A moment later he cried out in pain and dropped the rat, which quickly disappeared beneath another tree.

"It bit me!" Edward cried, staring at his hand.

Emmett laughed. "Worried about the plague, brother?"

"No." He held up his hand, which was oozing clear venom. "I mean, it *bit* me. It broke the skin."

Carlisle hurried over to him, and Bella followed with the rest of the family.

Edward held out his hand for Carlisle's inspection. "It has to be," he said in answer to an unspoken question. "What else could do that?"

"Back up." Carlisle motioned them all away from the tree where the rat had taken refuge. "Give it some room."

Bella obliged, easing back a few yards, and Carlisle knelt at the base of the tree.

"I'm sorry for our initial reaction," he said, peering beneath the roots. "We're a little surprised. We don't get many visitors like you here."

There was no answer, but Carlisle didn't seem to need one. He continued in a conversational tone, sounding just as he had when he'd greeted the other new arrivals. "My name is Carlisle Cullen, and this is my family. We called for this gathering, and have promised to provide a safe venue for all who respect the restrictions of this territory. I extend the same promise to you. You're welcome here."

Alexander tugged at Bella's hair. "Why is he talking to a rat?"

"That's not just a rat," Edward told him. "It's a shape-shifter."

"What's that?"

But Edward didn't answer. His eyes widened and started searching the trees again.

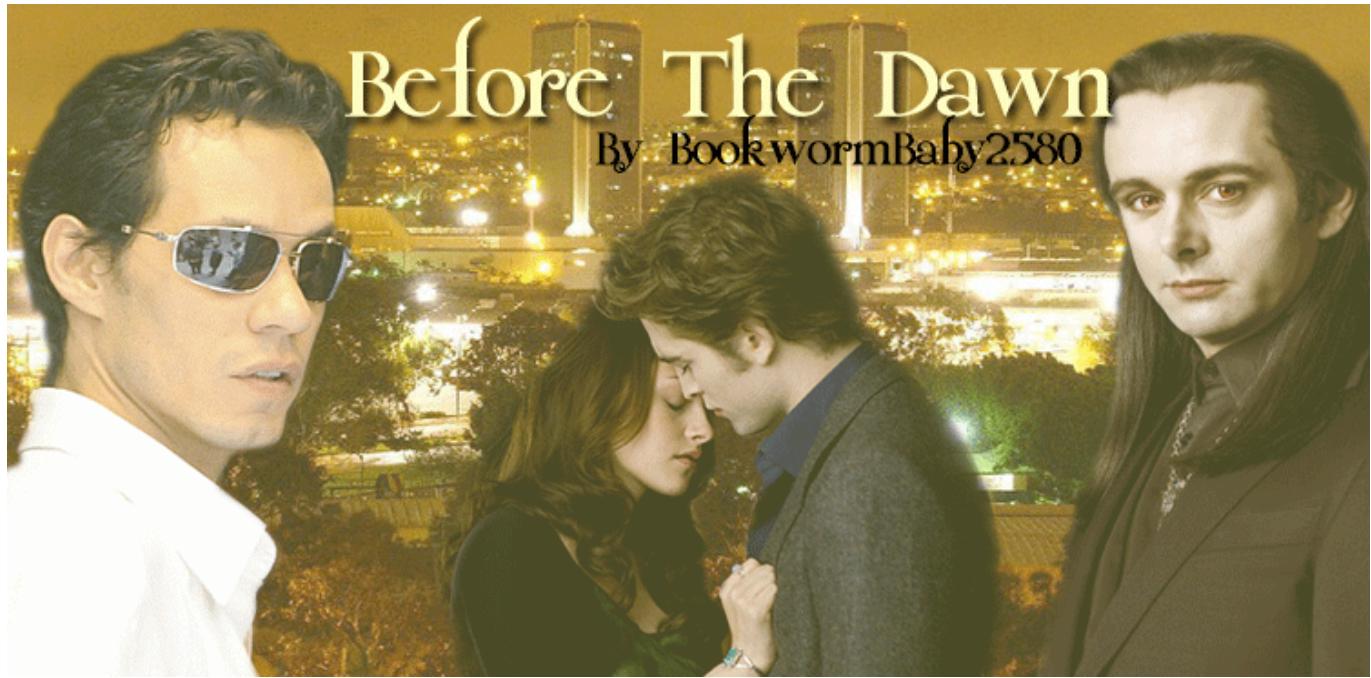
"Uh . . . Carlisle? She's not alone."

"She?" Carlisle glanced back at him before turning to the rat again. "That's interesting. We have some shifters in the area, but it's always been only the male—"

"Carlisle!" Edward snapped, his voice rising in panic.

Bella followed his gaze and her jaw dropped. Racing toward them, its long, sinewy shape weaving effortlessly in and out of the densely-packed trees, was something she could only describe as a dragon.

Heaven's Lieutenants



Rosalie jumped between Bella and the dragon as it raced toward them.

"Take Alexander to those boulders up the hill and wedge yourselves in between them," she growled as she braced herself against the oncoming attacker.

Bella immediately saw the wisdom of her instructions. The dragon, though long-bodied and sinewy, was racing toward them on short legs that clawed at the ground and kicked up wild clumps of bracken as it ran. The huge, leathery wings indicated that it would be at home in the air, but on the ground it was at a disadvantage. Bella tucked Alexander against her chest and darted up the gentle slope to the rocks, twisting back to face the action once she'd hidden herself in a deep crevice. Her position gave her a new perspective, and as she turned she caught sight of something the others had missed. An enormous dog with short, wiry fur and a tightly curled tail was running toward the group from another direction while their attention was wrapped up in the dragon.

"Jasper!" She yelled. "Another one, to the southwest!"

Jasper spun toward the dog, and then there was a streak of color as Peter and Charlotte raced to his side, both of them falling into defensive crouches.

They weren't the only ones to respond. Laurent and Victoria were falling back, moving away from the commotion, while James advanced into the fray with at least a dozen others from the campsite. Those who weren't running toward or away from the ruckus were climbing trees, trying to see what all the commotion was about.

And still, the dog and the dragon advanced with terrifying speed.

Edward grabbed the collar of Carlisle's leather coat and hauled him back away from the tree. "They're protecting the rat!" he called over the rising din.

As soon as the way was clear, the little rat darted out of her hiding place beneath the tree and streaked toward the dragon. Bella saw the dog change its course, angling toward the other two, its

wide muzzle pulled back to reveal sharp teeth and a black tongue glistening with saliva. The three of them skidded to a stop when they met, and the little rat hid itself beneath one of the dragon's taloned feet.

Carlisle freed himself from Edward's grasp and stepped out in front of his family, his hands held out in a placating gesture.

"I'm sorry for the misunderstanding," he said. "It wasn't our intention to threaten you."

The dragon let out a roar that made the leaves in the trees tremble, but held its position beside its friends.

"Carlisle, what are you doing?" Aro hissed. He was in a tree, well back from the center of the chaos, and Bella was startled to see that he was actually trembling. "Do you have any idea what they're capable of?"

Carlisle made a show of looking over the dragon, taking in the scaly red-brown hide speckled liberally with black and yellow, the long snout full of gleaming teeth, the mane and whiskers of something thick and ropey that wasn't quite hair. He threw a wry glance over his shoulder at Aro.

"Yes, I think I can surmise what they're capable of."

"Destroy them! Send in your warriors! The threat must be eliminated!"

Carlisle turned around to face Aro, exposing his back to the shape-shifters in the process. Bella shuddered and Jasper let out an exasperated growl, but Carlisle looked perfectly calm.

"This is not a battleground, Aro. It's a friendly gathering."

"They *kill* vampires," he hissed.

"Vampires kill vampires. In alarming numbers. I've chosen to overlook that fact and welcome you all as my guests. I'll extend the same courtesy to the delegation from . . ." he turned to the side and looked back at the dragon and the dog, "China, is it?"

"Mother," Alexander asked, "why doesn't Carwile want to kill those things?"

Carlisle heard his question and turned to meet his gaze. "That's a very good question, Alexander. I don't want to kill them because life is precious. I believe it's a travesty to kill any intelligent being, and I would go to great lengths to avoid it."

"Is that why you don't drink human blood?"

Carlisle smiled. "That's exactly why."

"Do not defy me, Carlisle!" Aro snarled, interrupting their exchange. "I order you to destroy them!"

"You order me?" he asked quietly, turning back to Aro. "On what authority?"

"I am the law," Aro hissed. "I have ruled and protected our race for thousands of years, and I will go on ruling and protecting long after you are dead."

Carlisle was silent for a moment. He drew in a slow breath and let it out again. "Are we doing this now?" he asked.

Aro let out a snarl.

"Don't mistake my patience for blindness, old friend. I see you. I know what you are. And while I've put my faith in the nobility of your character, don't think for a moment that I'm ignorant of your weaknesses. You reach too far and demand too much. Your service to us has been invaluable and you have my gratitude, but you do *not* have my unqualified obedience."

He took a step back toward the shape-shifters, drawing another sharp hiss from Jasper, and addressed the gathered crowd.

"I promised you all my protection if you agreed to abide by the rules of my territory. My promise extends to anyone who has accepted my invitation to attend this gathering, including our shape-shifting friends."

"Are you forgetting their recent display of violence?" Aro snapped. "A display they only put a halt to when they saw our numbers?"

"It was an understandable reaction to a perceived threat," he said, turning back to the newcomers. "And again, I'm very sorry. In our surprise and confusion we reacted unwisely, and I hope you can forgive us for that."

For a moment there was no answer, but then the rat crept out again and, in a burst of heat, transformed into a slight young woman with short-cropped black hair. She was naked, and her bashfulness about that fact showed in her stance, though she tried to hide it with a raised chin and a hard look. She ignored her nudity and said something to Carlisle in what Bella assumed was a Chinese dialect.

Emmett shrugged out of his coat threw it to the girl, who grimaced at it, but she put it on. It was so large on her that it fell all the way to her knees, and she had to bunch up the sleeves to free her hands. Still, she wrapped it around herself, and the protection it offered seemed to soften her a little.

Carlisle answered her in her own language, and then switched to English.

"I only ask because I believe more of us here speak English. Our kind tend to avoid any dealings in China."

"Yes," the girl answered in a soft, lightly accented voice. "We all speak English."

"I'd like to formally welcome you to my home. Do you intend to stay for the gathering?"

The girl looked uncomfortable. "Our purpose . . ." she said haltingly ". . . is to . . . gather information."

Carlisle smiled. "Should I assume that you intended to remain unnoticed?"

She dropped her eyes and stayed silent.

"It's perfectly all right. This is an intimidating situation—for all of us. Our intention is to make some decisions pertinent to the government of the vampire race, but objective opinions wouldn't be

unwelcome. Will you attend our meetings and share your thoughts with us?"

"We . . . would like to . . . confer?"

"Please. Take your time."

She slipped her arms out of Emmett's coat, and in another flash of heat the heavy leather fell to the ground. For several long moments, there was no movement from any of the shape-shifters.

Bella caught Edward's eye, and he beckoned her down from her hiding place. She hesitated, and he smiled his understanding.

"It's fine, I promise. They're as eager as we are to keep things peaceful."

"I want to see the dragon," Alexander said, squirming in Bella's arms.

"No!" she said sharply. "Alexander, you don't go anywhere near that thing, do you understand me?"

His little face screwed up into a scowl, and she sighed.

"We'll get a little bit closer, but you stay right by me whenever it's around, okay?"

His scowl eased just a little. "I just want to see it."

Bella eased them out of the crevice and crept closer, sidling up behind Edward and clinging to his arm. Alexander crawled up onto his shoulders, his eyes fixed on the enormous creature in front of them.

"Does it make fire like in the stories?" he asked.

The dragon snorted, the heavy puff of air sounding almost like a laugh.

"Apparently not," Edward said, "though she says she always has a cigarette lighter handy."

Bella shuddered.

"Don't worry." He eased his arm from her grasp so he could take her hand. "She's a mother too. She's not interested in hurting children."

Bella couldn't help but wonder if it was difficult to lie with your thoughts, but she kept her comments to herself.

There was another blast of heat, and once again there was a girl climbing to her feet beneath Emmett's coat. She tugged it around herself, her gaze furtively scanning the crowd before settling on Carlisle.

"We are grateful for your invitation, but we are not sure your welcoming spirit extends to your friends."

"It is my hope that my friends will join me in fostering a broader sense of community than we have enjoyed before. I won't force anyone; they're all free to leave if they don't like the way I govern my territory. But I ask the same things of them that I ask of you: respect, discretion, and open-mindedness."

"Then we are honored to accept."

Carlisle smiled. "Wonderful. The house is starting to fill up, but if the three of you don't mind sharing a space, there's still one room available. Or you're welcome to choose a lot and camp with the rest of us, though I'll warn you that we do tend to get a lot of rain."

"We do not mind the weather," the girl answered simply.

"The bathrooms are at your disposal if you want to clean up from your trip, and of course, the kitchen is yours. I'll have to have it stocked with fresh food. . ."

"I'll do that," Jasper said quietly, and then even softer, he added, "I need to get Peter out of here for a while."

Carlisle shot him a concerned glance, but Jasper shook his head. "Later."

"While you're out . . . I need equipment to do ultrasounds on the girls."

"Got it."

"Can we get you anything?" Carlisle asked, turning back to the shape-shifters. "Is there anything you need?"

The girl shook her head. "We left our things a few miles away. We will retrieve them and return."

"I'll be at the house taking care of a few details. Please make yourselves at home, and . . . if it's not too much of an imposition . . ." He smiled, his eyes bright with eagerness. "Perhaps I could ask you a few questions? There's so much I want to know."

His smile was infectious, and the girl returned it shyly. "We will return soon." Her eyes sought Emmett, and she gave him a smile as well, hugging the coat to her tiny frame. Heat rippled through the air once again, and the coat fell into a leather heap, jostled only slightly when the rat darted out from under it.

The other two animals followed, clambering after the rat and disappearing into the trees.

Emmett let out a whoop. "That's a fucking dragon!"

"That's a fucking dragon!" Alexander repeated gleefully.

Bella winced.

"Shit," Emmett muttered. "Sorry—dammit!"

Bella groaned. "Emmett, stop talking. Alexander, sweetie, there are some words that you should try not to use in everyday conversation."

"Why?"

"Because they're not nice. They offend people."

"Is someone 'fended about the dragon?"

There were plenty of people who weren't particularly pleased about the dragon, judging by the grumbles that were starting to pick up around her, but she decided it would be best to keep the conversation focused. "No, sweetie, it's not about the dragon."

"What words, Mother?"

Edward grinned at her side. "Yeah, Bella, what words?"

"Well, *shut up*, for instance," she said pointedly. "That's not a very nice thing to say to someone, even when you're very tempted."

Edward snickered.

"But there are others that are worse," she said, directing her comments to Alexander this time.

"Your mom's right," Emmett said with a penitent shrug. "Some words a gentleman doesn't use the way I just did. Sorry about that."

"What words, though?"

Jasper had been corralling Peter, Charlotte, and Alice, and he strode past Bella now with the others in tow, giving her a wink as he passed. "Good luck with that, kid. And call your father. This is the kind of thing that gets more difficult if you avoid it."

Carlisle said goodbye to Jasper's party and then held out a hand to Bella. "I'm going back to the house. Walk with me?"

"What words, Mother?" Alexander asked impatiently.

Bella sighed, and as she headed back to the house with Carlisle and Edward, she rattled off a short list of words she had never really felt comfortable using.

"You're not supposed to say those words?" he asked for confirmation.

"Right."

"Why did Emmett say fuck?"

Bella scrambled for some kind of explanation, but when she couldn't come up with anything, Carlisle stepped in.

"People use profanity to give emphasis to their words, or sometimes to add humor to what they're saying. The dragon made a strong impression on Emmett, and his language reflected that."

"It's different for grown-ups and kids," Bella said, though she faltered for a reason that might be true. "It's best if you leave those words to older people."

"How old do I have to be to say them?"

Bella chewed at her lip. That was an impossible question to answer even under normal circumstances, but Alexander's unusual maturity made it even more difficult. A child his age shouldn't even be able to roll over, and one that matched his physical size probably couldn't speak

in complete sentences. But if Alexander was able to understand abstract concepts like the appropriate use of profanity, exactly how mature did that make him?

"You know what?" Edward said. "I think that's different for each person, and you can't really predict when you'll be ready to say words like that. But let's do this. You listen really closely and pay attention to how people react to those words, and in one year you can talk about them with your mom again and see if you're old enough yet."

"*One* year?" Bella hissed. "You think he'll be old enough in *one* year?"

Edward shrugged. "Probably not, but what do I know? He shouldn't be old enough to be having this conversation right now."

Alexander grinned at their chagrin. "I know. I'm a very special young man."

Bella frowned, but decided to let that one go for now. One step at a time.

They reached the house and Carlisle went straight to the telephone. He picked up the handset and handed it to Bella with a pointed look.

She sighed. "Yeah. I'll call him."

"Alexander," he said, "would you like to come with me to check on your sisters?"

Bella gave him a grateful smile as she handed her eager son off to him. The two of them disappeared upstairs, and Bella turned to lean against Edward's chest.

"This is going to be weird," she muttered. "I mean, how do you tell your father that you have a son you never mentioned?"

"Just remember that he loves you. Nothing's going to change that."

She nodded, taking another moment to draw strength from him, before straightening and dialing Charlie's number.

He answered on the first ring.

"Hey, Dad," she said in response to his sharp hello.

His voice softened. "Hey, baby. Glad you made it back safe. How was your . . . trip?"

"It was good. It was really good, actually. Um . . . I kind of need to talk to you about something. I mean, if you have time. Are you still at work?"

"Leaving in about half an hour. Should I come over?"

"Yeah, I think that would be best."

"Bella," Carlisle said from upstairs, "would you have him pass along a message to Billy or Sam for me? I'd like to invite them out to meet our new friends from China."

"Oh," she said to Charlie, "Carlisle wants to know if you'll give Billy a call. Sam and those guys are kind of hard to get on the phone, I guess, but there are some people here that Carlisle wants to

introduce them to. He wants them to come out . . . I mean, if they're willing."

"Yeah, sure, I'll let them know. See you in about an hour?"

"That sounds good."

They said goodbye and Bella replaced the phone in the cradle. She turned to Edward, who had wandered into the kitchen and was pulling dishes and canned food out of the cupboards.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a casserole."

She giggled. "A casserole? That's so domestic."

"Isn't it?" He smiled and started filling a pot with water. "Until Jasper and Alice get back with some fresh ingredients, I don't have a lot to work with. So for now . . . casserole."

"I would never have thought of you as much of a cook."

He shrugged. "You live a hundred years, you pick things up."

"Can I help?"

"Sure. There are some egg noodles in the pantry that need to be boiled, and see if we have anything crunchy to crumble on top for texture."

Bella ducked into the pantry to sort through what was available, half-listening while Carlisle talked to Maysun about the possibility of terminating her pregnancy. He was explaining that he wanted to wait until Jasper had brought him some ultrasound equipment before he formed an opinion about his ability to perform the procedure. From what Bella could hear, Maysun didn't sound happy about the delay. Bella couldn't blame her. She remembered all too well what it was like carrying Alexander, the way his swiftly-growing body had leached away her strength. But at the same time, she shuddered at the idea that, given the opportunity, she would have willingly put an end to her own pregnancy. She didn't want to think about that. Not now that she was on the other side of it, with a son she loved and the support of a generous family.

She was exiting the pantry when she heard Alexander's thoughtful voice.

"Maysun is a girl."

"That's right," Carlisle answered, though he sounded preoccupied.

"Father doesn't like her as much as he likes me."

"Did he tell you that?"

There was a pause. "No."

"But you figured it out another way?"

"Yes. He taught me my lessons and let me play outside, but he made Maysun and Jennifer stay inside with Russell and David."

"I think you're right. I think that's a good indication that he respects you more than he respects your sisters."

Bella poked her head out of the pantry and held up a box of crackers.

Edward nodded. "Fry them in butter for a few minutes. There should be some in the refrigerator."

There was silence from upstairs while she crumbled the crackers and melted butter on the stove, but after a few minutes Alexander spoke again.

"Jasper says that's bad. He says you shouldn't un-restimate women."

"Does he?" Carlisle asked. Bella could hear faint rustling and clinking, and she assumed Carlisle was busying himself with some task while he talked to Alexander. "Why do you suppose that is?"

"I don't know."

"Here, will you hold that for a minute?"

Bella listened to their quiet footsteps as they moved into the bedroom that had been Edward's, and then hers. There was a soft creak of bedsprings, and then Carlisle's low voice asking, "How are you feeling, Amelia? Still thirsty?"

"He's so casual about Alexander's questions," Bella murmured to Edward. "How does he do that?"

"A lot of practice. Carlisle has spent a long time quietly lobbying for his moral code without sacrificing neutrality."

Bella grimaced at the smell of the crackers sauteeing in the butter. "Are you sure this will be good?"

"It's not gourmet. But I've seen this done, and it went over fairly well."

Carlisle had fallen silent upstairs again, but after a moment Alexander took up their conversation again.

"Mother fought with Father, and he got broken."

"That's right," Carlisle answered. "His friend had to help set him right, didn't he?"

"But mother's a girl."

"She is. Do you think your father underestimated your mother?"

"Yeah, I fink so."

"That probably wasn't a wise decision, considering what happened."

"Did Mother ever fight with you?"

Bella grimaced, and she heard Carlisle chuckle.

"We've had our moments, but nothing like that. I would much rather be kind to your mother so that she never gets that angry with me."

There was another short silence, and then Alexander said, "If you're kind to people, they don't get angry?"

"Generally speaking. Anyway, I find it to be a good policy."

"What's a policy?"

"It's like a rule. In this case, it's a guideline I used to govern my behavior."

There was more creaking of bedsprings, and then Carlisle was urging Amelia to her feet and helping her walk slowly around the perimeter of the room.

"I feel like I'm not prepared for this," Bella told Edward. "What do I know about being a parent?"

"From what I understand, that's how most people feel when they have their first child."

"Most people aren't sixteen."

He smiled. "Not anymore, but it hasn't always been that way. Plenty of women your age have had children and done just fine."

I don't feel like I'm doing fine."

"Don't sell yourself short. Alexander chose to come with you instead of staying with Joham, and the fact that he asks you question means he trusts you." He pushed her frying pan off of the burner and turned her to face him. "And you have help. If you like the way Carlisle handles questions, learn from him."

He started to say something else, but stopped when Alexander's voice drifted down the stairs.

"Carwile, why do you like humans so much?"

"How can I not, when they make such beautiful things?"

"What things?"

"Very good, Amelia," Carlisle murmured before answering Alexander. "The works of humans are all around you. Arts, sciences, architecture, all of it produced by humans. Many people make claims about the superiority of the vampire race, but the fact is, our kind is much more focused on destruction than creation. 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' "

"What does that mean, about the fruit?"

"It's a metaphor from the Bible. You can tell if a tree is good by the fruit it produces, just as you can tell if a person is good by the things he does."

"So humans are good because they make good things?"

"In general. Humans do good things and bad things, just like vampires. But I owe a lot of what I love to humans. You, for example."

"Me?"

"You're half human. You never could have been born had your mother not been human."

"You love me?"

Bella smiled as Carlisle chuckled.

"Yes, Alexander, you're very easy to love."

"What does it mean to love somebody?"

Another challenging question. Bella frowned, listening to how Carlisle would answer it.

"That, young man, is something I can't teach you. Love has to be experienced to be understood. But I have a feeling you'll figure it out soon enough."

She shook her head. Carlisle sounded so wise even when he wasn't offering answers. How did he do that? How could she?

"Hey." Edward leaned down, nuzzling her ear. "You'll do fine, Bella. Your parents had to learn on the fly, too, and look how you turned out." He pressed a kiss to her temple. "You're the most wonderful woman I've ever met."

"You're nice to Amelia and Maysun," Alexander was telling Carlisle.

"I try to be nice to everyone."

"Even girls?"

"Even girls. I confess, I might even be more careful to be kind to women than I am to men."

"Why?"

Bella heard Carlisle's step on the stairs, and Edward pulled back, returning to his task.

"Oh . . . cultural training, I suppose. It's probably not right to treat them differently, but I find myself being more gentle and affectionate with women."

"'Specially Esme, huh?"

He chuckled. "You noticed that, did you?"

"Yes. You're always hugging her and holding her hand."

"It's only natural. After all, she *is* my wife."

"What does that mean?"

They entered the kitchen, and Carlisle set Alexander on the counter next to where Edward was working. "It means that, out of all the people in the whole world, I chose Esme to be my best friend forever."

"I want Mother to be my wife," Alexander declared.

"Sorry, buddy," Bella laughed, "but your mother can't be your wife."

"Why not?"

Carlisle ruffled his hair. "You have a lot to learn before you can pick a wife. But for now, I think your mother will make a very good best friend."

"Do you have a wife, Edward?"

Edward grinned and glanced at Bella. "Not yet."

"Why not?"

"I only just met the girl I want to be with. We have some things to figure out, but between you and me, I think my chances are pretty good."

"Are you all right to watch him?" Carlisle asked Bella. "I still need to run up and say hello to Alistair."

She nodded, while Edward handed Alexander a spoon and showed him how to stir together the mixture in the bowl.

Carlisle headed upstairs, and a moment later Bella heard him mounting what must have been a retractable staircase into the attic. So *that* was where Alistair had been hiding.

"Is this human food?" Alexander asked Edward.

"Yep."

"Is it for me?"

"Partly. Amelia needs human food, and we'll give some to your sisters and the shape-shifters too, if they want some."

"We should probably offer something to Charlie, too," Bella added.

Edward frowned down at the mixture Alexander was stirring. "We may have to make another casserole."

"Do you have any milk?" Alexander asked.

"We will, as soon as Jasper gets back with the groceries."

"Good. I like milk."

Edward started putting together a second casserole with different ingredients, allowing Alexander to help with simple tasks. The two of them cooked together while Alexander peppered Edward with questions about subjects he hadn't come across under Joham's tutelage. His curiosity seemed boundless, and Bella was grateful that Edward showed no signs of impatience. He, like Carlisle, was happy to answer whatever questions were put to him. The inquiries got more scientific when a light rain began falling outside and Edward had to explain precipitation.

Bella had never found him so irresistibly attractive.

Just as she was getting a plate of hot casserole dished up for Alexander, she heard a car turn off the highway and onto the gravel drive. She recognized Charlie's cruiser, and she exchanged a look with Edward.

"Go ahead," Edward told her. "I'll keep an eye on Alexander. Emmett and Rose will stay with you."

Bella saw to her scarf and perfumes, and by the time Charlie pulled up she was waiting for him on the porch steps while Emmett and Rosalie rocked in the swing. Charlie greeted her with a hug, and they sat down on the lower steps of the porch.

"So . . ." he said, "what's this all about?"

Bella pressed her hand to her stomach to try and quell the fluttering. "There's, um . . . something I need to talk to you about."

He stayed silent, waiting for her to go ahead. The problem was, she didn't know how to start. She floundered for a moment and blew out a heavy breath. "Um . . . you remember when I was gone? In Mexico?"

Charlie looked at her like she'd lost her mind. "Yeah, Bella, I think I remember."

"Okay, well . . . um . . . something happened."

He leaned back on his elbows, one eyebrow arched, and waited.

"Joham—that's the . . . the vampire who . . . kidnaped me. The thing is . . . he had a reason. He wanted something."

Charlie's eyebrows lowered.

"He, um . . . he wanted . . . kids."

Charlie's face went white and his hands clenched into fists.

"He does this," Bella went on quickly. "He has it in his head that he's going to create this race of half-vampires. He had four other kids before he met me."

Charlie took a deep breath and sat forward, leaning on his knees. "Did he—are you—baby, are you trying to tell me that you're pregnant?"

"Uh. Not exactly." She twisted her fingers together.

"So, what? You . . . lost it?"

"No. The thing is . . . I know it's only been a couple of months, but Dad, he grew so fast."

"He?" Charlie looked confused. "Who grew? This Joham guy?"

She shook her head and glanced back toward the house. "My son."

Charlie was silent for a long moment. He pushed himself to his feet and started pacing slowly in front of the porch. Bella glanced back at Rosalie and Emmett, who both gave her encouraging

smiles, and then turned to Charlie again. He had his head bowed, hands shoved in his pockets, and was taking slow, deliberate steps.

After nearly a minute, he drew in a deep breath. "You're telling me," he said, "that this Joham guy kidnaped you and got you pregnant . . . and now you have a kid."

"Yeah."

Bella didn't think she was meant to hear the stream of low oaths Charlie muttered.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Bella said hurriedly. "I just . . . I felt so guilty. Because I left him there with Joham."

"Of course you left him. The kid was what he wanted, right? So, what, did he always plan to let you go afterward?"

"Um . . . no, actually, he thought I would die. Dad, could you please not dig your nails into your palms like that? I'm afraid you'll cut yourself, and the blood is too much for me."

Charlie flexed his hands a couple of times before relaxing them.

"Okay," he said. "Okay. But you didn't die, and now you're back, and you don't ever have to see him again."

"Well . . ."

"God damn it, Bella!" he burst out. "What? What is it that you're trying to tell me? Because you're not going back there, kid or no kid. Forget it. You're staying right here where you belong."

"Yeah, well . . . I sort of already went back."

Charlie froze and glared at her.

"You went back."

"Yeah. That was the whole reason for the motorcycle thing. A bunch of people wanted to come along and help."

"And Cullen thought that was a good idea?" he asked, his voice rising. "He thought you'd just take a little road trip back to visit the guy who *kidnaped* you?"

Bella winced. "He was trying to help."

"Help? Without talking to the police? Without talking to *me*? God *damn* it, Bella! Did it not even occur to you to include me in all of this?"

Bella sighed. "No. It didn't. Dad, you have to understand, these are vampires we're talking about. Do you think they're worried about law enforcement? About guns? I needed something stronger, because I *had* to get Alexander back."

Charlie stilled. "Alexander."

She brushed a lock of hair off of her cheek. "We brought him home with us."

"Jesus." All the fight left him with the hiss of his breath and he dropped back down onto the steps.
"You have a son. I have . . . Jesus Christ, I'm a grandfather."

Bella shook her head. "It doesn't seem real."

"That's because it's at least ten years too soon. You were supposed to . . . go to college . . . finish high school. Bella, honey, you're going to have to move back home."

"We talked about that."

"I know, but . . ." He ran a hand through his hair. "You can't do this on your own. You have no idea how *hard* it is to be a parent."

"I want to come home. You wouldn't believe how bad. I don't have the first clue what I'm doing." Bella dropped her head onto his shoulder. "I've already screwed everything all up. I feel like I'm just waiting to see how much more damage I can do."

Charlie let out a hard laugh. "I remember what it was like when I found out your mother was pregnant. I was excited, but . . . god, I was so scared. What if something went wrong with the pregnancy? What if we didn't feed you enough, or fed you too much, or fed you the wrong things? What if I dropped you? I had nightmares about dropping you until well after you were walking around by yourself."

"Yeah, well, I can do you one better. I abandoned Alexander. I don't even know if he'll ever forgive me."

Charlie shrugged. "Lucky thing he's a baby. People tend to be pretty easy-going about things they don't remember."

"Yeah, um . . ." She glanced back at the house. "Well, I mean, he's not like . . . other babies. It's the vampire in him . . . he's just really advanced."

"Advanced?"

"Do you want to meet him?"

"Yeah. Uh . . . yeah. Where is he?"

"Edward's watching him."

The door behind him opened and Edward stepped out, holding a jar of something that smelled potent and unpleasant. Alexander was perched on one shoulder, his hand clutching a fistful of Edward's hair to help him maintain his balance.

Charlie gaped at Alexander. "That's—is he—Bella . . ."

"I know." She stood and reached out for Alexander, who leapt from Edward's shoulder into her arms. He turned to Charlie and looked him over curiously.

"Are you Mother's father?" he asked.

Charlie cleared his throat. "Yeah. That's me."

"Edward says that means you're my grandfather."

"That's . . . the way it works." He cast Bella a bewildered glance.

"Can I smell him, Mother?"

A surprised laugh escaped her, and she shook her head. "No, sweetie, that's not really polite."

"It's okay," Charlie said. He reached for Alexander and lifted him from Bella's arms. "You can smell me if you want, kiddo. You've got to learn about things somehow, right?"

Alexander leaned in and sniffed Charlie's neck. "You smell good. But Mother says it's bad to drink human blood."

"Well . . . she's right. We humans need our blood."

"Do you drink animal blood too?"

Charlie looked startled, and Bella laughed.

"No, sweetie, humans eat human food. That's why we call it *human* food."

"Oh." Alexander pointed at the jar in Edward's hand. "I have some human food."

"Yeah? Whatcha got?" Charlie rose and moved closer to Edward to peer into the jar.

Bella looked too, taking in the little green slices that smelled of brine. She arched an eyebrow at Edward. "Jalapenos? Really?"

"What? He likes them better than the casserole."

"They're really good, Mother!"

"I agree," Charlie told him, plucking one of the peppers from the jar and popping it in his mouth. "Jalapenos are delicious."

Alexander extracted a pepper from the mug and sucked on it. "What's the best human food?"

"Hmmm . . ." Charlie sat back down on the step and settled Alexander into his lap. "I think my favorite is fresh trout battered in Harry Clearwater's fish fry."

Alexander screwed up his face in curiosity. "What's that?"

"Trout?"

"All of that."

Charlie gave Bella a stern look. "Young lady, haven't you fed this boy a proper fish fry yet?"

Bella just grinned and shrugged.

"I guess I'll have to fix that. Tell you what? Next time I come over, I'll bring some trout and some fish fry, and we'll have the best meal you've ever tasted."

"Yes!" Alexander cried. "When are you gonna come again?"

"Uh . . . tomorrow night?" He shot Bella a questioning look and smiled when she nodded. "Okay, tomorrow night. It's a date."

"Yay!" Alexander clapped his hands, looking for just a moment like the infant he could be mistaken for. "Can Jennifer and Maysun have some too? And Nahuel?"

"Who's that?"

"Joham's other kids," Bella told him. "They're staying here for a little while."

Charlie grunted. "Family reunion, huh?"

"Yeah. And . . ." she gave him a sheepish look, "Joham should be here too, eventually."

Charlie stilled. "Excuse me?"

"Yeah. Carlisle sort of . . . invited him. Because of this whole caucus thing."

Charlie stood up and passed Alexander back to Edward. "Where is he?" he asked, his voice low and quiet.

The conversation Carlisle had been having with Alistair in the attic abruptly cut off.

"Dad, maybe now isn't the best time." Bella gestured around to the group of vampires that had slowly crept into the clearing around the house, curious to witness their interaction.

"Is he here?" Charlie asked, enunciating each word carefully.

Edward nodded and glanced toward the house.

"CULLEN!" Charlie yelled. "Get your ass out here RIGHT NOW!"

There was a brief moment when Bella considered trying to calm him down, but the fact was, she was still pretty angry with Carlisle herself. Seeing Charlie go to her defense over a situation she was none too happy about . . . it was just too satisfying to interrupt.

And anyway, Carlisle was already coming down the stairs.

"CULLEN!" Charlie yelled again, and started toward the house just as the front door swung open. Carlisle stepped out, placating words already on his tongue, but Charlie bellowed over him.

"WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?"

"Is hell a bad word, Mother?" Alexander whispered.

"It's kind of bad," she whispered back, moving to Edward's side and lifting him into her arms.

Carlisle was attempting to placate Charlie with soothing words and gestures, but it wasn't working.

"Do I understand this right?" Charlie demanded. "You go off to track down the man who kidnaped and raped my daughter, and when you find him, YOU INVITE HIM OVER FOR A BEER?"

"I know it's not ideal—"

"NOT IDEAL?" Charlie looked like he was barely holding himself back from throwing a punch. "You know what, Cullen? I took your advice. I went to Billy and Sam and asked about you, and they gave me an earful. They told me you were nothing more than a blood-crazed animal, that you were dangerous and that I'd regret having anything to do with you. AND I DEFENDED YOU! I said you were helping my little girl. HELPING!" He grabbed the front of Carlisle's shirt and shoved him back against the door. THIS IS NOT FUCKING HELPING!"

"Fuck is definitely a bad word," Edward told Alexander.

"I know. Emmett already told me that one."

Quiet laughter echoed around the clearing, and from the porch swing Emmett muttered, "Terrific. Jasper's going to love this." He stood, pulling Rosalie with him, and headed out into the yard to join the spectators.

"Charlie," Carlisle said, still placating, "could we *please* not start an international incident on my front porch?"

There was more laughter and someone—Liam, Bella thought—called out, "Do you need some help, Carlisle?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Charlie, please, let's try to keep this civil."

"Civil? You invited that *animal* here and you want me to be *civil*?"

"Is animal a bad word?" Alexander asked Bella.

She shook her head.

He frowned in confusion and chewed thoughtfully on another jalapeno.

"Believe me," Carlisle was saying, "I didn't want to. I would very much like to make Bella's needs my first priority. But there are larger considerations here."

"Larger than—"

"Yes, Charlie, and I think even you would agree. The vampire world is in crisis, and allowing our population to devolve into anarchy could have catastrophic results. You pointed that out yourself, if you'll recall."

Charlie grunted and released his grip on Carlisle's shirt.

"This is an opportunity we'll never have again. I'm still completely invested in keeping Bella safe, and it's my hope that I can limit contact between her and Joham as much as possible, but it would be hypocritical of me to exclude anyone from this gathering based on my personal feelings for them."

"You'll try to keep him away from Bella?"

"I'll do my best."

"You'll keep her safe?"

He hesitated. "There are risks—"

"Do better than that," Charlie growled.

"Bella's a part of my family now, and in this community that's no small thing. I have a lot of friends."

"Not good enough."

"Charlie, look." Carlisle took him by the shoulders and turned him to face Bella. Charlie stiffened, but then his face softened, and for a moment Bella was confused. She glanced behind her, unsure exactly what Charlie was seeing, but there was no one nearby except for Edward, hovering close to her, his hand just grazing the small of her back.

"I . . . okay." Charlie rubbed his face wearily. "This is all so complicated. I just want to take my little girl home. I want to . . . get to know my grandson."

"I know. And you're welcome here any time, as long as Bella's thirst isn't bothering her too much."

"It's not," she said. "Actually, it's getting a lot easier, especially with Alexander here. Something about his scent makes me feel . . ." she paused, looking for the right word. "Calm? Less driven? I don't know how to describe it, I'm just more focused on Alexander than on anything else."

Curiosity lit Carlisle's face. "Really? I wonder . . . could your nurturing instinct be overriding your predatory instinct?"

His description settled firmly into the groove that her own words had just missed. "Yes. That's exactly what it feels like."

"That's tremendous." Carlisle was staring off into space now. "I wonder if newly-turned mothers feel the same way about human children . . . or if it might have something to do with Alexander's venom changing you . . . I'll have to talk to Huilen about it and see if she noticed anything similar."

"Hold that thought," Edward said, nodding toward the edge of the clearing. Three slight figures were approaching through the trees, all with short-cropped black hair and lightly-brown skin. "Our shape-shifting friends are back."

Carlisle hurried down the steps with a cursory, "Excuse me, Charlie," and headed out to meet the three women. They each had heavy packs slung across their backs, and Carlisle angled himself toward the oldest looking one, an aging woman whose skin wrinkled around her eyes and mouth, and whose dark hair was streaked with threads of fine gray. He took her pack from her and fell into step beside her as they continued across the clearing.

Alexander tugged at a lock of Bella's hair. "Which one is the dragon?"

"I don't know, sweetie. Maybe we can ask them after they get settled."

"Okay." He dug a jalapeno out of the jar Edward was holding and popped it into his mouth. "Do they eat human food?"

"I think they probably do."

Charlie cleared his throat. "Bella? Did Edward say they were shape-shifters? Like the Quileutes?"

"Yeah . . . sort of. They don't turn into wolves."

"One of them's a dragon!" Alexander burst out excitedly.

Charlie blanched.

"It's *huge!* It has great big wings, and a super long tail, and *lots* of teeth!"

"A dragon," Charlie muttered. "My daughter and my grandson are hanging out with vampires, werewolves, and now dragons."

The older woman holding Carlisle's arm stopped short just shy of the porch. "Werewolves?"

"Ah—no," Carlisle said. "Not werewolves. Shifters, like yourself, but they change into wolves. I had Charlie invite them out to meet you, actually."

The woman nodded to Charlie when Carlisle gestured toward him.

"I hope you don't mind that we listened in on your conversation, Charlie. You are this girl's father?"

Charlie shifted so he was standing next to Bella. "That's right."

"I'm surprised to see a human here. Few of your kind know of the existence of the supernatural, correct?"

Charlie shrugged. "There are circumstances."

"And you don't mind that your daughter has been changed?"

"What, into a vampire?" He snorted. "Of course I mind. She should be worrying about curfews and math tests, not . . ." He trailed off with a vague wave of his hand. "But this is what we have to deal with, so we're dealing with it."

She surveyed him critically. "Few humans would be bold enough to yell at a vampire, much less threaten him physically."

He glanced at Carlisle and rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "Yeah, well . . ."

When he didn't continue, Carlisle stepped in. "Charlie and I have been friends for quite some time. I understood that he was simply venting his frustration. I didn't mind."

Alexander was bouncing in Bella's arms, his little hands fisted in her shirt. "May I ask her, mother?" he whispered loudly. "Please?"

Bella smiled at him and nodded.

"Which one of you's the dragon?" he asked, nearly tripping over his words in a rush to get them out.

The old woman laughed as she turned to him. "I am, little one. My name is Minh. What's your name?"

"I'm Alexander, and I'm a very special young man."

"I can see that." She reached toward him, and before Bella knew what she was doing she was letting out a vicious roar that startled even herself. She jumped back and clapped a hand over her mouth, though deliberately turning her body to place herself between Alexander and the decidedly non-dragonish woman.

"I'm sorry," she gasped behind her fingers, suddenly conscious of that international incident Carlisle had warned Charlie about. "I'm so sorry. I just sort of snap sometimes—I'm still working on my control!"

Minh smiled and drew back her hand. "It is I who should apologize. I will keep my distance from your child."

"No!" Alexander's voice went shrill with his protest. "Mother, you don't like anyone! It's not fair! You don't like my father and you don't like vampires who drink human blood and you don't like her!" He pointed his finger at Minh, his lip poking out as his eyes welled with tears. "It's not fair! I want to play wif the dragon!"

Bella stared at him in surprise. She hadn't even realized it, but she *had* been constantly critical of the people around them since she'd been reunited with Alexander. But what choice did she have? They were dangerous, both to his safety and to his moral education. How could she protect him if she didn't keep him away from the world of peril around him?

Edward rubbed her shoulder. "Bella," he murmured, his voice low and soothing in her ear, "she really doesn't mean any harm."

"How can you know?" she demanded. "You can't see everything."

"He sees enough," Carlisle told her gently. "Caution isn't a bad thing, but at times it can hold you back. I've found that giving people the benefit of the doubt usually fetches better results than the alternative."

Minh gave her a soft smile. "We came only to observe. We do not wish to raise conflict."

"I want to play wif the dragon," Alexander whimpered again. His voice was softer this time, but the tear that rolled down his little round cheek gave more weight to his request.

"Let Carlisle take him inside with the others," Charlie said.

"Dad—"

"He'll be fine. And I need to have a talk with you and—" he fixed Edward with a piercing glare, "your boyfriend."

"Please, Mother?" Alexander said, his little face lighting up with hope. "Please?"

Bella relented and passed him off to Carlisle. She arched an eyebrow at him, conveying a stern warning, and he nodded.

"I'll take good care of him."

Alexander grinned and clapped his hands, tears still drying on his cheeks. "Thank you, Mother!" He took the jar from Edward and held it out to Minh. "Do you want a hallapaino?"

Carlisle and the newcomers filed inside and Bella turned her attention to Charlie. He was standing with his hands on his hips, eyeing the arm that Edward had draped around her shoulder.

"Dad, we're just friends—"

"Bullshit. Sit down." He gestured toward the porch swing and Bella obeyed, leaving room for Edward to settle down next to her. He took her hand and gave it a squeeze before turning to face Charlie.

"You guys want to give us some privacy?" Charlie snapped at the gathered spectators. There was a quiet murmur of laughter and they all melted back into the trees. Bella noticed, however, that most of them stayed near enough to hear the conversation that would follow, even if Charlie could no longer see them in the dimming light of the evening.

He turned back to them, heavy eyebrows lowered in irritation.

"I distinctly remember telling you two that I wanted you to keep some distance from each other."

Bella dropped her eyes and stared at the planks of the porch.

"And *you*." Charlie jabbed a finger at Edward. "You came to me and asked me for my permission, and what did I say?"

"You said no."

"*I said no.* Yet here you are, disregarding my decision, and now things just got a hundred times harder."

"It's not harder," Edward said quietly.

"Excuse me?" Charlie glowered down at him. "It's not harder? Bella has a *son*, Edward. Do you have any idea what that means?"

"It means I have more reason than ever to be there for her."

Charlie let out a hard laugh. "Boy, you have no idea what you're talking about. You don't know how hard it is to keep a family functional even under the best circumstances. It's damn near impossible. And what you have here is a *far* cry from the best circumstances."

"And you think that means I should just walk away?" Edward asked, pushing himself to his feet.

"It means you'd better not make promises you can't keep!" Charlie yelled. "You don't know what happens when you break those promises! You can't know until you've done it!"

Edward stared at him in shock for a moment, then closed his eyes. "Renée."

Charlie snapped his jaw shut, glowering at Edward. He moved back a few steps to the porch railing and slumped against it. "The biggest regret of my life was that I didn't follow her to Arizona."

"What?" Bella asked, confused by the turn the conversation had taken.

He looked up at her, his tired eyes meeting hers. "Don't get yourself into something you're not ready for. You'll never know the damage a broken promise can cause until it's too late to fix it."

"This is about me and Mom?" she asked.

He sighed. "Yes. And it's about you and Alexander. It's hard raising a kid alone, Bella, but it's so much harder when the person you thought you could count on isn't there for you."

"Dad, you *were* there for us. Do you know how many friends I had who had parents who constantly fought over child support? Who never got phone calls or birthday presents? You were never that guy."

"I did what I could for you." He shook his head. "But Renée . . . she needed more from me. Raising a kid is too hard on your own. The decisions you have to make, like when and how to discipline, how much freedom to allow—like letting Alexander go in there with Carlisle and those women. They're *hard* decisions, and if you choose wrong, the consequences can be . . ."

Bella was glad he didn't finish his sentence. She was all too aware that she had been allowed too much freedom, and that she hadn't handled it well. Those consequences would linger forever.

"Isn't that one more reason for me to be with her?" Edward asked softly. "So she doesn't have to raise Alexander alone?"

"It would be if you were ready."

"What makes you think I'm not?" Before Charlie could argue, he continued. "I'm not just some teenager playing house. And maybe I don't know anything about raising kids, but I know I'm not going to disappear as soon as things get hard. Love is different for vampires. Mating is—"

"Stop!" Charlie said, throwing up a hand. "I do *not* want to hear about that."

Edward smiled. "I don't mean that. I mean . . . falling in love. Humans can do it again and again but it's different for us. When we fall in love it changes us in a fundamental way, and that change never gets undone."

Charlie grimaced. "So you're telling me that you two have fallen in love?"

Edward's smile deepened. "I have. I love Bella, and nothing is ever going to change that. I don't think she feels the same way—at least, not yet. She's been . . . otherwise occupied."

Bella let her teeth scrape over her lip, uncomfortable with the fact that he was exactly right. Her focus had been on Alexander, and to a certain extent, it still was. "I feel it, though," she whispered.

"I know." He sat down next to her and took her hand. "I can be patient. Which, believe me, is evidence of how much I've changed since I met you. Patience was never my strong suit."

Bella beamed at him, and Charlie cleared his throat.

"You're telling me there's no possible way that this relationship ever ends?" he asked, skepticism plain on his face.

"It's possible. It would take extreme cruelty over extended periods of time, but yes, if we were determined not to be together, we could manage. It leaves a mark, though. A hollowness that I'm

not sure ever goes away."

Charlie scrubbed his hands over his face. "Bella? Is this what you want? Because if it isn't, you don't owe him a damn thing. We can get out of here, make other arrangements."

Bella shook her head and glanced at Edward, warmed by his smile. "I want to stay."

"Fine. I should have known better than to try to keep you from something you wanted. You two . ." he waved vaguely in their direction. "Do what you want. You have my blessing." He caught Bella's bright smile and scowled. "But that doesn't mean you have to rush into anything."

Bella jumped up and darted across the porch—maybe a little too quickly, judging by the startled look on Charlie's face. She threw her arms around him and hugged him, consciously reminding herself to be gentle in spite of her enthusiasm.

"Thank you, Dad," she whispered.

"Hmph." He brought a hand up to pat her back. "Stubborn kid."

"Just like my dad," she said with a grin.

"Just like your son. I hate to break it to you, but that boy is going to give you *hell*."

She let out a distressed laugh and pulled back. "I know!"

"Well." He sighed and shook his head. "I guess I'd better get to the grocery store and buy some candy."

"Why?"

"I'm a grandpa now," he said, his moustache twitching. "Grandpas are always supposed to have candy in their pockets."

Bella laughed. "You'll come back tomorrow?"

He nodded. "When does this whole vampire government shindig kick into gear, anyway?"

"The day after tomorrow. Carlisle said he wants to start at sunrise."

"Do you think it'd be all right if I stopped by then?" He shrugged, looking a little sheepish. "I'm kind of curious."

"Of course it's all right," Carlisle said from inside.

Bella nodded. "Yeah. That would be good."

"I'll see you tomorrow then." He leaned in and gave her another quick hug, then fixed Edward with a glare. "Don't you push her. She's got a lot on her mind and she doesn't need unnecessary pressure."

"Yes, sir." Edward grinned.

Charlie kissed Bella's forehead and then headed down the steps, casting an exasperated glance at the handful of vampires that had drifted into sight again. He shook his head, muttering something about respect and privacy, and then climbed into his car and drove away.

"Did you notice?" Edward asked as Bella watched the car head down the unpaved road. "How little attention you paid to your thirst that whole time?"

Bella spun to face him, her triumph showing in her wide grin. "I'm getting better!"

"I think you're right about Alexander. I think having him around must temper your instincts."

"Or maybe he just takes so much of my attention that there isn't any to spare?"

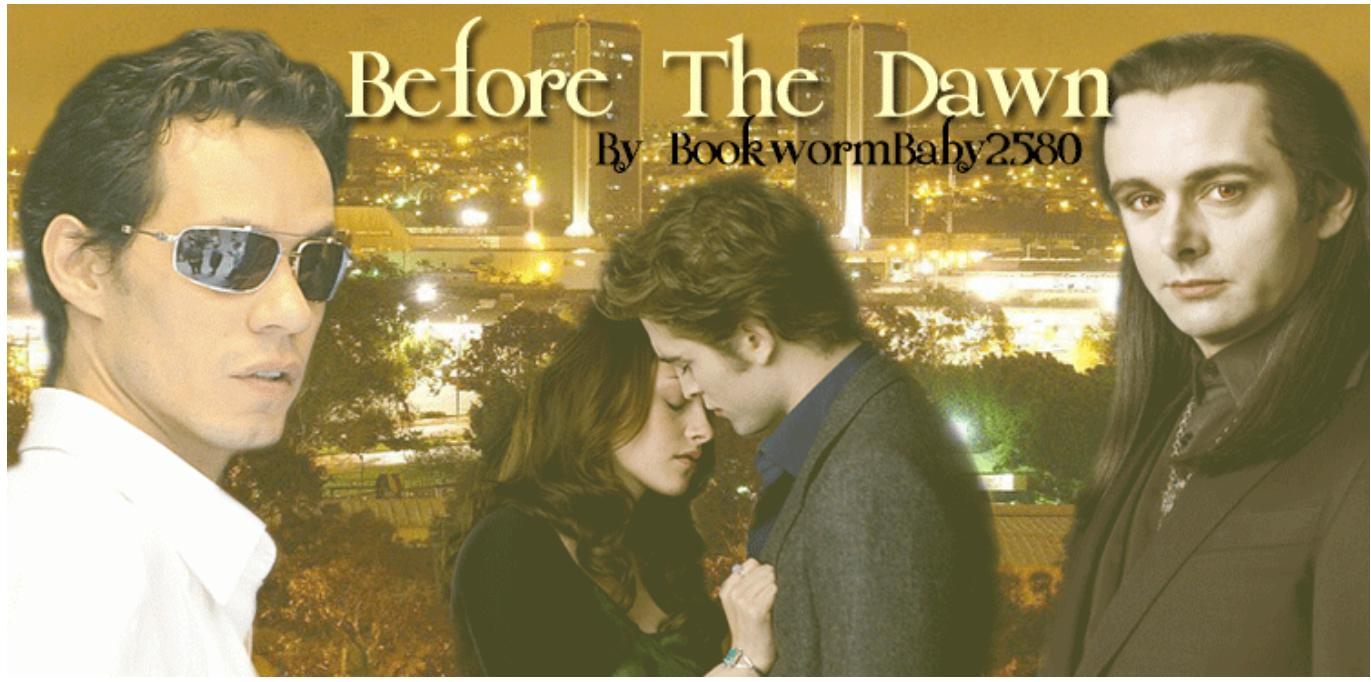
Edward raised a dubious eyebrow, and Bella understood what he meant. Being a vampire meant having a *lot* of attention to spare. But then, she was still funneling most of that to her son. She hadn't missed a word of the conversation happening inside the house, and had she heard so much as a threatening tone of voice, she'd have bolted to his side without taking the time to open the door.

She shrugged. "Whatever the reason, I like it."

"Come on." Edward dropped an arm around her shoulders and steered her toward the porch steps. "Jasper and Alice are almost home. We should help them load in the groceries."

"Good. I want to give Alexander something with dairy to balance the acidity of those jalapenos. God only knows what they'll do to his digestive tract."

Magnetic North



Joham arrived sometime before dawn of the following morning. Bella was sitting in a camp chair in front of the tent she was sharing with Edward, a blazing fire burning in the pit and a sleeping Alexander cradled in her arms. A murmur of sound and scent filled the air around them, as more than a hundred vampires moved about, gossiping, playing games, or simply wandering the woods behind the Cullen home. But one set of footsteps echoed in Bella's ears, and when the breeze carried the scent to her, her stomach clenched.

"He's here," she whispered to Edward.

Edward paused, then nodded. "He didn't bring his friends."

Bella considered leaving. Again. It seemed so much easier to run away from Joham than to face him. It made her feel like a coward, but was a coward really such an awful thing to be? Maybe she could hide in the attic like Carlisle's friend Alistair.

"Hey." Edward reached out and gripped her shoulder. "It's going to be fine. Listen to them."

As though she could help it. Bella had a feeling she would always be hyper-aware of anything happening near Joham. And right now, Carlisle and Esme were moving to intercept him.

"You made it, I see," Bella heard Carlisle say. She noted with petty satisfaction that he didn't sound at all welcoming. Joham, who hadn't heard the warm greetings everyone else had received, might not realize just how significant that was.

"I want to see my son," Joham barked at him.

"No." It was Esme's voice this time, low and firm.

"Excuse me?"

"No, you may not see Alexander."

Joham snarled loudly. "Do you think you can keep him from me?"

"Yes," Carlisle said, as unflappable as ever. "Come. We'll show you to your tent."

"How *dare* you?" Joham yelled, his voice rising. "Alexander is *my* son—"

"Alexander isn't *your* anything. You ceded control of your coven to me."

"If Alexander wants to see you, he can ask Bella," Esme added. "Otherwise, you'll need to leave them alone."

"You've got some nerve, ordering me around—"

"Watch your tone when you speak to my wife," Carlisle snapped. "You are tolerated here because you are a vampire and you have a stake in the future of our government, but don't imagine for a second that you're welcome. The way you treated Bella and the other girls—your own daughters, for god's sake—is appalling. I've never been so disgusted."

Bella squeezed Edward's hand, and felt the tightening of his own grip in return.

"You won't get a second chance," Esme told Joham. "If you harass Alexander or any of those girls, even once, you'll be dismissed."

There was silence from Joham.

"Good," Carlisle said. "Your tent is this way. Follow me please."

Bella was glad to hear that their footsteps were taking them to the far side of the makeshift campground. Avoiding Joham might not be so difficult after all.

"Are you still mad at Carlisle?" Edward asked her with a small smile.

"Yes." Her answer was a little sharper than she had intended it to be, so she softened it with a shrug. "But maybe not quite as much as I was a minute ago."

"He didn't want to invite Joham. There are a few people he'd like to be rid of, in fact. He just feels such a responsibility to be fair, despite his own feelings."

"I know. I get it. But don't expect me to be happy about it."

Edward grinned. "Fair enough." He was about to say something more, but he was cut off by a loud cry of pain and a heavy body hitting the ground a few yards away. They both looked over their shoulders to see Kate standing proudly over a moaning Garrett, electricity sparking at her fingertips.

"Take that, playboy," she said, turning haughtily away and shaking her long blonde hair behind her as she strode off.

Garrett pushed himself to his feet with some effort and, noticing Edward and Bella watching him, grinned at them. "I think she just restarted my heart."

Edward laughed quietly. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Garrett. Katie's not really into vampires."

"I wouldn't be either, if I all I had to choose from were *vegetarians*." Garrett winked at him and trotted after Kate, calling for her to wait.

"She might actually kill him," Edward mused. "Carlisle will be so disappointed."

Bella smiled and looked down at Alexander. He was sleeping peacefully, despite all the activity around them. She was grateful for that. If he had been a light sleeper, she doubted he'd get any rest for a long time. How long . . . it was hard to say. Would this gathering last days? Weeks? Longer? No one seemed to know, or even care very much. Carlisle was the only one with social responsibilities, and he seemed unconcerned about his ability to extend his vacation as long as he liked. She wondered how he'd managed to get that kind of preferential treatment. Sizeable donations to the hospital, maybe?

"You should put Alexander in the tent," Edward murmured.

She glanced up at him. "Why?"

"He was excited about camping. I think he'd like it if he got to sleep in the tent for a while."

She nodded and stood, moving to the tent. She unzipped the door and crawled inside, settling Alexander into the blankets they had brought out for him. He stirred, but settled quickly back into sleep.

He looked very young like this. Like a child who needed to be fed and rocked and held, and not a boy who protected his sisters against a monstrous father, or who struggled to understand the moral implications of drinking blood. Bella brushed the dark curls off of his forehead and kissed his cheek. She wished she could give him more of a childhood.

She felt a tug on the waistband of her jeans and looked back to see Edward leaning into the tent, pulling on her belt loop. He jerked his head, beckoning her after him, and she backed out of the tent and zipped the screen closed.

Edward pulled her to her feet and into his arms. "You know what I keep thinking about?" he murmured in her ear.

"What?"

"We have Charlie's permission."

Bella smiled and leaned closer. She ran her hands up and down his sides, waiting for him to take advantage of their new license.

But he didn't. For several long moments he stood with his arms wrapped around her, his head bent low, lips hovering near her ear, and did nothing.

Was he waiting for her? To . . . what? She peeked up at him to try to read his face, and he let out a sheepish laugh.

"Uh." He released her and ran a hand through his hair.

"What?"

"I . . . suddenly don't know what to do."

The perplexed look on his face made Bella giggle. "So you're only good for a few stolen kisses?"

His eyes widened at her teasing.

"Or are you bored with me? Now that the lure of forbidden fruit is gone?"

"No! Bella, I—that's not it—"

She didn't leave him stuttering for long. She bent down and plucked a pinecone from the ground, lobbing it lightly at his chest. "Tag. You're it."

She took off running before Edward could collect himself, keeping one eye on the tent where Alexander slept but still darting between trees and dodging around other tents.

Edward was after her in an instant. He dove for her, but she jumped out of his reach, using a high tree limb to spin herself around and head back the way she had come—a part of her mind always focused on staying near her son. But Edward anticipated her move and sprang for her again, catching her ankle just before she could twist away from him. They hit the ground hard, both landing on their hands and knees, laughing as they struggled. Bella tried to wriggle away, but Edward had her ankle in an iron grip. He jerked back, dragging her through the bracken, and Bella just had time to spare a rueful sigh for yet another ruined blouse before Edward was crawling over her and pinning her to the ground.

"That was a very serious accusation," he growled in her ear.

She arched beneath him, her backside pushing back against his hips, and she was rewarded with Edward's very intriguing reaction.

His response was abrupt. He pushed off of the ground on either side of her in an attempt to back away, but Bella knocked his hands out from under him and grinned when he tumbled down on top of her again.

She ground back against him, her body instinctively searching for that intriguing sensation again. "Tell me more about this very serious accusation."

"I don't take kindly to having my devotion challenged," he murmured, nipping lightly at the skin at the crook of her neck.

"I suppose I can understand that. But I'm not sure why you had to take it out on my shirt."

His lips stilled against her neck. "Your shirt?"

"It's all torn."

"Is it? I may have to investigate this little problem." He pushed his hands beneath her, seeking out the somewhat exaggerated snags in the fabric. He took his time, exploring every inch of the fabric—and the contours of the flesh beneath it.

"You're right," he murmured. "Your shirt is a little worse for the wear. Pants too, I would imagine. We should get you out of them."

"Is that how it works? Maybe I should check your clothes for tears, too." She wriggled against him and he groaned.

"I don't know whether to tell you to stop that or to tell you to do it again."

"If you let me up, you might see what else I can do."

Edward pushed off of her just long enough to slide a hand beneath her and flip her over. Her legs fell open and cradled him when he settled on top of her again—and suddenly that intriguing sensation was being pressed just *there*, and Bella let out a whimper.

Someone whistled and Bella's eyes snapped open. She glanced around, noticing for the first time how much attention their play had garnered.

Edward smirked. "You can all go about your business," he called out. "I've got this."

There were chuckles, but Bella noticed that no one turned away. Which didn't seem to bother Edward. He leaned in and kissed her deeply, his hips shifting ever so slightly. His hands sought hers, fingers twining as he brought them above her head and pressed them into the forest floor.

It was fantastic. It was the most thrilling moment Bella could remember, and it was suddenly interrupted by the only thing that could possibly have mattered more. Alexander yelled, his angry voice mingling with the sound of ripping fabric, and Bella felt Edward stiffen above her. He suddenly went limp, falling bonelessly on top of her.

"No!" Alexander shouted, his little body colliding with Edward and attempting to shove him off of her. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

"Alexander?" Bella asked, startled. The little boy's fists were beating against Edward's unresponsive body.

"I know what he's doing!" Alexander cried, his fists still pounding ineffectually against Edward. "He can't! I won't let him! He can't do that to my mother!"

Bella shook off her surprise and pushed Edward off of her. He made no protest, just rolled senselessly onto the ground beside her. Bella's concern was torn, but her son's needs came first, even over those of the man she was growing more and more attached to. She stood and swept Alexander up in her arms, cradling him against her chest.

"Honey, what's wrong?" she cooed, smoothing his curls back from his face. "I thought you were asleep."

"I waked *up!* And Edward was being bad!"

"Bad? No, sweetie, he wasn't."

"Yes-huh, I *saw* him!" Edward started to stir and Alexander scowled fiercely. "I saw him, and he's not allowed to do that to *my mother!*"

Edward groaned and sat up, rubbing his forehead. "That's so weird," he mumbled.

"I hate you!" Alexander yelled. "You're a bad man!"

"Alexander," Bella began, but the rest of her admonishment was interrupted by Carlisle, who suddenly appeared at Edward's side and looked him over with concern.

"Are you all right?" he asked. "Can you stand?"

"No! He's bad, Carwile!"

Carlisle looked up at Bella, his brow furrowed. "What happened?"

"Um." She suddenly felt awkward about what she had just been doing.

"We were . . . kind of making out," Edward said.

Carlisle still looked confused, but satisfied that Edward was unharmed, he stood and reached for Alexander. "May I?" he asked Bella, and at her nod he took Alexander from her. He moved to a chair in front of the torn door of the tent and settled the little boy onto his lap.

"Can you tell me what happened?"

"Edward pushed my mother on the ground and laid on top of her."

"And that upset you?"

"It's *bad*," he insisted, pointing an accusatory finger at Edward. "He was being mean to her, just like Father."

"I see." Carlisle nodded thoughtfully. "So you think Edward was hurting your mother?"

"He was. I know. Father and Russell and David did that, and it made my sisters cry."

Carlisle nodded slowly and sat back in his chair. "I understand why you're concerned. I certainly wouldn't want to see your mother hurt that way again. But I have something I want you to consider."

Alexander cocked his head.

"Most actions aren't inherently wrong or right."

"What's 'inherently'?"

"It means by their nature. Very few actions are naturally bad or naturally good. Their virtue depends on the intention behind them and on their reception."

Alexander's eyebrows pulled together, and his thumb found its way to his mouth.

"Let's consider an example," Carlisle said. "Do you remember when your mother threw you across the river and Edward caught you?"

He nodded.

Bella moved to Edward's side and wrapped an arm around his waist. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

He nodded. "It doesn't hurt. It's just weird."

"You're a strong boy," Carlisle was saying to Alexander, "so there was little danger of you getting hurt. And you enjoyed it, didn't you?"

"Yes," he said around his thumb.

"But what if you didn't want them to throw you? What if you were afraid of water or of being thrown in the air?"

He popped his thumb out of his mouth. "Why would I be afraid?"

Bella couldn't help but smile at his perplexed question.

"Some people are," Carlisle said. "If you were, and your mother threw you anyway, that would be cruel, wouldn't it?"

He nodded.

"So throwing you across the river isn't right or wrong. It's how you feel about it that makes it right or wrong. Or how your mother intends to make you feel. Do you understand?"

He nodded again, his lips puckering as he considered it.

"Physical intimacy—what you saw your mother and Edward doing—is an especially sensitive kind of act, and that makes intention very important. You know I love my wife very much, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Sometimes when we both feel like it, we go to our bedroom and spend some time being intimate together. And because it's something we both want, it's a beautiful and precious experience."

"Doesn't it hurt her, though?"

"I'm very careful with Esme, and she's very careful with me. We don't do anything to hurt each other."

Alexander looked at Bella, then back at Carlisle. "Jennifer said it hurts."

"Her experience was quite different," Carlisle said with a grimace. "She didn't want to be intimate with your father's friends, but they disregarded her feelings. They weren't concerned about taking care of her. Intimacy, because it is so sensitive, can be very traumatic when it's forced on someone."

"What's 'traumatic'?"

"Trauma is physical or emotional pain that has effects that linger beyond the source of the pain. The cruelty that has been inflicted on your mother and sisters could potentially make them unhappy for a very long time."

"I know," he said, his voice uncertain. "That's why Edward shouldn't do it."

"Remember, though," Carlisle said, "that intimacy can be a good thing. Do you think your mother might have liked being with Edward that way?"

Alexander met Bella's anxious gaze. "I don't know."

"Why don't we ask her?"

Carlisle turned his gaze on Bella, and she tucked herself closer to Edward.

"I wanted to be with Edward," she told Alexander. "He's very important to me."

"You won't cry?" Alexander asked.

"No, I won't cry."

"Will you get another baby?"

Bella smiled and shook her head. "I can't have any more babies. You're my only one."

"I'm not a baby anymore. I'm a young man." He reached for Bella and she lifted him into her arms.

"That's right, you are." She took a deep breath, trying to channel Carlisle's cool, logical demeanor. "And young men take responsibility for their actions, right?"

He nodded.

"I think maybe you should apologize to Edward for—" she stopped. Was there a name for what Alexander had done? "For stopping him."

"But I was trying to help."

"It was just a misunderstanding. But when we have misunderstandings we have to do our best to correct them."

"*I'm* sorry," Edward said, placing his hand on Bella's shoulder. "I didn't think about how much it would upset you to see your mother and me like that. And I think it was very brave of you to protect her the way you did."

Alexander didn't seem to know how to respond. He looked at Bella and she nodded toward Edward.

"You should say you're sorry too."

"I'm sorry I made you go to sleep," he said to Edward.

Edward grinned ruefully. "You know, it wasn't so bad. It's been decades since I've slept." He met Alexander's tentative smile and ruffled his hair. "One of these days I'll have you do that on purpose. I want to see if I can dream."

"That *would* be interesting," Carlisle said, sitting forward. His eyes were alight with curiosity, and Bella had no doubt that Edward would have a partner in his experimentation.

"I wonder if there are cycles," Edward said. "And how you would measure them if—" He broke off, stiffened, and for a moment he stared blankly over Carlisle's shoulder. Then he leaned down and whispered in Carlisle's ear.

Carlisle's eyes narrowed. "Bella, take Alexander into the house, please. Aro!" he rose and started jogging into the trees as he called out, and a moment later Aro approached, his expression wary.

"We have some new guests who will be arriving shortly. Will you come with us to greet them?"

"Go on," Edward murmured, nudging Bella toward the house. "They're Volturi. We don't want them to see Alexander before we can talk to them."

That was all the explanation she needed. She tucked her son close to her chest and ran for the house.

"What's 'Volturi'?" Alexander asked her.

"They're . . . they're like the police for vampires. Carlisle's friend Aro used to be their leader."

"Why did he stop?"

They reached the house and Bella hurried up the stairs. She wasn't sure how much risk there was, but she wasn't going to chance anyone glimpsing Alexander through the full-length windows.

"Someone attacked them," Bella said as she went. "A lot of them died, but I guess there were a few survivors."

Jasper and Alice were in the library when Bella reached it, surrounded by large, complicated-looking machines. A box and packing material lay scattered around them, and they were assembling what looked like a padded table.

"What are you doing?" Alexander asked them.

"Building an exam table," Alice said. She glanced up at Bella and blinked in surprise. "You ruined *another* shirt?"

Bella gave her an apologetic shrug.

"Oh well. We'll just have to do some more shopping. What a tragedy!" She giggled, and Bella smiled back.

"Mother, I want to look at the books," Alexander said, trying to wriggle free from Bella's grasp.

She happily set him down between the stacks where the shelves of books would hide him from anyone looking in. "Find something you like and I'll read it to you," she told him.

"Okay."

Alice smiled fondly at him. "He's so sweet, Bella. And you'll just *die* when you see the clothes I ordered for him. I might have cleaned out a boutique or two."

Bella grinned and moved closer to watch their work. "Does Carlisle ever set limits on how much you can spend on clothes?"

Jasper snorted. "Alice brings in a hell of a lot more money than Carlisle does."

"You do?" Bella asked Alice. "I didn't know you had a job."

"I don't. I invest. I take that small-town doctor salary and buy shares in companies that are about to bring in major returns. And I buy a few losers, too, to keep the SEC off our backs."

"Since she manages the portfolio," Jasper said, tightening a screw, "she gets to do the budget. And it just so happens that she reserves a rather large portion of the returns for wardrobe replacement."

Alice sighed. "Anyway, I *did*. That may not last much longer."

"Why not?" Bella asked.

"I can't *see* anything." She tossed down a screwdriver in frustration. "I got some of it back when we went out with Peter and Charlotte, but now everything's blank again. I just don't get it."

"Interference," Jasper said, and Bella thought it sounded like he had said it before. "There are a lot of vampires here. Someone's talent is counteracting yours."

"Do you really think so?"

"I do." He stood and moved around the half-built table to where Alice sat, taking her hands and pulling her to her feet. "Your visions will come back. But until things settle down again, just enjoy the break. We ask too much of you, expecting you to know about everything that's going to happen. Just think of this as a long overdue vacation."

Alice melted against Jasper, and Bella thought it seemed like a very good moment to check on Alexander. He was halfway down the row of shelves, tugging at a book that was nearly as big as he was.

"Did you find something?" she asked him.

"Yes." He gave the book another tug and it tumbled to the floor in front of him. "I want this one."

Bella settled down next to him and read the title of the book. "*Biological Mechanisms of the Human Brain*." She blinked and looked back at Alexander. "This is the one you want to read?"

"Yes, please." He climbed onto her lap, settling himself into the crook of her arm, and she shrugged. If he got bored, she had no doubt he'd let her know. She opened the book and started reading the dense scientific prose.

Alexander was more engaged than she expected him to be. He interrupted occasionally to ask about words he didn't know, he carefully examined the diagrams, and he asked related questions that Bella didn't know the answers to.

"I'm not sure," she had to keep telling him. "If the book doesn't explain it, maybe we can ask Carlisle."

It wasn't long before Carlisle appeared, leading Edward, Aro, and two strangers in his wake. Alice and Jasper had finished building the table by that time, and were arranging the new equipment around it.

"Ah, here they are," Carlisle said, smiling down at Bella and Alexander.

Alexander looked up at him. "Carwile, we have a lot of questions about this book."

"What's that you're reading?" one of the strangers asked, squatting down a few feet away from them.

Bella bristled. She didn't like that he was blocking the aisle, and she had to remind herself that the way behind her was still clear, and that she could simply go up and over the shelves if she needed to. There was nothing to worry about. Anyway, Carlisle and Edward were here, and they wouldn't allow this red-eyed stranger to hurt her son. Everything was fine. She just had to keep telling herself that everything was fine.

Alexander didn't have the same qualms. He had flipped the book closed so the man could see the cover.

"Neurobiology? At your age? You *are* a bright little fellow, aren't you?"

"Yep," he said, but then glanced up at Bella and amended, "I mean, thank you."

The stranger chuckled and rose, moving back to the group again. "You're right, Carlisle, he's a remarkable boy. I can see why the others might be anxious, though. You couldn't pass him off as a human savant."

"No, I agree. He'll require careful and constant supervision." Carlisle smiled down at them. "Bella, Alexander, I'd like you to meet some old friends of mine. This is Demetri," the man who had just spoken nodded his head, "and this is Alec."

Alec was surprisingly young for a vampire. He could have been a pre-teen, maybe slightly older, and he stood next to Aro looking overwhelmingly bored. He barely glanced at them when he was introduced, and he didn't bother looking at Jasper or Alice at all.

Demetri, however, was interested enough for the both of them. "You'll be giving the other girls exams in here, then?" he asked Carlisle.

"Yes. Jasper and Alice were kind enough to get the room ready. It's late now, but as soon as the girls wake up I'll see what I can learn about the development of the fetuses."

"Carlisle!" A voice called from one of the bedrooms down the hall. There were soft moans and a rustling of blankets, and a few moments later Jennifer appeared in the doorway of the library, half-carrying Maysun.

"Do it now," Maysun said, looking desperate and disturbingly frail. "I want this thing out of me."

Which was the last thing Bella wanted Alexander to be present for. "Time to go," she whispered, sweeping him up in her arms as she stood.

"Why?

"Maysun needs privacy," she said, already heading for the stairs.

"But my book. Mother! My book!" He squirmed in her arms, reaching back over her shoulder for the volume she had left on the floor in her haste to get out of there. But Jennifer was helping Maysun onto the table and Bella wanted to be far away from that room before they started talking about what Maysun wanted to do.

"Catch," Demetri said from behind her. She turned long enough to allow him to toss her the massive book, then darted down the stairs and out of the house.

It wasn't fast enough, though. Alexander's endless curiosity was already piqued.

"Why does Maysun need privacy?" he asked.

"Um . . . Carlisle wants to do an ultrasound."

"What's 'ultrasound'?"

"It helps you see a fetus before it's born."

"They're going to look at Maysun's baby?"

Bella nodded.

"Why?"

That was precisely the question she didn't want to answer. She didn't have Carlisle's finesse, and even if she did, she wasn't sure it would be enough for this discussion. But at the same time, she didn't want to lie to Alexander or dismiss his questions. He was more than a baby in so many ways, and yet it was only a handful of weeks since . . .

Since Bella would have made the same choice that Maysun was making now.

She hesitated while she ran, but Alexander was perceptive, and her avoidance made him all the more curious. "Is Maysun sick?"

Bella sighed as she ducked into her tent and settled Alexander down in his blankets. "Yes, sweetie, she's sick. Having a vampire baby is . . . it's very hard. It makes you hurt all over."

"Were you sick when I was in your tummy?"

"Yes. I almost died."

"But I made you better." He pulled the book into his lap. "Maysun's baby will make her better too. Right, mother?"

"Well . . . I don't know. Maysun's not human. She's half vampire, like you. Do you know what would happen if a vampire bit you?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know either. Maybe it wouldn't work the same. And maybe her baby won't have venom, like Maysun and Jennifer. Then a bite wouldn't do anything at all."

"Someone else could bite her, though."

"Maybe. But it's a big risk, and . . ." She took a fortifying breath. "Maysun doesn't really want to have a baby."

"I know. She told Father, but he said she had to."

"Well . . . your father can't force her to do it anymore."

"But she already has a baby in her tummy."

"Yes. And she wants Carlisle to take it out."

Alexander had opened the book and was looking at the pages, but now he looked up at her, his face screwed up in concentration. "Father says if a baby comes out too early, it will die."

Bella nodded. "That's right."

"Does Maysun want her baby to die?" he asked, still looking confused.

She scraped her teeth over her lip, searching for the right words. "It's a really hard choice for someone to make. Maysun didn't want to have a baby, but your father and his friends forced her to get pregnant anyway. And now she has to decide whether she wants to stop the fetus inside her from growing into a baby."

"Oh." He fell silent for a moment, his fingers tracing a diagram of a cross-sectioned amygdala on the page of his book. "You didn't want to have a baby either, did you, Mother?"

Bella swallowed against the tightening in her throat. "No."

"Did you want to stop me from growing?"

"I . . . no. I wasn't given the choice, so I guess I never really thought about it." It was a bald-faced lie, but even honesty had its limits. Bella wasn't going to tell her son that she once wished him dead with every miserable, shallow breath she took.

He looked up at her, his deep brown eyes imploring. "But you want me now, right?"

She nodded and wrapped an arm around his little shoulders, leaning down to kiss the top of his head. "I want you more than anything else in the world. I can't live without you."

"Maybe Maysun will want her baby too, after it gets born."

She ran her fingers through his glossy curls. "It doesn't always go like that."

"Why?"

"Emotions are complicated things, sweetie. They don't always work the way you want them to."

"But why doesn't she try? She could have the baby and try to want it."

"Yes, but what if she doesn't? Then what? There would be a baby stuck with a mother who didn't love it. Would you want to be with a mother who didn't love you?"

"Father would take it."

Bella shuddered. "That might be even worse. You remember how he treated Jennifer and Maysun? Do you think he's the kind of person who should be raising children?"

"I don't know." He frowned down at his book. "I have to think about things." He pushed the book off of his lap and wrapped himself up in his blankets, his thumb drifting to his mouth again.

"Okay, sweetie. I'm going to go sit outside by the fire. If you have any more questions, you can ask me."

She was letting herself out through the torn screen door when Alexander called after her.

"Mother?"

"Yes, sweetie."

"You won't leave me again, right?"

She smiled sadly. "No, baby, never again."

"What if you don't want me anymore?"

She crawled back into the tent and scooted close to him. "I'm always, always, always going to want you."

"Do you promise?"

"I promise. Do you want me to stay with you until you fall asleep?"

He nodded.

Bella stretched out next to him and snuggled him against her chest. She hummed softly to him, trying to be calm and soothing on the outside, while inside her head was filled with turmoil. What Joham had done was awful, but this? This belonged to her. Alexander obviously worried about being abandoned, and that was entirely Bella's fault. She made a promise to herself then that she would fix it, no matter what it took. If she had to be the last thing he saw when he fell asleep at night and the first thing he saw when he woke up in the morning, she would be. If she had to stay close to him every minute of every day, so that he could look up at any moment and reassure himself that she was near, she would do it.

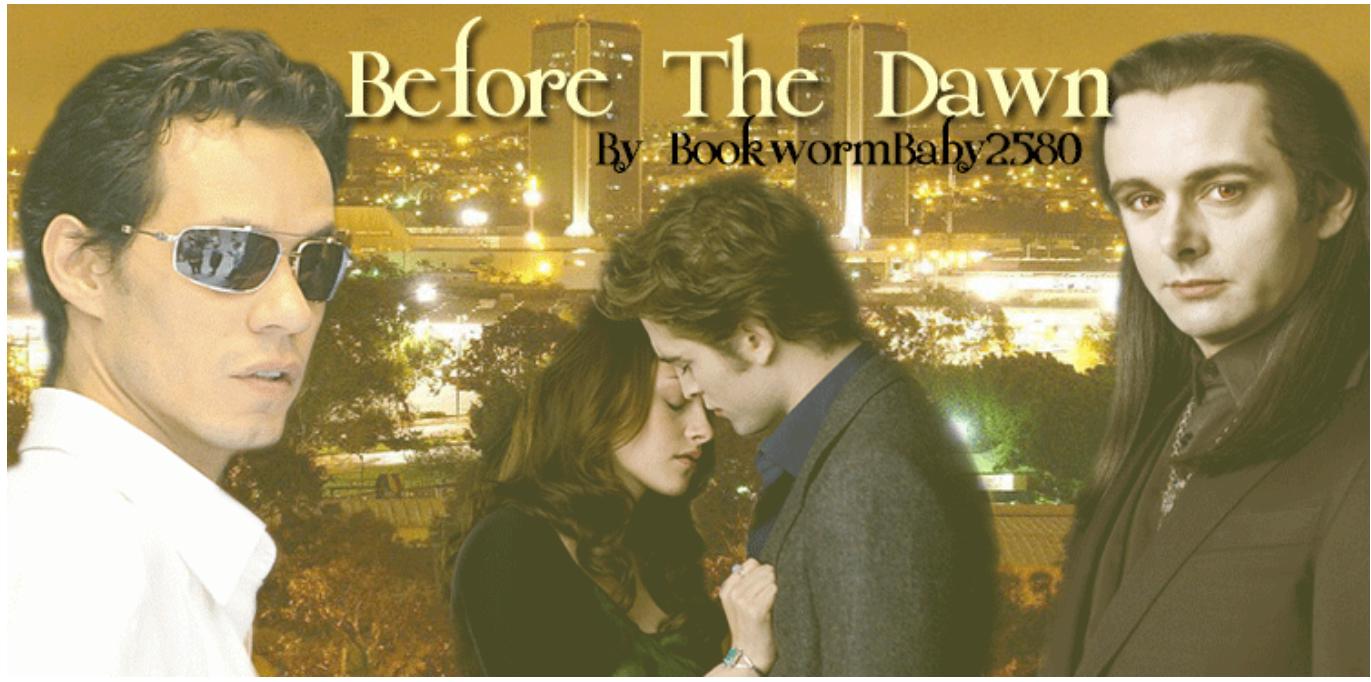
Which had the potential to complicate things with Edward. How would he handle it if he was never allowed a moment alone with her? How long would he be willing to wait for her? When Charlie had told him that a baby changed things, Edward had denied it. But was that really true? All of the other couples in his family could put their mates first, but Bella couldn't do that. She couldn't make Edward her first priority because that position was spoken for. He would always come second, and it wasn't fair to him.

Bella remembered what it was like, lying on her cot in Mexico, waiting to die. She remembered how badly she had wanted to be loved, held, cherished like a heroine in one of her novels. That was within her reach now, but she was still separated from it by the responsibilities of motherhood. Charlie was right after all. Having Alexander made everything much more complicated.

She rubbed a hand over her son's small back, thrilling over the warmth of his body and his tiny, fluttering heartbeat. "I love you the most," she whispered to him, just loudly enough that he could hear her if he was still awake. "I always will."

She had to hope that Edward would understand.

Blood Work



The sun was rising when Edward crept into the tent and settled down beside Bella. A chemical smell lingered on his skin, and Bella wrinkled her nose at it.

"How did it go?" she whispered to him.

"Not well."

She adjusted the blankets around Alexander and rolled over to face Edward. "What happened?"

"The ultrasound can't penetrate the placenta. Carlisle tried every angle, but we just couldn't see anything. Except . . ."

"What?"

"It looks like the fetus isn't relying solely on the umbilical cord for sustenance. Which I guess makes sense. It couldn't get blood from a human mother's stomach if it did."

Bella frowned. "I don't understand. How does it get blood?"

"There are . . . connections. Of some kind. We can't get a good look at them, but the uterus seems to be attaching itself to the other organs and to the spinal cord."

"What does that mean?"

Edward shrugged. "I wish we knew. Carlisle is worried that severing those connections will damage the organs, though. Enough that he's advised the girls against terminating their pregnancies."

Bella winced. They couldn't have been happy about that. "How did Maysun take it?"

"She's furious. She wanted him to do it anyway, but he asked her to think it over for a day or two."

"What about Amelia?"

"I don't think she cares whether she has the baby or not. She just doesn't want to die."

"She's got to be close. Do you know how far along she is?"

"It's hard to tell without an ultrasound, but Carlisle's keeping a close eye on her."

Bella sighed and sidled closer to him. "I had to explain abortion to Alexander last night."

He let out a low whistle.

"It was awful. He's too young for this."

"I think *I'm* too young for this."

Bella buried her face in his chest and breathed in his scent. "Can we just stay here in this tent? Forever, maybe? So we don't have to deal with all the hard stuff?"

His chest shook with quiet laughter. "Sure, baby."

Silence closed over them, and Edward ran the back of one finger down her cheek. Bella let out a soft moan and turned her face into his touch.

"I'm sorry about last night," she whispered.

"Yeah. I guess it wasn't the smartest thing to start making out in front of Alexander."

His name must have woken him, because the little boy stirred behind Bella. He yawned and climbed over her, wriggling himself between her and Edward.

"I'm hungry, mother," he mumbled, and then drifted off to sleep again.

Bella smiled down at him. "We should take him hunting later. He probably ought to have some blood to balance out that bottle of jalapenos he ate."

"No sign of indigestion," Edward said with a grin. "Kid's got an iron stomach."

Bella shot him a reproachful look.

"What? He liked them. And we should take advantage of the fact that he likes human food, if it means he'll be less anxious about restrictions on blood."

Bella smiled. Which probably made him think he'd won some kind of argument, but that wasn't it at all. She just liked that he'd said "we." Like he was in it with her. Like he didn't think it was such a bad thing if Alexander was her first priority. Like he might be willing to make Alexander his first priority, too.

"I'm not so sure about him hunting wild animals," she said. "Maybe I should bring something back for him."

"Catching them is half the fun."

"Sure, when they can't eat you. He's just a baby, Edward."

He shot her a skeptical look.

"Let's start small, at least. With rabbits. If he does okay, we'll move on to some larger herbivores."

"Good call. I wonder if he'd like the rabbit meat . . ."

Bella grimaced. "That's a good idea. I just . . . wish I didn't have to smell it cooking."

Edward grinned and leaned closer to her over Alexander's head. "A necessary evil." He gave her a quick peck and then pushed himself to his knees. "I'm going to go help Alice set up a few more tents. Last day before we get this meeting started. I'm betting we get a lot of new people today."

"Okay. I'm going to stay with Alexander until he wakes up."

"Let me know when you're ready to hunt," Edward said, crawling through the torn screen door. "I definitely want to come with you."

Edward was right. Minutes after Bella had finished getting Alexander bathed and dressed for the day, a group of four vampires made their way to the house. Bella peered at them from across the river as Carlisle moved to intercept them, curious about the similarities in their features.

"That's Luca's coven," Edward told her, since they were a little too far away from the action to hear Carlisle's introduction. "They're probably the last people who would violate the rules against harming humans."

"Why is that?"

"They've been working with them for hundreds of years. Luca is the head of a very powerful family. He looks out for their interests, and occasionally he chooses one of his descendants to turn."

Carlisle was pressing Luca's hand, speaking earnestly, and Bella shot Edward a questioning glance.

"He's offering his condolences. Two of Luca's family were members of the Volturi. One was Aro's personal bodyguard, in fact."

"Mother, come on," Alexander said, tugging at her leg. "You said we were going hunting."

"You're right, we're taking forever." Edward crouched in front of Alexander. "Shall we run?"

"Yes!" he cried.

Edward swung him up into the air and placed him on his shoulders.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"Watch his neck," Bella told him.

Edward winked at her. "I got this." He started them on their way jogging so slowly that Bella wondered what he was doing. "How's that?" he asked Alexander.

"Faster!"

"Are you sure?"

"Faster!"

Edward increased his pace a little. "How about now?"

"Faster!"

They continued like that, slowly building up speed, and Bella realized that Edward was keeping Alexander entertained while also being careful not to injure him.

He really couldn't be more perfect.

As it turned out, rabbits were a little bit too fast for Alexander. He could scare them out of their warrens, and he could even keep up with their speed, but his reflexes weren't quite developed enough to follow their quick direction changes. Edward and Bella helped, heading them off and scaring them back toward Alexander, but in the end, Edward had to catch one and flip it into the air so Alexander could catch it. He barely managed to hang onto the squirming animal, hugging it against his body while he sank his teeth into its fur.

He loved every second of it. He didn't want to stop, even after he'd had his fill, which prompted a conversation with Edward about wastefulness and respecting their resources.

The campground was nearly deserted when they returned. Edward and Bella wandered past empty tents, swinging Alexander between them, and Bella shot Edward a questioning glance.

"They're all watching Carlisle and Peter."

She froze. "What's he doing?"

"It's not bad. Jasper's worried enough about his excessive paranoia that he asked Carlisle to look him over."

"What, like a medical exam?"

Edward shrugged.

"Do vampires get sick?"

"Not in the same way that humans do, but you never know. Something's changed in Peter, and they're trying to figure out why."

Peter's exam was taking place in the amphitheater. Most of it was filled with curious spectators, excepting several yards to either side of Carlisle, Peter, Charlotte, and Jasper. Carlisle was shining a light first in Peter's pupils, and then Charlotte's. He tested their reflexes, both by tapping sensitive points and by throwing pebbles at them. After a handful of tests, he sat back.

"Hm. Well, there are differences between the two of you. Peter's reflexes are slightly quicker, his breathing is faster, his body temperature is higher, but he responds to light more slowly."

"What does that mean?" Charlotte asked.

"I don't know. I don't even know if there's a standard deviation. Jasper, come here."

Carlisle ran through all his tests again and frowned. "Better light sensitivity than Peter or Charlotte. Slower breathing. Reflexes just a touch slower."

Jasper snorted. "Slower?"

"It's the animal blood," Charlotte shot back with a grin.

Carlisle frowned thoughtfully.

Edward extracted his hand from Alexander's grip and jogged toward Carlisle, still carrying a pair of rabbits that he intended to cook up for Alexander's dinner. "Do me."

Carlisle ran his tests and scratched his head. "Closer to Jasper's numbers. Bella?" He looked up to where she was standing at the rim of the amphitheater. "May I test you?"

She glanced around at the crowd, but decided the process wasn't really all that invasive. She weaved her way through the audience to where Edward was sitting and passed Alexander to him before taking a seat beside him.

Carlisle ran through his list of tests and then stood and clasped his hands behind his back.

"That looked more like Peter," Edward said.

He nodded. "So Bella and Peter could fall in a similar place on a perfectly normal scale, or something could be driving Peter to behave like a newborn. I need data . . ."

"Volunteers?" Edward asked the group.

Benjamin shrugged and stood. "Why not?"

More followed his example, most of them looking mildly curious, as though this were a pleasant enough diversion. After all, Bella thought, what else did they have to do? Emmett was doing his best to keep everyone entertained with games, but there had already been several long days of that. Vampire medical exams were new and interesting.

"Edward, make me a graph," Carlisle said as he started performing his tests on the volunteers.

Edward jumped up and ran for the house, returning a moment later without the rabbits, but with a clipboard and a stack of paper. He hastily drew a handful of perfect graphs, then started filling in numbers.

It quickly became apparent that Peter and Bella were outliers. Most of the vampires fell in the same cluster for reflex speed, light sensitivity, breathing, and body temperature, but Bella and Peter were separated. And they weren't the only ones. Six more vampires showed stats like theirs, out of sixty-seven that volunteered for testing. Ulka, Pythia's companion, was among the six.

Alexander, meanwhile, kept himself entertained by building a tiny city in the dirt. Benjamin was helping him, drawing groundwater up to dampen the soil and make it more moldable.

When he was finished, Carlisle took the graph from Edward and stared at it for a long moment.

Edward started laughing, and Carlisle met his gaze with raised eyebrows.

"Yeah, but they're *human*."

Carlisle shrugged.

"Okay," Edward said. "Okay. You're going to sound like a lunatic, but whatever."

"What are you thinking?" Charlotte asked.

"Look at this." He showed her the clipboard. "My family are on the slow end of the reflex scale—excepting Bella, of course. And so are Tanya's family."

"Oh. Well, maybe you're a little rusty. You live pretty quiet lives."

"Maybe, although I would argue that the way we hunt actually requires better reflexes. Animals are faster than humans."

"But not faster than vampires," she countered. "How often are your territories challenged?"

"Fair enough. Maybe we're too sedentary. But maybe you were right. Maybe it does have something to do with the animal blood."

"Peter," Jasper said, "when we had that little brawl the last time you came through, did you let me win?"

Peter snorted. "Why the hell would I do that?"

"If your reflexes are supposed to be so much faster than mine, why couldn't you beat me?"

"Maybe you're stronger," Ulka said. She had suddenly become a lot more interested when she realized she was being lumped in with Peter and Bella.

Charlotte shook her head. "Anyone who survived the Southern Wars knows better than to rely on strength."

Carlisle and Edward exchanged a glance, and Edward jumped up again. "Give me half an hour."

"What's he doing?" Bella asked, watching him run back to the house.

"He's making up some IQ tests. Anyone who would like to continue this experiment, please be available in thirty minutes."

"IQ tests?" Peter asked. "You're going to ask us trivia questions?"

"No, not trivia. Questions that need to be worked out. Math and logic problems."

"You really think any of us will get them wrong?"

"No, I'm sure they'll be easy enough. What I'm interested in is time. I want to know how well our brains are performing."

"You think that might be the difference?" Jasper asked.

"It's a hypothesis worth testing."

"I don't understand," Charlotte said.

Carlisle sat down beside her. "Do you remember what it was like to be a newborn? All frenetic energy?"

"Sure."

"How good was your focus?"

Charlotte smiled ruefully.

"Bella," Carlisle said, "tell me what you think. Do your physical reactions ever get in the way of your ability to think?"

Bella grimaced. "There's a scar on your hand that ought to answer that question for you. And some major repairs that we've had to do to your house . . ."

He grinned at her.

"So you think Peter's problem is that he's reverting to a newborn state?" Charlotte asked.

"Not reverting, no, but something has got him in a state of hyper-excitation."

"Any idea what?"

Alexander crawled into Bella's lap, listening intently now. Bella wasn't sure why he was so interested, but he obviously found the conversation more compelling than his sand sculpture.

"Maybe," Carlisle said to Charlotte. "When you mentioned the animal blood, it reminded me of a surprising study I came across recently."

Alexander sucked his thumb into his mouth, still staring fixedly at Carlisle.

"Human children, expelled from their schools for violent behavior, were sent to a school where they were fed foods with high nutritional value and no preservatives, and were denied highly processed foods with excessive amounts of sugar. Their behavior and their grades improved dramatically."

"Because their diet changed?"

He nodded. "And that, in turn, made me think of a conversation I had recently about whether our instincts really drive us to make the healthiest choices."

"What do you mean?"

"Bella?" Carlisle said.

She tore her eyes away from her son and looked at Carlisle. "Of this crowd, you're the one who has most recently been a human child. Can I borrow your opinions for a moment?"

"Uh . . . sure."

"Which is a better food for the health and performance of the human body? Broccoli or jelly beans?"

She laughed. "Broccoli, definitely."

"And which, as a young child, would you have chosen to eat? Assuming your parents weren't being consulted."

"Jelly beans."

"You're sure?"

She grinned. "Absolutely sure."

Carlisle turned back to Charlotte. "We call young vampires newborns for a reason. They're like children in many ways. A responsible human parent would never allow a child to make dietary choices based on taste alone, but that is exactly what vampires do."

There was a brief silence, broken after a moment by,

"Have you completely lost your mind?"

Garrett dropped from a nearby tree and strode over to them, plopping down on the step above Carlisle. "You cannot possibly be telling her that you think human blood is causing her mate's paranoia."

"Why not?"

"We *all* drink human blood. Do you think we're all paranoid?"

"Paranoid, no. Territorial, yes. Quick-tempered, violent, and lacking in empathy, yes. It's generally considered impossible for vampires to live in large groups, and yet I drink animal blood and here I am, living comfortably with eight vampires in one house."

"With slow reflexes," he shot back.

"Maybe so. But we're not really so far removed from our human origins. What if we discovered that drinking animal blood gave you better mental acuity?"

"I don't care if it makes you fly, I'm not touching it. That stuff is disgusting."

"Bella," Carlisle said again.

She smiled. "Hm?"

"As a human, was there a vegetable you disliked."

"Onions. I couldn't stand them."

"Still better for you than jelly beans, right?"

"Definitely."

"Is drinking animal blood worse than eating onions?"

She considered that for a moment. "No. Maybe not a lot better, but not worse."

Carlisle spread his hands and turn back to Garrett. "The vampire race makes childish dietary decisions. Responsible humans eat their vegetables because they know it's good for them, but vampires? We only want what tastes good."

"Except for you, you smug bastard." Garrett was grinning, and Carlisle smiled back.

"Let's just see what the test results say. This is all still entirely hypothetical."

Edward returned a little while later with several copies of his IQ test, each a hundred pages long. Carlisle passed them out, face down, instructed everyone to write down their answers before moving on, and then gave them all the command to get started.

Esme finished first. Eleazar, Alice, Tanya, Carmen, Emmett, Irina, Kate, Rosalie, and Jasper completed their tests within seconds of her. Excepting Bella, Jasper was the last of the animal hunters to finish, and he set his pen down a full thirteen seconds before the next person in the group.

The last test completed was Bella's, but she was only a fraction of a second behind Peter, who finished his exam right around a second after the other five of the six outliers.

Carlisle graphed each one of them meticulously, smiling at the results.

"Smug bastard," Garrett muttered.

"I can't believe you're doing this."

"Shut up, Garrett."

"I can't believe you're letting them sucker you into this ridiculous exercise."

"You didn't have to come."

"Of course I had to come. Who else is going to tell you how stupid you are?"

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "We should have brought Kate along. She seems to know how to stop your mouth."

"Kate," he said, shaking his head sadly. "Poor Kate. A beautiful, misguided nymph, that one."

"Shut up, Garrett."

There were thirteen of them running through the woods, making their way toward more fertile hunting grounds. Peter and Ulka had agreed to be part of Carlisle's nutrition experiment, as had a woman named Maureen, one of the other outliers. The rest would be the control group—mostly because they weren't the slightest bit interested in changing their diets.

Esme and Tanya had volunteered to lead a hunting trip, and Alexander begged to go along. Bella thought it was for the best if she hunted anyway, since Charlie was coming over again that evening, so she tagged along with Alexander and Edward. Charlotte had agreed to switch to animal blood to

support Peter, so she was there too. Tia couldn't stand the idea that human blood might be impairing her brain, and Benjamin was just curious. Minh had wanted to join them and do a little hunting herself, but her presence unnerved Peter so badly that she'd had to promise she would keep to her human form—much to Alexander's disappointment.

Garrett, apparently, had come along entirely for the sake of being obnoxious.

"I'm not sure you understand how *bad* animal blood tastes."

Tanya stopped and turned around. "Garrett, if you don't shut up, I'm going to remove your Adam's apple."

"Is that where Kate gets her violent tendencies? Did she learn them from you? Listen, Peter, I'm not sure this little scheme is going to work. Vegetarians are bad tempered."

Tanya rolled her eyes and started forward again.

Esmé fell back and took Minh's arm, giving it a familiar squeeze. "I feel terrible about how busy we've been. We've hardly gotten to know you and the other girls. I hope you don't think we're bad hosts."

"You have been more than generous," she replied.

"Tell me a little about yourself. Minh isn't a Chinese name, is it?"

She smiled. "No. My father was Vietnamese."

"You don't have to be full Chinese to become a shape-shifter, then?"

"Very little Chinese blood is required." She looked up at the sky. "The magic is in the stars."

Alexander wriggled out of Bella's grasp and dropped to the ground, running to catch up with Minh. He tugged at her skirt, and she swung him up into her arms.

"How does the magic work?" he asked her.

"It is very old. It started long, long ago when the men of China were called upon to work the fields and defend their lands against attack. The daughters of China had work to do in their homes, but many of them wished to serve beyond the hearth. One day, twelve daughters gathered to petition the Jade Emperor's favor. He heard their request and was pleased with their desire, but he believed they would need help."

"From dragons?" Alexander asked eagerly.

She chuckled. "Yes, from dragons. But not only them. He thought there were many animals who could help, but he didn't know which ones to choose. So he held a race."

"A race? To see who was the fastest?"

"Oh, it wasn't just about speed. The race was long and crossed difficult terrain. Each of the animals would have to be very resourceful to overcome the obstacles."

"Who won?"

"The dragon did, of course." She laughed, eliciting a giggle from Alexander. "But not just the dragon. The first twelve animals to reach the end were chosen to help serve the people of China."

"What animals."

She smiled. "The dragon, the snake, the horse, the sheep, the monkey, the rooster, the dog, the pig, the rat, the ox, the tiger, and the rabbit."

"I had rabbit for breakfast," Alexander said.

Bella winced. Was that going to offend her? She watched Minh for a reaction, but the old woman just laughed.

"I certainly hope you didn't have one of my friends for breakfast. Though, I think you would have known. I'm told our blood makes vampires sick."

"I'm pretty sure it was just a rabbit."

"That is good."

"What happened to the animals who won?"

"The winners were invited to a great feast, where the Jade Emporer joined the souls of the animals with the souls of the daughters of China. They became one, and were given many tasks. Some, like the rooster and the sheep, were asked to help on the farms, understanding and improving conditions and helping watch for predators. Some like the rat and the rabbit were to aid the warriors as spies. The Horse and the Ox were to assist in travel and trade."

"What did the dragon do?"

"What do you think the dragon did?"

"She was a warrior!"

Minh laughed. "That's right. She was a warrior. She helped her allies win many battles."

"Were you there?" Alexander asked.

That made her laugh even harder. "Oh, no, my boy. That was thousands of years ago. I'm a very old woman, but I'm not *that* old."

"How old are you?"

Bella wasn't sure that was a polite question, but . . . she was just so curious herself.

"I am one hundred and thirty-six years old."

"Wow, you're *old!*"

"Alexander!" Bella hissed.

"It's all right," Minh said. "To you, little one, I'm very, very old. And to me, you are very, very young."

"I'm growing up, though," Alexander said. "Someday I'll be a hundred and thirty-six too."

"Oh, I hope so. A hundred and thirty-six is a wonderful age to be."

"How does the shape-shifting trait get passed along?" Esme asked.

"It must be carefully planned. If a daughter born in the year of a dragon has a daughter born in the year of the dragon, and she also has a daughter born in the year of the dragon, the last will be a dragon. My line goes back nearly six hundred years, each generation producing a new dragon. My daughter is one, and in a few years she will try to have a daughter as well. If she does, my granddaughter will be a dragon."

"That's amazing," Esme murmured. "Is it very common?"

"It was, once. But it seems that we have performed our duties too well. Our people have grown too numerous for our lands, and births have been restricted. This makes a difficult task even more challenging, especially when a boy is born to the family first. Some still try again, to keep the legacy intact, but if they are successful the child must be hidden. It would be unwise to send a young shape-shifter to be raised by people who don't understand her abilities."

"That does sound difficult," Esme agreed.

Tanya stopped and turned back to the group. "This is probably far enough. Bella? Do you want to show them how it's done?"

"Me?"

"Sure. I don't need to hunt, and neither do Esme or Edward. That leaves you to show them how it's done."

"Please, Mother?" Alexander said, reaching for her.

"I can't hold you while I hunt, sweetie."

"But I want to see."

She took him from Minh and tucked him close against her chest. "Just until I find something," she said, cupping the back of his head to protect his neck.

Once he was situated, she dropped her head back and sniffed the breeze. She picked out the individual scents and—there. Elk. They must be near a stream, since she could smell the freshness of the water and the moss. She tightened her grip on Alexander and took off running in the direction of her prey.

Alexander giggled.

"Shhh," Bella breathed. "We don't want them to hear us coming."

When she got close, she scaled a tree until she was high enough to see what she was after. All around her, other vampires were climbing as well, watching her closely.

A small herd was drinking at a stream, and Bella gestured toward them. "I think I'm going to try for the one with the injured leg," she whispered to Alexander.

"Why?"

Bella paused. She had chosen that one instinctively, though of course she wouldn't have a problem catching the strongest of them. It just seemed . . . right.

"Well . . ." she said, "I guess because I want the healthiest ones to keep breeding, so we always have plenty of elk in these woods."

"Okay."

Bella set Alexander on the limb. "Hold on tight."

"I will."

Edward moved to the limb below, which eased Bella's mind significantly. He wouldn't let Alexander fall. Once her son was settled, she turned and dove off of the limb, the power of her jump taking her right to the edge of the stream. The elk were already scattering when she hit the ground, but that only made it more fun. She zeroed in on the one with the limp and bolted after it, jumping onto it from behind and sinking her teeth into its neck while it was still running.

Fantastic. Hunting was always such a rush.

Once the animal had collapsed to the ground, she stopped drinking and slid to her knees on the ground. She turned back to where Alexander watched and beckoned to him and Edward. She wanted Alexander to taste some of the elk blood.

Edward collected Alexander and climbed down, running out to meet her as precious drops of blood oozed from the elk's neck. It was difficult to let them be wasted, but it was worth it to share the experience. Edward set Alexander down at her side, and he jumped at her.

"You ran so fast, Mother!"

She laughed. "I did. Do you want to taste the blood?"

"Yes!"

She set him down next to the animal's neck and he crouched down to drink. When she glanced up at Edward, he was grinning at her.

"What?"

"I was just thinking."

"About what?"

He sat down beside her and tugged her away from the elk and into his lap. "About how it wasn't very long ago that you were completely perplexed when Jasper offered Alice his kill."

Bella laughed at the memory. It had been a very strange concept to her. But then, she'd never had the privilege of watching her little boy explore all the things the world had to offer him. She smiled down at him and ran her fingers through his curls. "What do you think, little man?"

"It's pretty good," he said, smacking his blood-stained lips. "I like milk better."

"We'll make sure you get milk with dinner," Edward said. "Cool?"

"Cool."

The other vampires had scattered once she'd taken down her kill, chasing other game through the forest. Bella heard the yowl of a mountain lion in the distance and grinned. Someone had snagged a good one.

"One of these days, we'll get you a carnivore," Edward said to Alexander. "Might have to wait until you're older, though. They're pretty vicious."

"How old?"

"Oh, I don't know. Forty-four, forty-five maybe."

"That's too long!"

Bella scooped him up and deposited him on her shoulders. "We need to practice on the rabbits a little more before we go after big game."

When they got back to the house, more guests had arrived. The tents were full, and Alice was on the phone with Newton's Olympic Outfitters, checking to see how many more they had in stock. Alexander let go of their hands and ran to the amphitheater, where he began hopping down the steps with his feet together. He giggled at his little game and peered back to make sure Bella was watching.

"Look, mother! I can jump really far!" He turned back to his steps and made a mighty leap, jumping three of them at a time.

Bella clapped and made the appropriate approving noises while he beamed and continued his game.

Alice hung up the phone and wandered over to join them. "I can get eight more tents after the sun goes down tonight, but then that's it. They're cleaned out."

"Will that be enough?" Edward asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"How are Amelia and Maysun?" Bella asked. She glanced toward the house, but what she saw through the window stopped her cold. Alistair was standing in the doorway of Maysun's room, staring down at her while she slept.

Bella grabbed Edward's arm and jerked him around so he could see what she saw. He looked toward the house and then back at her. "What? What's wrong."

"Alistair," she hissed.

"Oh. Yeah. It's fine."

"Edward!" She rounded on him, shocked and angry.

"Bella, it's okay. They . . . met. Last night."

"They *met*?"

He smirked. "It went well."

"What does that mean?"

"They like each other. A lot. Carlisle's over the moon about it."

"What, just like that? They're, like . . . a couple now?"

"It happens pretty fast for some of us," Alice said. "Rosalie fell for Emmett in roughly the time it took to blink."

"Faster than that!" Emmett yelled from somewhere in the woods.

"So she's okay?" Bella asked, looking back toward Maysun's window. Alistair was looking out at her now, but otherwise he hadn't moved.

"You don't need to worry about him. He's just making sure no one disturbs her."

"I think it's sweet," Alice said.

"You would, wouldn't you?" a voice drawled from behind them. Bella turned to see James striding toward them, with Victoria at his heels. "Those girls must bring back memories for you, Mary Alice. Oh, wait." He smirked. "I guess they don't."

"What do you mean?" She sounded calm, but Bella noticed that her hands were clenched into fists. Judging by the smug look on James's face, Bella figured that he must have noticed too.

"Oh, you know. Young girls locked up and at the mercy of their vampire captors. It ought to feel awfully familiar."

"Why? Because of the mental hospital?"

James let out a low laugh. "Oh yes. Poor little Mary Alice. Locked away to keep her from harming herself and others. Little Mary Alice, who always knew what was coming, but could never do anything to stop it."

Alice shivered.

"How did you come to know her?" Edward asked. If he was bothered by this conversation, he didn't show it.

"I smelled her. Only faintly, and from far away, but the moment I caught her scent I knew I had to find her. And I did. Hidden away in a dank little cellar, with only a tiny window for us to talk through."

"Is that what you did? Talk?"

"For days. So many conversations at our little window. Mary Alice used to cry so sweetly. She knew what I was, and she knew I was going to kill her. But first I wanted to know what made her smell so sweet. And of course, there was Sebastian."

"Sebastian was the head of the asylum?" Alice asked.

He smirked. "An ingenious situation."

"Are you sure he drank from the patients?" Alice asked.

"Regularly. You were his favorite, as I recall—but I could hardly blame him for that. You smelled so delicious."

He was inching closer to Alice, and Bella's unease grew. He was too close. She had to resist the urge to snap at him and drive him back.

"Of course, it wasn't just your blood he wanted. He spent far more time in your room than he needed for feeding . . ."

That made Alice fall back a step, and Victoria laughed. "Aw, sweetie, did you think your ugly boyfriend was your first? How disappointing."

Alice exchanged glances with Edward and straightened her shoulders. "What happened?" she asked James. "If you were so determined to kill me, why didn't you?"

"I told you." His eyes darkened. "Sebastian got in my way. He wouldn't give you to me, and when he realized that I was determined to have you anyway, he took you away from the asylum and hid you. I found you, of course, but by then you were in the middle of your change."

"You're unique," Victoria said. "James always gets his prey. You're the only one who ever escaped."

James snarled at her and she flinched and backed away.

"But I made you a promise," he said to Alice, struggling to regain his composure. "Do you remember what it was? I whispered it in your ear while you were screaming."

Alice shook her head slowly, her eyes fixed on him.

"I told you I wasn't finished with you. I promised I would find you again."

She stared at him for a long moment. "Why?" she finally asked. "Why not just kill me then? It would have been easy."

"Easy is boring." He flashed his gleaming teeth at her. "I like a challenge."

"You might want to put a pin in that," Edward said. "Carlisle has forbidden us from killing each other during this little shindig."

"Of course," James said, his voice smooth and just a little bit oily. "Don't worry, friend. I always play by the rules." He turned and strode away with Victoria following in his wake, and suddenly Jasper was there beside Alice. Bella hadn't known he was even nearby, but he appeared the moment James was out of sight.

"Edward?" Jasper asked.

"It was true—mostly, anyway. He's not sure about any sexual misconduct on Sebastian's part, but he assumes."

Alice gave Jasper a small, secret smile. "He's wrong."

"How do you know?" Bella asked.

"I just know." She glanced at Edward, who only nodded.

That was good enough for Bella. After all, there was only so much she needed to know about her friends' private affairs.

"Mother, look!" Alexander cried from the bottom of the amphitheater. He was making his way back up now, hopping up one step at a time, but when she turned to look he squatted low and jumped two at once.

"Wow! Look how strong you are!"

"I'm going to jump all the way to you!"

Bella beamed at him. "Once you get to the top, we need to get ready for Grandpa Charlie to visit."

"Yay! Grandpa Chawlie!" He started taking faster hops up the steps.

"Oh, Bella, that reminds me," Alice said, "the first clothing delivery arrived. I put the box in the downstairs bathroom."

"That was fast. Thank you." She caught Alexander on his last hop and carried him to the house to clean him up.

True to her word, Alice had bought Alexander some of the cutest clothes Bella had ever seen. Alexander seemed just as gleeful about them as Alice did, too. He climbed right into the large box and dug through the clothes until he found his favorite item—a tiny leather jacket.

"Look, mother, I got one too! Like Carwile and Rosalie and everyone else!"

"Don't tell Edward. He might get jealous."

"Too late," Edward said from the kitchen. "I'm jealous already, and I don't even know what it is."

"It's a new coat!" Alexander called back, already digging for more. "And this one, Mother. And this." He presented her with a tiny pair of cargo shorts and a white button-up shirt with a red bowtie attached. The shirt was part of a tiny little tuxedo set, but Alexander only shook his head when Bella pointed that out.

"I'll wear those later."

There was no harm in his awkward ensemble, so Bella shrugged and allowed him to have his fun. She got him washed and dressed and put a pair of shoes on him, but after a few steps he sat down and pulled them off again.

"Those don't work," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"They're in the way. My toes have to feel the ground." He tossed them back in the box, along with the socks Bella had put on him, then raised his hands to be picked up again.

Bella had to agree with him. It was easier to run with bare feet.

"Is Grandpa Chawlie here yet?" he asked as Bella carried him to the kitchen.

"Not yet," Edward answered, "but we should skin these rabbits and cook them up tonight. Do you want to help?"

Alexander hopped onto the counter and peered into the bowl, where Edward had apparently stashed the rabbits earlier. "How do you skin them?"

"Here, I'll show you. I'll do this one and you do that one."

"Can you watch him while I get ready?" Bella asked.

"Of course." Edward grabbed her hand before she could walk away and pulled her close. He treated her to a long, slow kiss, and when he released her, Alexander burst into a fit of giggles.

"That's not how you skin a rabbit!" he cried gleefully.

Bella laughed and kissed his forehead. "That's how you tease a girlfriend." She shot Edward a sly smile and left to get herself ready to see Charlie.

Edward and Alexander had just finished preparing the rabbits for cooking when a familiar truck turned off the main road and onto the gravel path that led to the Cullen's house. Bella raised her eyebrows at Edward, and he shrugged. "I guess Billy and some of the boys from the Reservation decided to accept Carlisle's invitation."

"The wolves are coming?" Bella asked, her anxiety skyrocketing once again. She remembered how hostile Sam had been the last time she'd seen him, and she didn't want him near Alexander.

"Hey." Edward moved toward her and gripped her arms. "I'll be right beside you the whole time. Nobody's getting through the two of us, right?"

She nodded. Edward's presence was a distinct advantage. It was awfully convenient having a boyfriend who could read minds.

He gave her a quick peck and then swept Alexander up onto his shoulder. "We need to make some batter to cook the rabbits in. Here." He moved to a cabinet and pulled out a bottle of garlic powder. "Smell that. Should we put some of that in the batter?"

Alexander took the bottle Edward opened for him and sniffed it. "Yes!"

"How about that?" he handed him some dried parsley to sniff.

"Ummm . . . okay."

Edward pulled out one spice after another, offering them for Alexander's approval. When he had a collection that satisfied him, he pulled a few more ingredients out of the refrigerator and started helping Alexander measure and mix them together.

Meanwhile, Carlisle and Esme had jogged up to the house from the campground so they would be there to greet Charlie and the others. Esme moved to Alexander's side to admire his cooking skills, while Carlisle stopped next to Bella and draped an arm over her shoulders.

"How are you feeling?" he asked her.

"Feeling?"

"Your thirst. Is it very difficult to control? With Amelia upstairs and Charlie visiting so frequently, I'm worried that we're asking too much of you."

"It's getting easier, actually. Sometimes I forget all about it."

"You're not just saying that so we won't keep your father away? I don't want you to push yourself past your limits over fear of the consequences."

"Really, I'm fine."

He still looked anxious, so Bella smiled at him. "I promise I'll tell you if it starts to get too difficult."

"Good. I'm here to help."

Bella heard the truck rumble to a stop in front of the house and Carlisle gestured toward the door. "Shall we go welcome our friends?"

She nodded. She reached for Alexander, who jumped from Edward's shoulder into her arms, and they all headed for the door.

Charlie and Billy were climbing out of the cab of the truck when they got outside, and five very large, foul-smelling young men in cut-offs were jumping out of the back, hauling three large ice chests with them.

"Hey, there's my grandson!" Charlie said. He managed to get his arms up just in time to catch Alexander, who had leapt at him as soon as he saw him.

"Did you bring some fish?" he asked eagerly.

"I sure did. Are you ready to fry them up?"

"Yes! And we have some rabbits, too."

Charlie cocked his head. "Rabbits?"

"I caught them today."

"You did? All by yourself?"

"Well . . . Mother and Edward helped me."

"Alexander helped prep them and make breading for them too," Edward added. "You don't mind frying them up with the fish, do you?"

Charlie jerked a thumb toward the boys. "With this crowd, the more food the better."

They all headed inside, and Esme went to find the Chinese visitors while the Quileute boys started unloading the coolers.

"You brought a lot of fish!" Alexander exclaimed.

"We have a lot of people to feed."

They pulled out pans and oil and started frying the fish, while Carlisle found the ingredients for coleslaw and threw some together. The kitchen was filled with chatter and the revolting odors of fish and wolves when the girls from China walked into the room. The moment they made themselves known, all of the boys went silent.

Carlisle glanced back and forth between the two groups. "Minh, Bo, and Mei Zhen, may I present my friends, Billy, Sam, Paul, Jared, and . . . I'm sorry, I haven't met the two of you yet."

"I'm Quil," one of the new boys said. "And this is Embry."

Embry was too busy staring at the women to answer.

"And you've both phased," Carlisle said. It wasn't a question. "Your pack is growing."

Sam glanced around at the other boys. "Possibly because of your numbers. We think it may be affecting us."

"Carlisle told us a little of your legends," Minh said, "but I believe he does not know them well. I would like to hear about them from you."

"And perhaps you'll do us the same kindness," Billy said. "I've never met any other shape-shifters."

"It would be our pleasure."

"Take a load off," Charlie said, gesturing toward the kitchen table. "I promised my grandson a proper fish fry. You're welcome to join us."

Embry practically fell over himself rushing to pull out a chair for Mei Zhen, the youngest of the three women who had spied on them as a rat. That seemed to break the tension, and conversation started up again. Bo, who looked like she might be in her thirties, wandered into the kitchen to help with the cooking while Minh drifted to Billy's side and started up a murmured conversation about the experiences associated with phasing for the first time.

Charlie had multiple pans arranged in front of him on the stove, and Alexander was on the counter next to him, while Bella hovered nearby to keep her son from getting too close to the spattering oil. Sam was there as well, a pair of tongs in hand, helping Charlie keep an eye on the sizzling fish.

Everything was going great until Charlie nudged Bella's arm and nodded toward the tall windows at the back of the house. "Who's that?"

A chill was already prickling up the back of her neck when Bella turned to follow his gaze. Outside, past the amphitheater and just this side of the river, Joham stood on the bank, staring into the house. He looked furious, his teeth clenched and his fingers curled into claws.

There was a part of Bella that understood exactly how he felt. A part of her was hyper-aware of her son, here in the kitchen, surrounded by creatures with whom she was on questionable terms. At that moment, in fact, he was sampling a sliver of fish that Sam was holding out to him—eating it right out of his hand. She was ready to snatch him up and flee at the first sign of hostility, and Joham, banned from their presence, didn't have the comfort of being near enough to protect him.

Another part of her took perverse and intense pleasure in his helplessness.

"That's Joham," she murmured.

Charlie froze. "That's him?"

She nodded.

He put down the filet he was breading and reached for a towel to wipe his hands.

"Charlie, don't," Edward warned.

"I just want to talk to him." He headed for the door, but Carlisle stepped in front of him.

"Charlie. No. There is a strict non-violence policy in place. I can't tell you how important it is—"

"I just want to talk to him."

"Talking is fine. You can *say* anything you want, but you *must not* allow it to move beyond words."

Charlie pushed past him, and suddenly the boys all around Bella were . . . they were taking off their clothes. They were getting naked, right here in the kitchen, and not one of them seemed to think it was even worth mentioning.

Edward caught Sam's eye and nodded. "Just don't start anything."

Charlie and five naked boys filed out of the house, and the moment they were outside, each of the boys . . . changed. They sort of rippled and fell forward, suddenly replaced by the biggest wolves Bella had ever seen.

"Look!" Alexander exclaimed. "Did you see it, Mother? They turned into wolves!"

Carlisle looked like he was considering following them, but Edward cleared his throat.

"Trust them, Carlisle." He dropped his voice to a whisper and added, "If they provoke Joham into attacking, we can be rid of him."

"Attacking?" Bella asked in alarm. That was her father out there, and she was all too familiar with Joham's temper.

"He'll be fine," Billy said confidently.

Bella picked up a spatula and poked at the fish, but she couldn't keep herself from watching Charlie and the wolves cross the yard to the river. It was comforting, she had to admit, that his back-up had such large teeth.

"You're Joham?" Charlie demanded, stopping a couple of yards away from the vampire.

Joham straightened and lifted his chin, but said nothing.

"You're the gutless sack of shit who kidnaped my daughter?"

Alexander scooted closer to Bella and tugged at her sleeve. "Mother, is 'gutless' a bad word?"

"No."

Joham snarled. "I'd watch my tone if I were you."

"Or what? You'll hurt me?" Charlie took a step closer. "I'm not buying it. Not from a spineless little cunt like you. You don't have the balls to come after me if there's a chance you'll get hurt."

"Is 'cunt' a bad word?" Alexander asked.

"Yes."

"Who do you think you are?" Joham hissed. "You're human. You're nothing. You'll be dead tomorrow, but my work will remain."

"I'm human, but I'm more of a man than you'll ever be. Does it make you feel like a bad-ass, abusing little girls? Does it make you feel like you're something more than a limp-dicked, pansy-ass shitstain?"

Charlie had an audience now. Vampires were taking notice, watching him from across the river, and most of them looked highly amused.

"Silence!" Joham yelled. "Or I will silence you."

Charlie met his gaze with an icy stare. "Try it."

For a moment, Bella thought he would. Joham was so furious he was trembling, and she really thought he would snap and go for Charlie's throat. But his eyes flicked toward the wolves and he let out a roar of frustration.

"Listen up, asshole," Charlie said. "I'm putting you on notice. I can't do anything to you right now, but I owe you. I owe you for every tear my baby cried, and for every second of pain she endured. When you leave this town, it had better be for good, because if I *ever* see you again I'll make sure that my debt is paid. I'll have you torn to tiny little pieces and I'll burn them all, one by one. Do you understand me?"

Joham looked murderous, but he didn't answer. He spun around and leapt back across the river, to the delight of the watching vampires. They laughed, and a few of them even applauded.

"You're all just as bad," Charlie grumbled, but he was smirking as he strode back toward the house.

Alexander looked awestruck. "Grandpa Chawlie doesn't like Father, does he, Mother?"

She shook her head.

He screwed his face up in concentration. "Lots of people don't like Father."

"That's true. He's hurt a lot of people."

"He does good things too, though."

"Does he?" She stared hard at the fish filets she was turning. "Like what?"

"He read me books and gave me my lessons."

She nodded grudgingly. "You're right. Those are good things."

"I think . . ." He folded his tiny hands in his lap. "I think sometimes people can do bad things *and* good things."

"You're on to something there. In fact, I think that's true of most people. But the bad things that some people do are so bad that it's not worth putting up with them while you wait for the good things to come."

"Do you think Father is too bad?"

She sighed. She didn't want to place herself in direct opposition to Joham because she was afraid she wouldn't win. But at the same time, she didn't want to let Alexander think there was any moral ambiguity involved in what Joham had done. "Yes, sweetie. I do."

"Do you want him to go away?"

"Yes."

Alexander poked his thumb into his mouth, and Bella started to worry that she had been too blunt.

"Do you want him to stay?"

"I don't know," he said around his thumb. "I have to think about it."

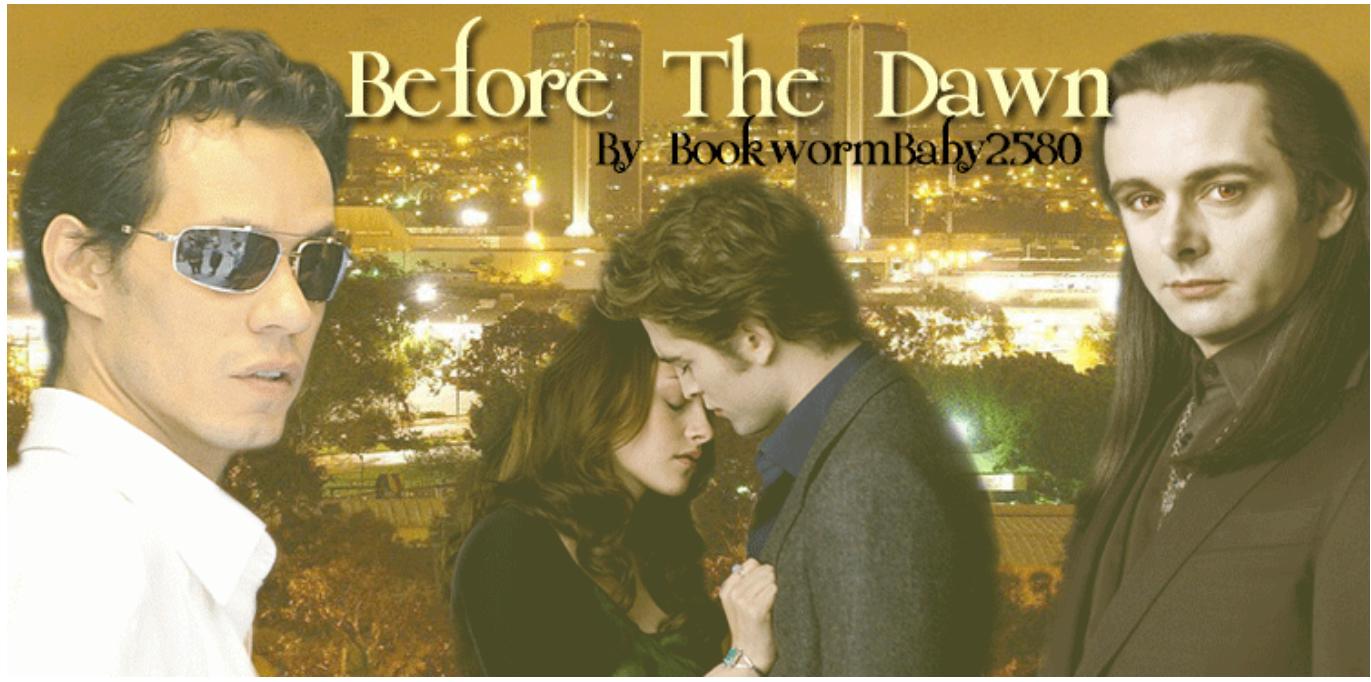
Charlie and five naked boys strolled back into the house, and the Quileutes all pulled their shorts on again. Charlie returned to the stove, and they picked up right where they'd left off.

"This batch is ready," Charlie said, lifting one of the frying pans off of the stove. "Embry, come over here and help dish up some plates for the ladies. Edward?"

Edward pulled a clean pan out of the cabinet. "Here you go."

Charlie accepted it and poured some fresh oil into it. "All right, Alexander. Let's get started on those rabbits of yours."

Crime and Punishment



Bella was *bored*.

She was trying not to be. All around her, vampires sat still and silent while each one stood in succession and told his *entire life story*, and Bella had to strain to keep herself from fidgeting.

No one else seemed to think this was as completely unnecessary as Bella did. When she asked, Edward had explained that not only was it customary, it was important to establish a history of each attendee of the gathering because personal experience lent weight to a person's opinions on certain matters. She could understand that. Jasper, for instance, should probably have more clout in a discussion of newborn armies than most people. But they had already spent the entire previous day listening to people drone on about themselves, and it looked like they wouldn't finish before sundown this evening. It was taking forever.

Which wasn't to say there hadn't been intense moments. She had told her own story the day before, and had been surprised by the support she had received from the other vampires. This savage community—a community that didn't blink at murdering humans and barely hesitated at killing their own kind—had very strong opinions about sexual assault. Bella's story had turned Joham into a social pariah. She had suspected that he might regain some favor once he'd had a chance to tell his side, but he hadn't. No one wanted to have anything to do with him.

She found that tremendously gratifying.

James had made some waves, too. He had been obscenely detailed when recounting his initial meeting with Alice, and Bella had expected Jasper to lunge for his throat the entire time. She still wasn't sure they wouldn't find charred pieces of his dismembered body littering the forest some morning. James was deliberately taunting Jasper, and his efforts hadn't gone unnoticed.

But the bulk of the stories were painfully dull. It seemed that when vampires weren't hunting inconspicuous prey, they were getting into snits and holding grudges. Or falling in love. All of the mated vampires had lingered long on the retelling of their romantic histories. From each party's perspective. In minute detail.

All told, one-hundred and eighteen vampires, half-vampires, and shape-shifters had shown up for the gathering—excluding Amelia, who had neither the strength nor the inclination to join them—and they *all* had to have their say.

Bella was impressed by how well Alexander was handling himself. The previous day, he had sat on Rosalie's lap and copied diagrams out of the neurology book that Emmett held up for him. Today he was with Nahuel, examining the beaded jewelry that the man wore around his neck and wrists. He'd been doing it all morning, and Bella worried that Nahuel would lose patience with him, though there was no indication that he was beginning to. He occasionally whispered bits of information about the symbolism of a particular piece or the method of creating it. Alexander was fascinated.

Toward midday, though, Alexander ran out of accessories to inspect and he started to get restless. He wandered back to Bella and settled himself in her lap.

"Mother, I'm hungry," he whispered.

The South American vampire who was speaking paused, and Carlisle glanced at Bella.

"We'll take a break in a few minutes. I'm sorry, Senna, please go on."

"When the burners came," she said, picking up her story, "we were not at first concerned. They destroyed and they created, like all humans. But soon the Anhangá and the Boiúna cried out against their imprudence . . ."

"I'm hungry *now*," Alexander insisted.

"You can wait a few minutes," she told him, but there was a flutter of misgiving in her stomach. A human child could wait a few minutes, but Alexander grew so much faster than a human. Minutes to him were different, physiologically. Was she asking too much of him? She looked over at Nahuel, and then at Jennifer and Maysun sitting next to him. None of them seemed concerned that she was making Alexander wait. That was good.

"I don't want to," Alexander insisted, and Senna broke off again, her gaze settling on Bella and the little boy.

"Shhh, sweetie, we need to be respectful of Senna."

His little face screwed up into a pout. "You're mean. Father lets me eat whenever I want."

A dozen irritable answers rose up in Bella's mind, each riding atop of a different wave of fear. Did Alexander love Joham? Did he love Joham more than he loved her? Would he leave her if she didn't give him what he wanted? If she did give him whatever he wanted, what kind of precedent would she set? Her first instinct was to get defensive, to snap at him, but she held it back and simply shook her head.

"Perhaps we should stop for a time," Senna said to Carlisle.

He frowned. "I'd hate to interrupt you."

"It means little to me. There will be time later."

"All right, then. We'll take an hour and pick this up again when we come back."

Alexander hopped up and tugged on Bella's hand to get her to stand. She did, but not without a flicker of dissatisfaction. She wasn't sure she wanted Alexander to get the idea that everyone would bend to his whims. A small part of her wished that Senna had been a little less accommodating.

"What are we going to make for lunch?" Alexander asked Edward, reaching for him.

Edward swung him up onto his shoulders. "I thought we'd try a cucumber brie sandwich and chilled melon soup."

"Do we have to skin some rabbits?"

He chuckled. "No, no rabbits today. I'm surprised we have any food left at all, after having the boys from the reservation out. I might have to do some more shopping tonight."

"Where's shopping?"

Alexander questioned Edward continuously as he once again helped him prepare the meal. They made enough for the other consumers of human food as well, and since the weather was nice, they all gathered on the back porch to eat. The Chinese women and Alexander's sisters murmured their appreciation at the flavors Edward had pulled together, but after two bites Alexander pushed his plate away.

"I don't like it," he said. "I want blood."

Bella glanced through the glass doors at the clock—purely out of habit, as her sense of time was significantly better since her change—and sighed. "Okay. We probably have time to run out and get something small if we hurry. We won't be able to go very far, though."

"I want human blood."

Bella stilled and frowned at him. "What?"

"I want some," he said again, pushing himself to his feet.

"No. Alexander, we talked about this. We don't drink human blood."

"I do, Mother. Go get me someone, please."

Bella gaped at him. What had happened to all their conversations about respecting life and treating people well? She slowly shook her head. "No. You can have the lunch Edward made you or you can come with me to look for a rabbit."

Alexander scowled at her and stomped on his sandwich hard enough to crack the plate beneath it. "I want human blood!"

Everyone nearby was watching, and Bella chafed under the feeling of being watched and judged. "I said no," she replied, her voice trembling.

"*Yes!* I want human blood and if you won't give it to me I'll go away and live with my father, and he'll give me *whatever I want!*" Alexander stalked away, heading for the amphitheater where they had left Joham.

Bella couldn't hold back the snarl that burst out of her. He *knew* what he was doing. He had picked up on her fear that he preferred his father to her, and he was using it to try and manipulate her.

"I'm sorry, Alexander." It was Carlisle. He dropped out of the window of the upstairs room where he had been attending to Amelia and started toward the boy. "Your mother is right. We don't allow —"

"No!" Alexander threw up his hand, and Carlisle suddenly tensed and collapsed. "You can't tell me what to do!"

Bella stared at him, wide-eyed. This made everything so much more complicated. How did you stand firm with a child when he could do *that*? She wrung her hands, fretting over how to handle it, wishing everyone would just go away and stop *looking* at her.

And then Esme was behind her, brushing her fingertips over her elbow, and murmuring in her ear, "You can handle this, Bella. Be his mother."

She straightened and tried to channel her inner Renée—no. Her inner Charlie. Charlie was the responsible one. "That's enough," she said, trying to sound adamant. "My answer is final." She strode toward him, hoping against hope that he would respect her authority. But he didn't. He let out a scream of rage and threw up his hand to halt her approach.

Bella didn't stop, but she braced herself against whatever it was that he did. To her surprise, however, nothing happened. Nothing stopped her. Her stride didn't break and Alexander let out a frustrated scream, his hand held out, tiny fingers splayed.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "Stop it! You have to go to *sleep!*" But whatever he was doing didn't seem to have any effect on Bella. He turned to run, but his tiny legs could only carry him so fast. Bella lunged forward and swept him up in her arms, and then . . . what? What happened next?

"I think you need a time out," she said. She sounded lame even to herself, but what else was there to do?

"No! I'm hungry! You have to give me human blood! You *have* to!"

Bella ignored him and carried him off toward their tent. That was probably as close to sending him to his room as she could get.

"I hate you, Mother!" he screamed. "You're mean! I hate you! I want Father!"

She tried not to let his tantrum affect her, but it did. Every mention of his father drove an icy stake of fear into her heart. She couldn't lose him. She couldn't. But what was the price of keeping him? Would she have to watch her little boy grow into a remorseless murderer? Was that a price of his love?

She reached the tent and unzipped the screen that Edward had mended the night before. She ducked inside and deposited Alexander on the blankets, settling down next to him. He stopped yelling at her and started sobbing, his little cries echoing in the woods around them.

"*Please*, Mother!" he wailed. "*Please!*" He crawled into her lap and wrapped his arms around her neck, crying into her shoulder. "I want it!"

"I know, sweetie." Bella took comfort in the fact that he was hugging her even while he screamed at her. "I want it too. Way too often. But we can't always have what we want."

"I can. I'm *special*."

She grimaced. "Baby, do you understand what it is you're asking? You're talking about killing someone. For you to have human blood, that means someone has to die. It means all the things that person wanted to do will be taken away, and all the people who loved that person will have to suffer. That's too high a price to pay just because you want something that tastes good."

"But *I'm special!* He insisted. "Father said so!"

She pulled back and held his chin so he would look at her. "You think you have the right to take someone's life away because you're special? That's just not true. Nobody's that special."

"Yes I am!" he wailed, and threw himself into her arms again, crying against her shoulder. "Father said! He said I can have whatever I want!"

Bella refused to be baited. She rubbed his back and let him cry, and there was even a part of her that recognized this as a good thing. She would prefer it if he would simply accept her reasoning, but barring that, at least he was learning that he had limits.

Still, she worried that she was setting the wrong ones. Nahuel had seemed confident that he and his sisters could survive solely on human food, but they hadn't ever actually been denied blood while they were growing. What if it was necessary? What if Alexander wanted it so badly because he needed it?

Maybe Carlisle could bring more donated blood. But then she would be giving in to him, and she really thought that would be a bad idea. She had to be firm. Alexander's sense of entitlement was already out of control.

It was a long time before he settled down. The hour allotted for lunch passed, and Bella could hear the rest of the vampires settling themselves in the amphitheater. Senna picked up her tale where she'd left off, and the meeting continued without them.

It was mid-afternoon when Alexander finally wriggled off of her lap, rubbing his eyes.

"I'm hungry, mother," he whimpered.

"I know. You need to eat. Do you want another sandwich or do you want to go hunt?"

His lip poked out, but he sniffled and sighed. "I want to hunt."

"All right. We'll go get a rabbit, but when we come back I expect you to apologize to Edward."

"Why?" he demanded with a scowl.

"He made you a nice lunch and you were ungrateful. If you act like that, people aren't going to want to do things for you anymore."

"But I'm special," he whispered.

"You're very special, and I love you more than anything, but that doesn't mean you can behave the way you did. You have to learn to treat people the way you would want to be treated."

"Why?"

Bella eased out of the tent, drawing Alexander after her. "Because people tend to mirror the actions of others. If you're rude to them, they'll be rude to you."

"But Father says I'm very important."

"I know. I'm afraid Joham gave you a distorted sense of reality."

"What's distorted?"

"It means . . . all twisted up. He misrepresented things."

"Why did he do that?"

"I'm not sure." She picked him up and started jogging into the woods. "Maybe he just really wants the world to be a certain way, so it's easier for him to believe that it is."

Alexander leaned his head against her and sucked his thumb into his mouth. When she picked up a rabbit's scent, he waited patiently for her to catch it for him, then sucked it dry and picked the carcass up by the ears. "Do we save this?" he asked.

"I think we should."

"Okay."

She picked him up again and he wrapped his arms around her, the dead rabbit hanging limply behind her back. "I love you, Mother."

"I love you too."

"I don't want to go back to Father."

She kissed the top of his head, letting out a sigh of relief. "I'm so glad."

"I can't ever have human blood again?"

She shook her head. "What if someone killed Grandpa Charlie because they wanted human blood?"

He frowned and shook his head. "That wouldn't be good."

"No."

"It tastes good, though, mother."

She nodded, feeling the prickle of thirst in her throat. "Believe me, sweetie, I know."

"Do you like human blood too?"

"I like how it tastes. I don't like how it makes me feel to know that I killed someone."

"You can't ever have human blood either?"

"That's right."

He sighed again. "I wish rabbits tasted better."

"*Me too.*"

He smiled at her emphatic response.

Bella took him back to the house and helped him skin and clean the rabbit, and they put the wrapped cutlets in the refrigerator to be cooked later. Then Bella gathered her son into her arms and nodded toward the amphitheater. "Shall we get back out there?"

"Okay."

Bella tried to be inconspicuous as she carried Alexander outside and slipped into the open space next to Edward, but she was surprised by the number of eyes that followed her to her seat. Most of the gazes were couched in antagonistic expressions, a few in contemplative ones, but nearly everyone watched her return.

She glanced uncomfortably around and then turned to Edward to see if he knew of some reason for the attention. One corner of his mouth pulled up, and he leaned close to her ear.

"Nobody's that special . . ." he whispered, and she felt his smile against her ear. "They've always thought of themselves as superior to humans. You just called into question their right to kill—fairly convincingly, if you ask me."

Bella frowned. She hadn't meant her lecture to be applied to everyone, even if she thought it ought to be. It wasn't exactly her place to dictate the morals of the vampire world.

"Don't worry about it," Edward whispered.

But that was easier said than done. Bella quailed under the scrutiny, and even after most of the attention had drifted away from her she still felt . . . off. Like something was out of balance, different from this morning. It was several minutes before she realized that it wasn't just a matter of atmosphere. The space *was* different. There were two people missing.

She nudged Edward and stretched up to whisper in his ear. "James and Victoria?"

"I know," he whispered back. "They never came back after lunch. Jasper's on the verge of a stroke."

Bella glanced at Jasper, who discreetly flipped Edward the bird.

Minutes ticked by slowly, and Bella was settling in for a few more hours of boredom when a breeze picked up a leaf and blew it into her face. She brushed it away, but when she shook back her hair she saw Benjamin watching her intently from his seat a few yards away. He smiled just slightly when he caught her eye, and his focus slid to a spot across the amphitheater from Bella.

She followed his gaze. On one of the lower steps of the amphitheater sat Joham, still and silent as he listened to the unembellished saga of a vampire named Randall. Bella's skin crawled at the sight of him, but as he wasn't doing anything objectionable, she wasn't sure what Benjamin wanted. She

shot him a querying look, but his attention was fixed on Joham now, his brow drawn in concentration.

Bella frowned and examined Joham carefully, looking for whatever it was she was missing. Had he done something he shouldn't have? Had he taken something? It was only after several seconds that she noticed that the ground around him was beginning to darken. It looked the way it had when Benjamin was playing with Alexander, when he had drawn ground water to the surface to dampen the earth and allow Alexander to build in the mud.

A tiny smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

A few seconds more and the darkened soil began to glisten wetly, and moment after that Joham leapt up in surprise.

Randall stopped and all eyes turned to Joham as he brushed at the mud that now covered the seat of his pants. He scowled at the muddy spot, and then glanced around at the crowd of people now watching him and shifted awkwardly. He moved to a higher step and sat down again, but the ground beneath him crumbled when he did and he sank several inches into loose dirt.

He sprang up with a snarl, staring wildly around the circle, but he must not have been aware of Benjamin's gift because his anger didn't find a target.

Carlisle cleared his throat softly. "Is there a problem, Joham?"

He clamped his jaw shut for a beat, then said with forced coolness, "This stadium seems to have some problems."

"You find my accommodations unsatisfactory?"

He seemed to lose his nerve under Carlisle's steely gaze. "Not at all."

"Then would you be so kind as to keep a respectful silence so Randall can continue?"

Joham sat back down on the step next to the crumbled portion, and it, too, promptly lost its rigidity. He ground his teeth as he sank down into the earth, but he didn't say anything more.

"I'm sorry, my friend," Carlisle said to Randall. "Please go on."

Randall began again, and after a few moments, Carlisle shot Benjamin a reproachful glance. Benjamin shrugged and smiled, then caught Bella's eye again and winked at her.

Bella *really* liked him.

A half hour later, her grin still hadn't entirely faded. Joham was still sulking and Alexander was playing at her feet, attempting to recreate the intricate weaving of one of Nahuel's accessories with Edward's shoelaces. His tantrum seemed to have passed, much to her relief, and he'd made no attempt to return to his father. That was good, because Bella wasn't sure she'd be able to keep herself from killing Joham if she thought he might come between her and Alexander.

Randall had finished his story and now his mate was telling almost exactly the same one. It was the repetition that had annoyed Bella for the last day and a half, but somehow it seemed less irritating now. There weren't very many introductions left to be made, after all, and soon they would get on with the purpose of this gathering.

She leaned her head against Edward's shoulder just in time to feel him stiffen. She glanced up at him to see his jaw clenched and his brow furrowed in concentration. In her peripheral vision, she saw Jasper's head whip around to stare at him as well.

Carlisle, seated next to Jasper, noticed their anxiety and locked eyes with Edward. Edward gave a sharp nod and Carlisle raised his hand.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you, Mary. There seems to be an issue that needs my attention. Would you all excuse me for a moment?" He beckoned the rest of the family with a flick of his fingers and Bella rose with Edward. She glanced at Alexander and caught Edward's elbow.

"Is it . . . dangerous?"

Edward looked down at the boy as well. "You should probably leave him here."

"Where are you going?" Alexander asked.

"I'm not sure. Will you stay here with Nahuel while I find out?"

"Okay." He stood and moved over to Nahuel, falling into his lap and peering closely at the armband he had been trying to recreate.

Edward kicked off his unlaced sneakers and grabbed Bella's hand, leading her and the rest of the family to the west.

"They'll meet us at the confluence," he murmured as he passed Carlisle, and the family fell in behind him.

They ran west until the river turned northward and cut across their path, then leapt across it and followed its meandering route to the southwest. They ran for a couple of miles, dodging farms and housing developments, until they reached a stand of trees near the point where the Sol Duc and the Bogachiel rivers converged and became the Quillayute. Bella probably could have deduced who they were there to meet, even if she hadn't heard the loping of wolves coming toward them. After a few moments they appeared, and Bella was startled to see that there were seven of them. She hadn't realized the pack was so big.

She didn't dwell on that for long, however, because it soon became apparent that each of the wolves was dragging or carrying a writhing fragment of vampire.

"James and Victoria," she whispered.

"Son of a bitch," Jasper spat.

The wolves stopped on the far bank of the Bogachiel and Carlisle moved to stand across from them.

"What happened?"

There was a brief silence, and then Edward said, "They found James on their land. Victoria was with him, acting as a lookout."

"Was anyone hurt?"

There was a snort from the large black wolf at the front of the pack, and it tossed a headless torso to the ground.

"Only those two," Edward said. "But the wolves aren't happy. They suspect us of collusion."

Carlisle spread his hands in a placating gesture. "My friends, I'm deeply sorry for their intrusion on your land. I assure you, I have no intention of breaking our treaty. All of my guests have been warned to stay away."

Edward sighed. "In that case, they doubt your ability to keep our visitors under control. They wonder how long it will be until humans start dying."

"It won't be a problem," Jasper said. "People tend to take rules a little more seriously when someone gets executed for breaking them."

Carlisle shot him a sharp look. "There won't be any executions today."

"Oh yes there will," Jasper snarled, rounding on him. "I want him *dead*, Carlisle."

"Watch your tone."

"You watch yours. I played by your rules; you said I couldn't move against him without clear provocation. Well, it's clear, and I want him dead."

"We'll send them away."

Jasper dropped into a crouch and roared in response.

"He's right," Rosalie told Carlisle. "And so is Sam. Sending them away won't do anything. Your rules only matter if you enforce them."

"So I'm supposed to make an example of them? Kill them to send a message to everyone else? That's barbaric."

"It's *necessary*," Jasper hissed.

"For God's sake, Jasper, stand up. We'll resolve this like men, not animals."

There was a burst of heat across the river, and then Sam stood naked in front of the rest of the pack.

"Yours weren't the only rules broken," he called to them. "This is a violation of our treaty. We can't let that pass unless we have some kind of assurance that it won't happen again."

"Assurance? The murder of two people?"

Sam crossed his arms over his chest and glared at Carlisle.

"There must be another way."

"What other way would a vampire accept?" Jasper said, the challenge clear in his voice.

Carlisle looked helplessly around at his family. "Esme . . . love . . ."

She moved up beside him and took his hand.

"Tell me what to do."

She raised his hand to her lips and then tucked herself against him. "We knew when we invited everyone here that we would have to take steps to protect our human friends."

"Isn't it enough to banish James and Victoria from the territory?"

"I don't think so, darling. If we did that . . . anyone who got bored with the gathering could feel free to violate your terms before they left."

"They're my friends."

"Some of them are. Many of them. But there are those . . ." she glanced across the river, "who won't show you the consideration you deserve."

He shook his head, his expression pained. "I can't, Esme. It's too much." He looked up at Bella and held her gaze for a long time. "What right do I have to take someone's life away?"

"You don't have the right," Jasper said. "But that's not what's happening here. James and Victoria trespassed on Quileute land with full knowledge of the consequences. They forfeited their own lives."

Carlisle sighed, and Bella thought she'd never heard a breath sound so tortured. "If . . . no one objects . . ." He glanced around, but Bella didn't see any hope in his eyes. He knew the decision was made. "All right. Sam . . . it was your territory they trespassed on. I'll leave it to you to take care of them."

Bella expected to see some sign of triumph from Sam, but his upper lip curled in anger.

"I agree," Edward called across to him. "Carlisle, I don't think that's a good idea. The other vampires will respect your right to enforce your rules, but they may not respect Sam's. If the pack kills someone, it could incite retaliation."

Bella thought Carlisle looked very young all of a sudden. He usually carried himself with an air of authority that made him seem older but looking at him now, with sorrow etched in his features and his weight supported by his wife, he looked like a boy who'd had his future taken from him too soon. He looked entirely too young to be dealing with any of this. Twice he started to speak, only to stop before anything came out. Finally, he turned to look at Jasper.

"We should at least speak to their coven leader first."

"Fine. But you can't lose your nerve in front of everyone. You have to be ready to do what's necessary."

Carlisle's face crumpled, but he nodded. "Sam, I'll let you decide whether you want to accompany us."

There was another ripple of heat and the man morphed once again into a wolf. Four of their number dropped the vampire limbs they were holding and melted back into the trees.

"They could use some help," Edward said. He tugged on Bella's hand and the two of them leapt across the river, closely followed by Emmett and Rosalie. They of them gathered up the pieces that

had been abandoned, keeping them apart so they couldn't mend, and then they jumped across the river again with the three remaining wolves trailing behind them.

Jasper collected the two severed heads from Edward and a reluctant wolf. He held them out to Carlisle, who winced at the expressions of pain and anger on the disembodied faces. They snapped and bared their teeth, but separated from their bodies they could make no sound.

"I can do it if you want me to," Jasper murmured.

Carlisle shook his head and reached out, gathering up handfuls of hair by which to carry the heads. However repellent the task was to him, he wasn't going to push it off onto someone else.

Carlisle took point this time, leading his family back to the amphitheater where the group still lingered. There were expressions of surprise and interest but none, Bella noticed, of protest. Nobody seemed to object to two of their own being brought to them in fragments. Even the aversion to the wolves and their stench wasn't enough to stem the curiosity that the situation generated.

"Front and center," Bella heard Jasper mutter to Carlisle, and the man obediently moved to the top level of the amphitheater where he had recently sat with the rest of the family. He tossed the heads down into the middle, where they landed with a thud and a puff of dust.

Carlisle stared around at the others, their attention all riveted on him. "Laurent."

The French coven leader stood from where he had been sitting with the Denali sisters and moved forward.

"My friends caught your coven trespassing on their territory. Can you answer for them?"

Laurent shook his head. "I confess . . . I am not really a part of their coven."

"You told us you led them," Carlisle said sharply.

"That was . . . a manipulation. Something James asks of me in return for his protection. He likes to divert attention from himself by claiming that I am their leader."

"You refuse to accept responsibility for these two, then?"

"I do . . ." He seemed to recognize the precariousness of his position, because he added, "I feel that I should warn you. James is tenacious—as is Victoria. If they didn't get what they wanted today, they won't stop trying. At the risk of making enemies of them, I must advise you not to underestimate them."

Carlisle scanned the crowd until he found the suspicious little redhead member of his friend Siobhan's coven. "Maggie?"

"True," she murmured.

Carlisle stared down at the pair of heads for a long moment. "I think it's only fair to let them speak for themselves."

Jasper let out a quiet huff but didn't argue. He gestured to Emmett, and the two of them dragged the armless, legless torsos of the two vampires down to the bottom of the steps. Bella grimaced at the

sight of empty sleeves and torn hiking shorts, and moved to take Alexander from Nahuel.

"They did a bad thing?" Alexander asked her.

She hesitated. "Why don't we go back to our tent?"

"No! I want to stay."

"This isn't a good thing for you to watch."

"Mother," Alexander pressed his hands to Bella's cheeks, gazing at her solemnly, "I have to learn this."

"Learn this? What do you mean?"

"This is an important thing," he said, with a baby's mouth and an adult's eyes. "I have to learn the important things so I know what to do when I'm growed up."

"You don't have to learn this yet."

"When, Mother?"

She sighed. "I don't know."

"I have to know the right things and the wrong things," he insisted.

She shook her head, remembering Carlisle's objections to what he was about to do. "Baby . . . I don't know how to explain what's going to happen now."

"Why?"

"Because . . . because I want to tell you that there *are* always right things and wrong things . . . but I'm afraid that sometimes there are only wrong things."

One of his hands moved, patting her cheek. "That's okay. I have to learn the wrong things too."

"It's going to be . . . ugly."

"He did a bad thing," Alexander said. "And now a bad thing is going to happen to him."

"Yes."

"Do bad things always happen to people when they do bad things?"

Bella glanced at Joham. "Not always."

"But sometimes they have to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well . . . to keep more bad things from happening."

At the bottom of the amphitheater, Jasper and Emmett had done a quick job of reattaching the heads to their respective bodies. James began snarling threats at Laurent, and Victoria was whispering to him, pleading for him to be quiet.

"Can you explain yourselves?" Carlisle demanded.

James hissed and forced a smile. "We weren't doing anything wrong. We never entered the restricted territory."

The black wolf let out a roar, but it didn't drown out Maggie's quiet, "False."

James's eyes flicked to her, and then back to Carlisle's. "We didn't *know* we had crossed the boundary. Maybe you didn't mark it clearly enough on your map."

"False," Maggie said.

"His intention was to stir up trouble," Edward told Carlisle. "He thought if he created enough chaos to distract Jasper, he might be able to get to Alice."

"True."

"How do you know?" Randall asked Maggie.

"It's what I do," she said with a serene smile.

"You're not the only one," Eleazar said to Maggie. He didn't elaborate, but Bella saw another vampire—Charles, she remembered, like her father—tip his head in acknowledgment.

"Do you disagree with Maggie's assessment?" Carlisle asked Charles.

He shook his head.

"Then I have no choice," he said, sounding defeated. He walked slowly down the steps, stopping once he reached the bottom and looking down at the destroyed vampires on the ground in front of him. "I truly wish I did."

James snarled a threat at him, but Jasper put a stop to that by twisting his head off again. Emmett did the same with Victoria's, kicking the pieces together into a pile.

Jasper drew a lighter out of his pocket and held it out to Carlisle, who took it with a regretful frown. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I would have liked to call you my friends." He flipped open the lighter and lit the flame, then dropped it onto the mangled pile in front of him. It flared immediately, as though it had been doused with lighter fluid, and Carlisle stepped out of the way so the rest of the dismembered limbs could be thrown onto the fire.

It took only minutes for the flames to burn out, leaving only ash and an inky cloud of smoke. The stench was awful and atmosphere grim, and Bella let Alexander watch it all.

When the fire went out, Carlisle turned away.

"We'll adjourn for the day," he said quietly, then climbed the steps of the amphitheater and headed for the house. Esme followed, saying nothing, and the two of them disappeared inside.

"Why is he sad?" Alexander asked Bella.

"Because he didn't want to do that."

"Why?"

She stroked his soft curls, wishing that the world were simple enough to explain to a child. "It's an awful thing to kill someone."

"Even when they do something bad?"

"Yes, baby. Even then."

"But he had to stop the bad things from happening, right?"

"That's right. I'm not sure that makes it okay, though, and neither is Carlisle."

"Is that what it means that sometimes there's only bad things?"

She nodded.

"I have to think about that." Alexander poked his thumb into his mouth and snuggled against her chest.

She stared at the thick cloud of smoke that didn't seem to be clearing as quickly as it ought to. She wanted to ask Benjamin to call up a strong wind and whip away the residue, but that seemed wrong somehow. She felt like she shouldn't get to brush away the evidence of what had happened here today. Like she and everyone else here ought to be forced to live with the reminder.

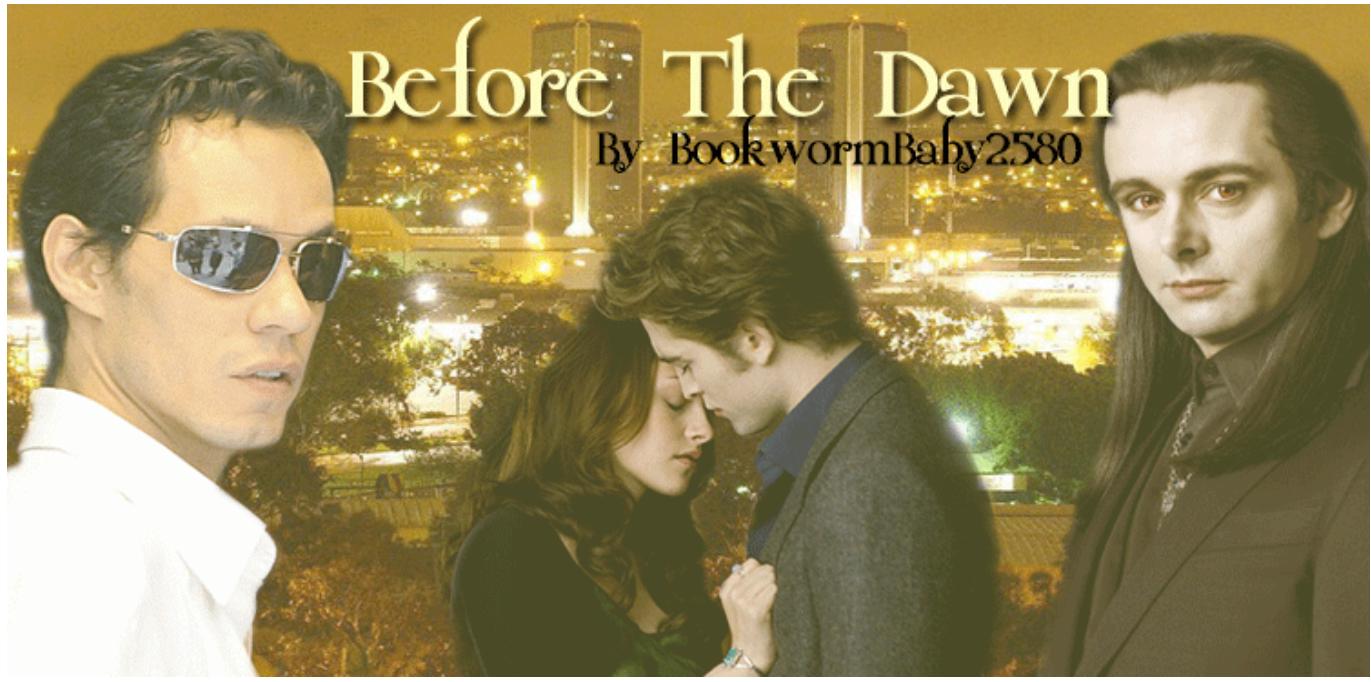
Edward moved to her side, wrapping an arm around her waist. She scanned his face, searching for some kind of reassurance, but it wasn't there. Edward wasn't any more sure of what they had just done than Carlisle was.

Shrouded in a cloud of smoke, Bella found herself missing the cool safety of the water at the bottom of the river.

The Charioteer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



Emmett didn't organize any games that night, out of respect for the dead. Bella didn't think he seemed particularly invested in respecting the dead, but he did respect Carlisle, and Carlisle mourned the loss of life.

The others seemed contented enough with the free time. A few went out to hunt, but most had come to the gathering satiated and didn't yet need to feed. Many of them retired to their tents to spend time with their mates, while others wandered the camps and visited. The introductions seemed to have been a thorough icebreaker, and the atmosphere was friendlier than it had been a few days ago.

Bella and Edward did their share of visiting, and Bella found herself repeatedly defending her position regarding a vampire's right to kill humans. She didn't know what to say when the others claimed nature or instinct, and all she could do was shrug her shoulders.

"It feels wrong," she said, over and over again, and once, when she was frustrated with a particularly waspish opponent she snapped, "I guess my ego isn't inflated enough to convince me that my appetite is more important than someone else's life."

Edward had been particularly entertained by that conversation.

Fortunately, once they'd had their chance to argue, most of the other vampires backed off. Either they only wanted to be heard or they recognized that they were wasting their efforts trying to convince Bella of anything. In the social hierarchy she was nobody. Just a newborn, if an unusually well-connected one.

Edward was still chuckling over her ego remark when Maggie beckoned them over to a campfire where she stood with three other women. Two were nomads, Hattie and Maureen, and the third, Pietra, was a member of Luca's family. All of them had introduced themselves already. Bella steered Edward toward them and prepared herself for another argument. "You don't have to explain to me how all animals kill living organisms to survive," she said drily. "Demetri already made sure I was aware of that."

Maggie chuckled and shook her head. "Demetri has a point, but that isn't what we were talking about."

Bella shifted the sleeping boy in her arms and shot her an awkward smile. "Sorry. I guess I'm a little defensive."

"It's all right," Hattie said, tucking a lock of her pale bob behind her ear. "It's probably a step up from the conversation we were having."

"Yeah?"

"We were trying to figure out what percentage of us have been victims of sexual assault," Pietra said. "It's a larger percent than I would like it to be."

"It's not so bad if you include the men," Maggie said with a snort.

Maureen held up a hand. "That's not fair. It happens to men too, and it's just as awful when it does."

"And I suppose they might be more secretive about it," Pietra mused. "So it would be harder to know what the numbers were."

"How do you know what the numbers are with the women?" Bella asked. She'd been restless, sure, but she had still listened to the introductions of everyone who had spoken so far. She couldn't remember anyone besides herself making a reference to assault.

"Gossip," Maureen said. "Well that, and . . . sometimes you can just tell. There are signs."

"Like what?"

"Like the tone Rosalie takes when she talks about her ex-fiancé," Maggie said pointedly.

"The way Hattie is standing there grinding that to stone dust," Pietra added.

Bella hadn't noticed, but sure enough, the rock beneath Hattie's bare heel was a little worse for the wear.

She smirked and shrugged.

"So . . ." Bella looked around at the women, "have you all . . . ?"

"All four of us," Maggie said. "In one way or another. For me, it was my father and my brother."

Bella recoiled.

"Married when I was fourteen," Maureen said, raising a hand. "Eighth wife of eleven."

"Stranger outside of a speakeasy," Hattie added.

Pietra crossed her arms. "Boyfriend. He was found dead a couple of hours after I told Uncle Luca. Choked on his own severed fingers, if you can believe it."

Bella realized her jaw was hanging open and she snapped it shut.

"And we obviously know about you," Maggie said, gesturing to Alexander. "I don't know how you managed to keep him. It's admirable . . . I think."

"Don't be absurd," Maureen said. "A mother loves her children no matter where they come from."

"Speak for yourself," Hattie snorted, drawing a box of cigarettes out of a pocket in her shorts. She tapped one out and lit up, eyeing Alexander all the while.

Bella shifted uncomfortably. She didn't love the direction the conversation had taken. "I can understand it either way. I love him like crazy, but . . . sometimes it's hard to deal with how much he resembles Joham."

"Fucker," Pietra muttered.

"Is that why you guys don't like him?" Bella asked. "Because you . . . have experience?"

Hattie nodded, blowing out a stream of smoke. "Us and at least a dozen other women here."

"And our covens," Maggie added. "They're sensitive to it for our sakes."

"That's depressing," Bella said with a grimace.

Pietra let out a hard laugh. "You're telling me. Violence against women has a long and illustrious history. At least as vampires we're better equipped to fight back."

Bella nodded in agreement. Shoelaces and leather collars wouldn't restrain her these days.

"How about you, Don Juan?" Pietra said, addressing Edward for the first time. "Ever raped anyone?"

Edward ignored her accusatory tone and shook his head. "I have a fair few crimes to my name, but that was never one of them."

"Oh, so you *do* have a rap sheet!" Maggie's eyes danced with curiosity. "Why didn't you tell us in your introduction?"

Hattie snorted. "Carlisle's golden boy a criminal? I can hardly believe it."

He smiled sadly. "Lucky for me, Carlisle believes in redemption."

"So did my husband," Maureen said with a wry smile. "He told me I'd get it by sucking his dick."

Pietra whistled. "Good riddance to him."

"Hear, hear."

A lilting trill of music drifted to them on the breeze and Bella cocked her head to listen. "Is someone playing . . . a harp?"

"That's probably Pythia," Hattie said. "I saw her carrying a lyre down to the river earlier." She jabbed the air with her cigarette. "She's one of us."

"Pythia? How do you know?"

Hattie shrugged, but Pietra said, "I'm sure you're right. There's a reason she hooked up with that little warrior of hers."

"Same reason I stick close to Siobhan," Maggie agreed. "It's comforting having a woman at your side who can dish out a proper ass-kicking. Still . . ." The corners of her mouth tugged into a smile. "Must have been nice doing it yourself, huh, Bella? I'm surprised Joham is still alive."

"For now," Bella muttered.

Edward tightened his arm around her shoulders. "Maybe we should plot his murder another time? I want to go see what Pythia's up to."

Bella waved to the other women and she and Edward followed the music to the banks of the river a few hundred yards upstream from the camp. Pythia was sitting in the bracken next to the water with the lyre in her lap, her head tilted back in song. She looked completely swept away and Bella slowed, reluctant to interrupt what looked like a private moment. She and Edward had already stopped walking when Ulka strode out of the trees and stood in their path.

Edward nodded in response to an unspoken thought. "Of course, we'll let her be. What is she doing?"

"Washing and singing paeans to Apollo. This is how she prepares herself to receive his words."

"Do you think her prophecies are really legitimate?" he asked, his voice betraying his doubt. "She's not just . . . hearing things?"

Ulka arched a brow at him. "I would expect a friend of Alice's to be a little less skeptical."

"Alice doesn't claim to be receiving messages from a god, though."

"You don't believe in any gods?"

"It's . . . a stretch."

She smiled serenely. "Then stretch."

Alexander stirred in Bella's arms and she bounced him until he drifted back to sleep again. "So it was the ancient Greeks who got it right? Polytheism? Cronus and Zeus and the River Styx?"

"I'm not sure I'd go as far as to believe the myths. Some of them are sure to be the invention of their human acolytes. But Apollo has spoken of other gods to Pythia, and there are hints that even those who believe in one supreme god may not be wrong."

"How is that possible?" Edward asked.

"There have been oblique references to something that the gods all serve. Whether it's another being or unifying purpose, I don't know. But if it's a sentient being, what Pythia calls gods, your Christian coven leader might call angels."

"What about you?" Bella asked. "Is there a religion you believe in?"

"I was Hindu in my human life. I have found little to challenge the essentials of my belief in the messages that Pythia receives."

"But you don't call yourself Hindu now?"

"I don't worship in the way I once did. My service to the gods now takes a new form."

"Protection of their messenger," Edward murmured.

She inclined her head.

"Have you been with Pythia very long?" Bella asked.

"One hundred twelve years and one month, come sunrise."

"That's . . . specific."

Ulka smiled. "Apollo keeps a regular schedule. He speaks on the seventh day of the summer months. If you seek his counsel, you must present yourself to the oracle on the proper day."

Bella hadn't been keeping a close eye on the calendar, but she knew Carlisle had set the beginning of the Gathering for the fifth of August, and they'd just finished their second meeting. It was after midnight, so today was the seventh.

"I believe Carlisle intended to make an offering," Ulka said, "but I'm afraid he may have been distracted by recent events."

"He hasn't forgotten," Edward assured her.

"Good. Pythia claims that Apollo appreciates a well-ordered society. She expects him to look favorably upon this venture."

"So you met Pythia because you wanted a message from Apollo?" Bella asked.

She shrugged. "I was curious. She tried to keep a low profile for a long time. Too many people wanted answers from her, or wanted to take revenge on her when they misinterpreted the things she told them. She moved around a lot and tried to hide her identity, but I heard rumors about her and I wanted to know if they were true."

"So now you're a believer?"

"A cautious one. She told me that she had been held captive by a dragon when she was human. That seemed a little far-fetched until . . ." She trailed off, waving a hand vaguely toward the cluster of tents.

Edward chuckled.

"She also told me that Apollo promised to free her if she would be his voice, but that she would have to be purified by the fire of the sun."

Bella raised her eyebrows, remembering the burning agony of her transition from human to vampire. "Could Apollo have been another vampire?"

"At first I thought he must be. But . . . Pythia knows impossible things. Whoever speaks with her mouth knows more than any living soul possibly could."

"Are you sure about that?" Edward asked. "You're in the company of at least two mind readers here. Couldn't Pythia simply be responding to what she sees in people's heads?"

"When you see her answer questions that her supplicants would never have thought to ask, you find yourself wondering how one acquires that kind of talent." Ulka smiled. "Wait until sunrise. She may just make a believer out of you."

"Fair enough."

They heard footsteps approaching from across the river, and Ulka excused herself to leap across and intercept the visitors. A moment later, Edward moved to head off another pair. They required a certain level of sternness from him before they gave up trying to speak to Pythia, and Edward sighed in frustration as he headed back toward Bella. "Jasper!" he called, looking back toward the house.

Jasper didn't make them wait for a response. Bella heard him running toward them, and a little irrational part of herself panicked at the sound. She'd been pursued by Jasper before, and she hadn't fared very well. She battled with her flight instinct and managed to stay at least in the vicinity, though she may have stumbled back a few steps toward the river.

"Why do you need him?" Bella asked.

"His presence may help keep others away," he murmured. "Everyone is avoiding him."

"Why?"

"Mostly out of fear. Everyone knew he wanted James dead, but Carlisle didn't. And since Carlisle's the coven leader, everyone figured that was the end of discussion. Until it wasn't. Now that the others are beginning to understand what kind of sway Jasper has in the coven, they're a little anxious about getting on his bad side."

Jasper skidded to a stop in front of Edward. "What?"

Edward didn't even have to answer. The group that had started to gather was already dissipating.

"Want to hang out and help give Pythia some space?" he asked with a smirk."

Jasper glanced around and shrugged. He dropped down into the grass next to the river and leaned back on his elbows.

"How's the kid holding up?" he asked Bella, nodding toward Alexander.

"He's fine."

"How about you?"

Bella shrugged. "I don't know what I'm doing, I can hardly stand to be here with all of these people, and I'm pretty much on the verge of running away all the time."

Jasper let out a low laugh. "I'd say you sound like a newborn except you didn't mention anything about thirst."

"I guess I didn't," she said, feeling oddly pleased with herself. "At least I've got one thing under control."

He gave her an approving look before turning to Edward. "So what's all this with Pythia?"

Ulka rejoined them as Edward explained why Pythia wanted privacy. He listened silently, and only grunted in acknowledgment when Edward finished.

"Are you a skeptic too?" Ulka asked him.

He shrugged, eyeing a couple of vampires who had crept near again and were watching Pythia from the low branches of a tree across the river. "Don't much care, to be honest."

"You don't care whether Pythia can speak to a god?"

"Nope. God and I haven't had much to do with each another for quite some time. Seems like that's probably the best thing for all involved."

"You may not think of Apollo, but that doesn't mean he doesn't think of you." Ulka was looking over Jasper's shoulder, where Bella noticed there was another person watching. Now that she was paying attention, in fact, she could pick out half a dozen in sight and could hear the breathing of a handful more. So much for Edward's plan to scare everyone away.

"Pain in the ass," Jasper muttered, following Bella's gaze.

"Maybe we should give them something more interesting to watch," Ulka suggested.

Jasper cut his eyes at her. "What'd you have in mind."

She shrugged, but as soon as Jasper looked away she lunged for him, aiming for his throat.

Bella gasped, but Jasper had already deflected her, dragging her to the ground and falling on top of her. In another fraction of a second he would have had her pinned, but she managed to pull her legs up between them and kick him off. Jasper caught hold of her ankle and yanked her back with him, and they both tumbled into the river. They scrambled apart, crouched and grinning at each other in the shallow water, then Ulka took off running and Jasper lunged after her, the two of them putting a fair distance between themselves and the bank before Jasper caught her and she had to turn and defend herself.

Bella bounced anxiously on her toes. "This is all in fun, right?" she asked Edward. "Nobody's going to end up in the fire pit over this?"

"They're both having a great time."

Bella winced at the sound of cracking vampire flesh.

Edward snorted. "Jasper's going to have to be a little quicker than—yeah. Like that."

Bella turned her back on the fight and kept an eye on Pythia instead. As long as Ulka was handling the distraction, she would do her best to head off any stragglers.

Carlisle spent most of the evening in the house, but a couple of hours before dawn he left with Esme in her SUV. When they returned, they were pulling a trailer full of what Bella thought sounded like livestock.

"What's going on?" she asked Edward.

"Sacrifices for Pythia. Or Apollo, I guess. I can't imagine Pythia appreciates goat very much."

Bella wrinkled her nose.

"Right?" he agreed. "It's the traditional sacrifice, though, and Carlisle's definitely one for honoring tradition."

Ulka and Jasper approached through the woods, both of them wearing torn clothes and caked with mud, but with eyes bright from their extended sparring match.

"You're quick," Jasper told her.

"You're strong," she replied.

Bella inspected both of them, but neither seemed to be missing any limbs or even sporting any new scars. They had apparently kept their teeth to themselves.

"That thing with your scarf and the branch?" Jasper was saying. "That was smart."

"Which is why it worked."

He laughed and gave her tangled hair an affectionate tug. "I'll see if Alice has a change of clothes hidden away."

"That's unnecessary. I brought my own." She nodded to Bella and Edward. "Could you look after Pythia for a few minutes more while I clean up?"

Bella nodded. Pythia had moved on from singing to bathing in the river. Edward had averted his eyes respectfully when she began to undress, but she didn't appear to be the slightest bit self-conscious. She chanted something low and rhythmic while she immersed herself in the cool, rushing water.

Ulka returned after a few minutes, clean and dressed in fresh clothes, with a dress of bright red and yellow silk thrown over her arm. She thanked Edward and Bella for staying and then dismissed them with a wave of her hand. The sky was getting light, and Bella figured that whatever was going to happen was coming soon. Edward was heading toward the bleating sounds coming from the trailer, and Bella fell in beside him, her curiosity mounting.

Carlisle was at the back of the trailer, having a slightly difficult time dragging ten unpleasant smelling goats out of it. He was stronger than they were, of course, but the ten of them together exerted enough force that he had to dig his heels into the earth with each step to keep them moving forward. Once out of the trailer, they attempted to scatter, and Carlisle had to shorten their tethers to keep himself from getting tangled up in them.

Esme moved ahead of him, carrying a three-legged stool that had been stained to a high gloss. She descended the steps of the amphitheater and placed it in the center, setting a small wreath of leafy

green sprigs on top of it. Then, as Carlisle dragged his reluctant livestock down into the amphitheater, she made a circle of large stones and began gathering dry wood from the forest.

"Is that for Pythia?" Bella asked Edward.

He nodded, settling down on the rim of the amphitheater and watching while Carlisle drove a long metal stake into the earth near the ring of stones. He tied the ropes to it, and then loped back up to the top of the amphitheater.

"You brought an awful lot of them," Edward teased mildly.

"This is a rare opportunity. I want there to be no doubt of my gratitude."

"Tell me you're not pinning all your hopes on this, Carlisle. The Oracle's prophecies are notorious for being misleading."

"Some legends have them to be quite plain." He sat down in the dirt next to Bella. "I'm hoping that a generous gift will encourage transparency."

He smiled and Edward returned it, the two of them sharing a joke that wasn't secret, exactly, but that held an intimacy that reminded Bella of the long years they had been together. She felt for just a moment like an outsider, and yet, oddly comforted. These were men capable of long and deep affection, and in a way, they belonged to her.

Alexander stirred and grunted, cranky at being awakened by the bleating of the goats. He rubbed his eyes and started to fuss, until he pulled his hands away and turned toward the source of the noise. He quieted, leaning forward, and then turned back to Bella with sleepy eyes.

"What are those, mother?"

"Goats."

"What are goats?"

Bella laughed. She had heard the boy recite the principal export of every country in South America, but he couldn't identify a goat?

"They're livestock. Animals that people raise to milk or to kill and eat."

"Why are they down there?"

"They're . . . an offering, I guess. A sacrifice to Apollo."

"Do you know any Greek mythology?" Edward asked him.

He shook his head.

"I guess we'd better fill you in, then. Starting with the Oracle of Delphi."

Bella rested her head on Edward's shoulder as he told Alexander all about the mysterious woman who, freed from the dragon Python by Apollo, became his spokesperson. Some of the stories were familiar to Bella, and some entirely new. Alexander listened to them all with rapt attention, and

peppered Edward with questions that often couldn't be answered. Every time his curiosity went unsatisfied, Alexander screwed up his face in a frustrated pout.

Characteristically, several other vampires gathered to listen to Edward's stories, and a good half of the group was already present when Pythia drifted to the edge of the amphitheater and began making her way down. She was dressed in the bright red and yellow gown that Ulka had brought her, the light fabric fluttering around her legs as she descended the stairs to the bottom. Once there, she moved to the stool and let her fingers trail over the wreath of greenery. She raised her eyes to Esme, who had returned to the fire pit to light the blaze.

"The laurels you brought were looking a little dry," Esme murmured.

Pythia gave her a serene smile of gratitude, then lifted the little wreath and placed it on her head. She separated tiny locks of hair and plaited them around her crown of foliage to hold it in place.

Esme coaxed the flames into a healthy fire, then moved back to the top of the amphitheater and settled beside Carlisle. Expectation hung thick in the air, drawing more spectators to the circle. The moment the first rays of sunlight appeared over the mountains, Pythia began scattering herbs in the fire. The scent of them mingled with the wood smoke and seasoned the air with their aroma, and Pythia sang a low, inviting tune, beckoning Apollo with her song. Pythia's nearness had sent the goats into an even greater panic, and two of them collapsed under the strain of their fear while the rest pulled desperately at their tethers. Pythia barely seemed to notice them. She hummed and sprinkled her herbs as the sun slowly ascended, and it wasn't until the light of it had entirely cleared the horizon that she leapt on the goats and, with surprising speed, sank her teeth into each of their throats. When the last one was drained, she rose with slow dignity and turned toward Carlisle. With a pace so lax that it would have frustrated even a human, she drifted up the steps of the amphitheater and came to a stop in front of where he sat.

Bella gazed up at her, her skin radiant in the sunlight, her eyes a bright burnished gold from her recent feeding and . . . something else, perhaps. Where she had always been serene before, now she was vital and brilliant, full of something that hadn't been there previously. The slow step that Bella had attributed to dreamy distraction she recognized now as careful deliberation, as though a false step would shatter the earth.

"Carlisle," she said, and her low murmur was just as controlled as her steps. "Scholar. Healer. Favored son. Honored are you among gods and mortals." She smiled down at him with deep affection. "Apollo is pleased with your efforts here, and rewards you with his blessing. All who desire his wisdom will be given it."

"I'm deeply grateful," Carlisle whispered.

"Hear and understand." She reached out and brushed his forehead with the tip of her fingers. For a long moment she said nothing, and then finally leaned down and whispered, "He who made the lamb made thee."

Carlisle's eyes widened and he caught Pythia's hand between his own. For a moment he was speechless, and then he pressed her hand to his lips and said in a trembling whisper, "Thank you."

She smiled and extracted her hand before turning toward Bella. With her eyes fixed on Alexander, she held out her arms and reached for him. Bella hesitated but Alexander didn't. He pushed himself away from Bella and let Pythia pick him up.

"The gods never had such a messenger," she said with doting smile. "Look, little evangelist, and see the gifts that have been given. You have been blessed with a family such as the world has never seen. Study them. Know their weaknesses but emulate their strengths. Seek always the very best, and you will be granted wisdom and discernment that will guide you to the light of truth. That, little one, is your mission. You will bring sunrise to a darkened world."

Bella shot to her feet. She wanted to snatch Alexander away from her and drive her off. How dare she make demands of him? How dare she place such a responsibility on the shoulders of a baby? But Pythia was already placing Alexander back in her arms, and with her hands freed she let her fingers rest on Bella's cheek. "Little mother," she murmured. "Your burden is heavy for one so young, but the arrangement was necessary. It was only you, as you are now, who could properly prepare the boy." She drew her hand back, kissed her fingertips, and then touched Bella's cheek again.

"Woman, how divine your mission,
Here upon our natal sod;
Keep—oh, keep the young heart open
Always to the breath of God!
All true trophies of the ages
Are from mother-love impeared,
For the hand that rocks the cradle
Is the hand that rules the world."

Bella frowned at her. "What?"

She didn't seem to notice Bella's question. She was already turning away from her, setting her sights on Edward. She cocked her head and frowned down at him. "The lessons you have learned you hide in shame. But they were not meant for only you."

Edward's face darkened, but he became thoughtful when Pythia meandered down a few steps to where Emmett and Rosalie were seated. She let her fingers trail over Emmett's shoulder as she moved around to face him. "Joy has been your commission, and joy shall be your reward."

Bella could hear the grin in Emmett's voice when he replied, "Excellent."

Pythia stooped to look at Rosalie then, her eyes fixed on her with a burning intensity. "For many long years your heart has cried out to the gods. The time is at hand for them to answer."

"Answer what?" Rosalie asked, but as before, Pythia ignored her. As she moved from one person to another, issuing sometimes cryptic, sometimes plain messages, she never once even acknowledged that a question had been asked. Either Apollo couldn't hear through her ears, Bella thought wryly, or he thought his messages were sufficient without clarification. She herself would have liked to ask dozens of questions about herself and Alexander, but it seemed obvious that the effort would be wasted.

Some of the gathered vampires got more attention than others. Kate, from the Denali coven, was treated to a solemn parable about a gardener whose plants kept dying, and when that was finished Pythia told Tanya simply, "The gods have prepared something new for you, if you want it." Additionally, the tone of her proclamations varied. Some messages were light-hearted, such as when she stopped in front of Garrett, her eyes dancing. "Some gods," she said with what was very nearly a laugh, "require sacrifice." But when she spoke to Joham, her voice turned stern.

"Your aspirations for your son will, in a sense, be fulfilled," she told him, "but your life's work has yet to be accomplished. If you remain on your current path you will find only stagnation and death." She turned back and gestured toward Bella and Alexander. "Let the boy inspire creation, not obsession."

Joham answered with a low growl that, of course, went unacknowledged by Pythia.

Most of what she said made little sense to Bella, though most of the recipients reacted in ways that made her assume Pythia's words carried some weight with them. For the most part, Bella paid little attention, though there were certain people who piqued her interest. Aro, for instance: Pythia gave him a sad smile as she touched his face, and murmured, "It is the nature of suns to rise and to set." To Amun, she said archly, "You are *not* a god." Then she cupped Kebi's face in her hands and murmured gently, "It *is*, dear one. It *is*."

Benjamin's message was nearly as opaque as Kebi's, and yet oddly specific as well: "He was wrong; there are two. The other is Carlisle."

Benjamin's eyebrows raised nearly to his hairline, and he shared a significant look with Tia.

"You," Pythia told Tia when she had her attention, "are hard enough. But you are not soft enough. It will be very important that you listen to your mate."

Tia looked completely perplexed.

On and on she went, weaving her way up and down the stairs, stopping in front of each person for at least a moment. Those who hadn't been there from the beginning soon joined the crowd, their curiosity piqued by the mystery that was Pythia. Even Alistair and Maysun came out, Maysun looking wan and fragile beneath her growing stomach. Their messages were delivered in a whisper that didn't carry to those around them.

Many of Pythia's declarations were made in other languages, too. All of the shape shifters were addressed in Chinese, and something about the way Pythia spoke made her words feel deeply intimate. All three of them were left with a smile, though Minh's looked somewhat sad.

It took nearly two hours for her to make her way back around the circle to where Jasper sat with Alice wedged between his legs, his arms wrapped protectively around her. Pythia stopped in front of them and smiled down at Alice.

"Quiet your fears," she said, her soothing murmur an odd contrast to her piercing gaze. "It is a gift. Those who are least like you can offer you the greatest peace."

"Peace?" Alice asked, wide-eyed, turning to look back at Jasper.

"It is a gift," Pythia said again, and then raised her eyes to meet Jasper's.

"Apollo is not greater than Dionysus, nor Dionysus than Apollo. Each attends to his purpose."

Jasper answered with a blank stare.

"And Esme," she murmured, moving to the last of the gathered vampires. She smiled warmly down at her and bent down to cup her cheeks in her hands. "You are the rock," she whispered lovingly, "against which your husband's good intentions will be dashed."

Esme jerked back in shock, and Bella drew in a sharp breath. She wasn't the only one. A low murmur rippled through the crowd as everyone reacted.

"What does that mean?" Esme asked.

But once again, there was no answer from Pythia. She floated down the steps, smiling as though she hadn't left more than a hundred people gaping after her. She moved back to her stool and lowered herself down onto it, bowing her head low. After a few silent seconds, she stretched, shook herself, and then raised her head and looked around at the gaping crowd.

The rush came almost immediately. People began shouting questions, several of them darting toward her to claim her attention. Ulka leapt to her aid, shoving a few back and snarling in warning. That held back the crush of bodies, but it didn't stop the questions. The din of voices grew louder and louder, but Pythia only laughed a low, quiet laugh.

"I can't help you," she said, her words quieting the commotion almost immediately. "I'm never given knowledge, only words. Their meaning is between you and Apollo."

"Then ask him!" someone shouted.

She smiled, her eyes sparkling. "You have what you need. The challenge is to accept it."

A multi-voiced growl of discontent began to rise, but Carlisle's voice cut through the commotion.

"That's enough," he said. "Everyone move back, please."

Bella thought for a moment that they would ignore him, but she underestimated his influence. Slowly and reluctantly, the knot of vampires returned to their seats.

"I don't know about you," Carlisle said, rising, "but I could use a little bit of time to think about what we've just heard."

He was answered with nods and murmurs of assent.

"We'll recess, then. I'll see you all back here in one hour, and we'll begin discussing the issues that have brought us all together." Carlisle looked at Esme, a slight frown on his face, but she only smiled and rose.

"I think I'll make Alexander something to eat," she said with a too-bright smile, heading for the house.

Carlisle looked like he wanted to go after her, but something made him hesitate. Instead, he glanced over at Jasper.

"We should talk."

Jasper nodded and the two of them went off alone into the woods.

Edward ground his teeth. "So much for transparency."

"Is Esme upset?" Bella asked him.

"Wouldn't you be?"

She nodded, thinking of Pythia's words, and yet she couldn't bring herself to dwell on Esme's distress for long. Her own message had left her in enough turmoil. The demands placed on Alexander by Pythia—or Apollo, if he existed—seemed unreasonably heavy. How could he be expected to be some messenger to the gods? And she especially didn't appreciate Pythia's telling Joham that his aspirations for Alexander would be fulfilled. That, in fact, made her feel oddly weak. She remembered what Joham used talk about with Serena: the rise of a super-race of half-vampires with his son at the head.

"Mother," Alexander said, drawing her attention back to him, "I want to talk to Father."

"No."

"Yes."

She shook her head. Days of swimming in the ocean hadn't left Bella chilled, but an icy cold crept into the center of her chest. There was nothing in the world that she feared more than Joham's influence on Alexander, and she couldn't seem to keep the two of them separated.

"Pythia said I have to learn from *everyone*. That means Father, too."

"Absolutely not." She realized that Joham could hear their conversation, and that she was avoiding his gaze. The thought made her irritable. She raised her eyes to meet his, only barely managing to hold back a hiss of pure hatred. "I will *never* let him teach you to be the kind of man that he is."

"But Pythia said I *have* to."

"I don't care what Pythia said," Bella snapped.

Alexander recoiled from her anger. He scowled at her, his bottom lip poking out, and he crossed his little arms over his chest. "You're not being fair."

"I don't care."

"Father loves me more than you do!" he yelled, squirming out of Bella's arms. "He lets me have human blood and do whatever I want, and I want to live with him instead of you!"

Bella didn't know it was possible to be both freezing and boiling at the same time, but suddenly she was. A red haze clouded her vision, but before she could respond, Rosalie whipped around and leveled a finger at Alexander.

"Cut the crap," she said, her voice stern. "You say that again and you'd better be ready for your mother to send you back to Nevada with your creep of a father. Think about that for a minute. Is that really the life you want?"

Alexander's little fists clenched. "Mother's being mean."

"Maybe she is, but kid, I'm a hundred times better at the manipulation game than you are. If you talk about living with your father again, you might just get what you asked for."

"Mother won't send me back," he said sulkily.

"I wouldn't count on that if I were you."

But Alexander was right. Bella wouldn't allow him to be with Joham again—not ever—and the fact that he was still an option for her son was a real problem for her.

"I should have killed him," she growled, glaring at Joham. He smiled smugly back at her, confident in the protection of Carlisle's rules. But Carlisle wasn't around, and rules on paper didn't have the power of claws and teeth . . .

"*You said it's bad to kill people,*" Alexander accused Bella, stomping his foot. "You said I can't have human blood and that it was awful to kill James and Victoria. But you're a liar, because you want to kill my father!"

"She's not going to kill him," Edward said, his voice soft and soothing at Bella's side. His hand moved to her shoulder, nudging her, urging her to look at him. When she met his warm, ochre gaze he said again, "You're not going to kill him."

The fight eased out of her and she shook her head.

"Alexander, come here," Edward said, drawing the boy into his lap. "There's something I need to tell you. Something that maybe I should have shared with everyone when we all gave our histories. I didn't, because I didn't want to undermine Carlisle, and . . . well, because I'm not proud of it. But what Pythia said made me think that was the wrong thing to do."

"What?" Alexander muttered, curiosity not entirely replacing his irritability.

"I know how it feels to be denied human blood when you want it so badly. I know because Carlisle was the one who turned me, and he kept me away from the blood that I wanted for years. I obeyed him because I loved him and I respected what he was trying to do, but . . . desire is a persistent thing. I wanted blood, and eventually I found a way to rationalize the killing."

"You drank human blood?" Alexander asked, his attention fully on Edward now.

He nodded. "I did. I thought that I would still be more virtuous than others of my kind. That, because I could read minds, I could hunt only the criminals and therefore actually be a boon to society. I moved to New York and I started stalking those who intended to hurt others, killing them and drinking their blood before they got the chance. Doubtless, there are people who are better off because of what I did, and I was proud of myself for that."

"After a while, things started to change. At first I only hunted when my thirst was strong. But there was so much crime in the city that I was tempted more and more often. And I liked the blood so much that I justified my killing with softer and softer crimes. Until I was hunting every day. Until I was obsessed with the next victim and the next meal. Until all I did was stalk, kill, drink, and hide evidence."

"And then one day I saw myself—or, rather, how little of myself there was left. With Carlisle I had played music, read books, talked about art and philosophy, given my time to charity work, and had lived a full and vibrant life. But in New York I had let all of that go, little by little, until all I cared about was blood. I had become a predator, nothing more, and I finally understood that killing for the sake of removing evil from the world was a farce. I finally saw the damage I was doing not only to my victims and their families but to my own soul."

"So I left New York. I went back to Carlisle. I had no right to expect his welcome, but he gave it anyway. He helped me rebuild the parts of myself that I had lost, but it was a long and painful

process and I'll never be quite the same as I was before. I'll never forget, Alexander, how very small I was at that time in my life. How narrow my scope, how feeble my presence. Sometimes . . ." He glanced around the circle, which was still almost entirely full of listening ears. "Sometimes I wonder if other vampires are reduced the way I was. It may be that we as a race have the capacity to be a tremendous force, but we limit ourselves to what we are because we invest too much of ourselves in our thirst."

He tightened his arm around Alexander in a brief hug. "I don't want that for you. You're already brilliant and inquisitive, and you're only a few weeks old. I want your mind to stay sharp and I'm afraid it will be wasted if you live the way I did when I was in New York. So yes, your mother and I want you to stay away from Joham's influence because we know how easily that kind of darkness can overcome you. We don't want you to be reduced to his level. We believe that you'll be a smarter, more capable, more well-rounded person if you're selective about the influences you allow into your life."

Alexander had listened closely, sucking his thumb as he did, but now he pulled it out of his mouth and pursed his lips. "I have to think about that."

Edward nodded. "You should. If you have any questions, you can come to me."

"Okay." His thumb found its way back to his mouth and he leaned against Edward's shoulder, his little brow furrowed in thought.

Bella sidled closer to Edward and gazed gratefully up at him. She didn't have the words to tell him what it meant to her that he would share his experience for Alexander's sake. He seemed to understand, though, and smiled at her, wrapping an arm around her to pull her closer.

Several yards to their left, Garrett got to his feet with a huff. "My kingdom for some bloody peace," he muttered, and stalked away through the trees.

Alexander watched him go and popped his thumb out of his mouth again. "Is bloody a bad word?"

Chapter End Notes

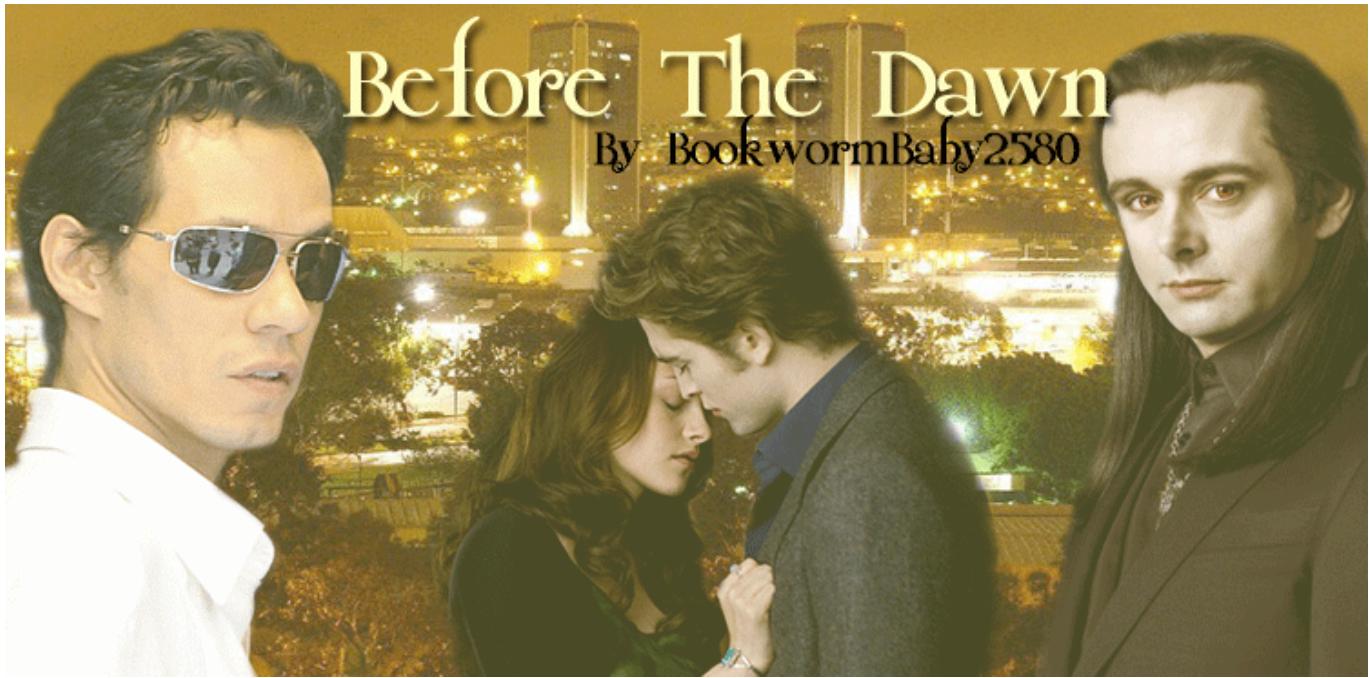
Some credits:

Stanza from "The Hand that Rocks the Cradle" by William Ross Wallace and paraphrased line from "The Tyger" by William Blake.

I'm deeply indebted to ATONAU and her story Prelude in C for shaping my perceptions of what Edward's rebellious period would have been like.

<http://archiveofourown.org/works/417880/chapters/694578>

Fearful Symmetry



It had been well over an hour since Carlisle had called for a recess, and he wasn't back yet. He'd eventually followed Esme to the house, but she hadn't wanted to talk to him; instead she'd gone off into the woods with Jasper and left Carlisle alone in the house. Bella could hear him going through the motions of checking on Amelia, but his voice didn't have the calm reassurance that it usually did.

Everyone else had returned and now sat in uncomfortable anticipation around the amphitheater. Some were still whispering urgently about what Pythia had told them, but Ulka was hovering menacingly over her partner, snarling at anyone who tried to pester her with questions.

Aro stood and moved toward the place Carlisle had previously occupied. "Perhaps we should get started without—"

"No," Tanya snapped.

He started to reply, but Tanya and her sisters all rose, icy glares fixed on him, and he retreated to his seat beside Alec.

"I don't understand exactly what's happening," Bella murmured to Edward as things settled down again. "Esme is this upset because Pythia told her she'd mess up Carlisle's intentions?"

"Kind of." Alexander was making sculptures in the dirt in front of them, and Edward fixed his troubled gaze there. "I mean, that *did* disturb her. This is all really important to Carlisle, so being told that she would be a detriment was a blow. But the real problem is that she was hoping for something else."

"Why?"

"Because of Carlisle, mostly. How do I explain?" He pressed his palms together in front of him, still watching Alexander. "What Pythia said to Carlisle . . . that's exactly what he's wanted to hear since the day he woke up a vampire."

"The thing about the lamb?"

He nodded soberly. "'He who made the lamb made thee.' It's a paraphrase of a line from a poem. Have you ever read William Blake?"

"Uh . . . a little. 'Tyger, Tyger, burning bright . . .' "

"Exactly," he said. "That's the poem she was making reference to. Do you know the whole thing?"

Bella shook her head. "I've read it, but all I remember was that 'Tyger' was spelled weird and that 'symmetry' was supposed to rhyme with 'eye.' "

"It used to." He finally looked at her, a small smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Do you know about the poem's origins? *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*?"

"No."

"William Blake wrote and printed a book of poems called *Songs of Innocence* that were . . . kind of simple, I guess. Easy rhymes, didactic messages. Most of them were the sort of poems you might expect a child to learn in a Sunday school class. Like *The Lamb*." He took her hand, sliding his fingers absently along the length of hers as he recited.

"Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

"Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee."

Alexander had stopped his play, looking puzzled. "A lamb turned into a child and made another lamb?"

"I think it means Jesus," Bella said.

"Who's Jesus?"

"He's the central figure in Christian religions," Edward explained. "Did Joham teach you any details of the world's religions?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know about very many of them either," Bella said. "Maybe we can learn about them together."

A smile lit up his face. "Yes! I want to, Mother!"

"We'll make it a priority." She looked back at Edward. "So that's one of the Innocence poems?"

He nodded. "Blake later added his *Songs of Experience*, most of which were direct counterparts to what he'd written in *Songs of Innocence*. Only these verses took the simple concepts and complicated them. The counterpart to *The Lamb* is *The Tyger*." Once again, he recited:

"Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

"In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

"And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

"What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

"When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

"Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?"

"I like that one!" Alexander exclaimed.

Edward smiled at him. "I like it too. Quite a lot. But can you tell what this one has in common with *The Lamb*?"

He screwed up his face in thought.

"It's the question," Bella murmured, thinking of what Pythia had told Carlisle. "Who made you?"

Edward nodded. "In *The Lamb*, it's simple. It's easy for a child to accept that God might create a lamb. But what about the animal that eats the lamb? What kind of god creates a lamb and then leaves it defenseless against the tiger, which he also created?"

"Jesus made tigers too?" Alexander asked.

Edward nodded. "Christians generally believe in a kind, benevolent God. But Blake wants us to consider the possibility that God can be cruel."

"And this is what Carlisle wanted to hear?"

He smiled, his hair falling into his eyes as he lowered his head. "In a way. It's . . . better than the alternative?"

"Which is what?"

"Carlisle's culture—Carlisle's father—believed that vampires were demon spawn. That we were created of pure evil. That's why crosses and holy water were believed to offer protection. A creature of the devil was supposed to be unable to tolerate the symbols of God's church."

"Does Carlisle believe that?"

"He doesn't want to, but . . . yes. Though he's spent his life trying to be something better, a part of him has always believed that becoming a vampire destroyed his soul."

"He who made the lamb made thee," Bella murmured, repeating Pythia's message.

"He who created the human created the vampire. Pythia just told him he still belongs to God."

"Wow."

He nodded.

"But what does that mean for Esme?"

He sighed and slid his arm around her, pulling her against him. "Carlisle's not the only one who woke up with a question. When he got an answer to his, and when so many people were told things that affected them in profound ways, Esme thought she might also get what she wanted."

"Which is?"

"Her son," he said, his breath fluttering through the hair on top of her head. "She wants to know that his soul lives on, and that he's content wherever he is. And who could possibly answer that question if not a god?"

Bella looked down at Alexander, who was wiping his dirty hands on his pants. She thought she understood a little bit of the devastation Esme must be feeling, and suddenly it made sense to her why Pythia might need a bodyguard. She pulled away from Edward a little, glaring as she sought Pythia's face in the crowd.

Ulka met her gaze with a hard look of her own, but Pythia only frowned. "If it helps," she said, directing her words not to Bella, but to the group at large, "Apollo rarely addresses the past. His way is to attend the future and leave the past to rest."

It didn't help.

"It's not her fault," Edward murmured. "She really has no insight into the things she told us."

Bella buried her face in his chest, trying to fight off a sudden overwhelming wave of claustrophobic panic. "I'm so sick of this," she whispered. "All these people everywhere, interfering in everything we do."

"Me too. After all this is over, maybe we can go away for a week or two. Just the three of us."

Bella peeked up at him, the idea of it already lightening the lead in her chest.

"Esme owns an island off the coast of Brazil. I bet she'd let us use it—assuming she and Carlisle don't decide they want their own getaway."

"She owns an entire island?"

Edward nodded, grinning. "Completely private. We wouldn't have to hide. Sunny beaches, warm water, and some *real* sand for Alexander to build castles out of."

Alexander smiled, shaping the mound of dirt in front of him.

"And after he's asleep," Edward whispered, leaning in to breathe very softly in her ear, "there will be all this exploring for us to do."

Bella was hyper-aware of the way his arm tightened around her, his fingers pressing into her side with hopeful intensity. She leaned into him, letting her cheek brush his. "I like the sound of that."

"It will be so much nicer," he whispered, turning into her cheek and trailing soft kisses toward her mouth, "when we can be alone." His lips met hers and he kissed her deeply.

Bella was conscious of the fact that they *weren't* alone just yet, and that they were making out in front of everyone right now. She chafed against their presence, but not enough to make her stop. They were only kissing, after all, and kissing Edward felt *so* nice.

"You two are killing me."

Bella and Edward both jerked apart at Jasper's muttered comment and searched the trees until they caught sight of him. He was striding toward the house, his arm linked with Esme's, who was avoiding the eyes of everyone they passed. Jasper walked Esme to the back door and opened it for her, then leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. He ushered her through the door and gave her a gentle push.

"They'll talk?" Edward asked quietly, and Jasper nodded as he returned to the amphitheater and settled next to Alice. "Good. That's what they need."

"Jasper, give us your opinion," Demetri called out. He was sitting with a group of vampires who had been huddle together, murmuring to one another in low, intense voice. "Pythia called Carlisle a favored son. Do you think that implies he's meant to be our next leader."

Jasper leaned back on his elbows, arching an eyebrow at Demetri. "No."

"You don't think he should be?" One of the others asked, "or you don't think that's what Apollo meant?"

"I'm not going to waste my time trying to figure out what Apollo meant, but whether he was stumping for Carlisle or not, it's not a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Carlisle's not the man for the job. He can't be what you want."

"Interesting." Demetri raised his eyebrows, sitting forward in surprise. "He must be awfully weak if his own coven doesn't support him."

Jasper's eyes darkened, his expression going steely. "Is that what you heard? That I don't support him?"

"You obviously don't believe in his abilities."

The fury behind Jasper's eyes made Bella shudder, and she was very glad it wasn't directed her way.

"Carlisle Cullen," he said, his voice low and steady, "is the strongest, noblest man I've ever known. When I say he isn't suited for leadership, it's not because I believe he is anything less than capable of the task. It's because he's *better* than this. His talent would be wasted leading a group of useless, bickering, self-centered brats who can't think beyond their next meal. Too much time spent with this filth would drag him down and turn him into something he doesn't want to be. Carlisle Cullen is better than any of us could ever dream of being." His voice dropped even lower, deepening into a snarl. "Don't *ever* misinterpret my admiration for him as disloyalty."

Demetri's eyes dilated and his breathing went shallow. His tongue darted out to wet his lips, and he pulled in a breath to speak.

"My mistake."

Jasper snorted and turned away, pulling Alice close and nuzzling the top of her head. She snuggled against him, and Bella saw some of the tension leave Jasper's body.

"Perhaps we *should* get started." Amun said in his usual oily manner. "I know Carlisle, and he wouldn't want to inconvenience us all with his personal problems."

"Amun," Benjamin chided. "After he's been so good to us? Is that any way to repay his hospitality?"

"He waited weeks to allow us to be here to discuss matters with him," Luca said, sounding bored. "We can wait an hour for him."

Luca must have had some clout among vampires, Bella realized, because no one contradicted him. They returned to their quiet conversations, and even Amun and Aro gave no outward indication of their impatience.

Bella herself found plenty to amuse her. Edward's hand was trailing softly up and down her back, and Alexander, who had been struggling with hollowing out his little dirt buildings, had begun

using sticks to brace up the damp earth. She glowed with pride over his cleverness as he tested the strength of various structural patterns. And she glowed with something else entirely when Edward leaned close and nibbled gently at her ear.

It was another ten minutes before Carlisle emerged, carrying Esme in his arms as he made his way toward the amphitheater. The way she was curled against his chest made her look small, and Bella couldn't help but notice the contrast between this woman and the one who had stood so proud and fiery at the top of the stairs, mastering Carlisle with her raw sexuality.

"It's strange to see her like this," Bella murmured to Edward.

He cocked his head curiously. "Like what?"

"I don't know." She dropped her voice to a low whisper. "I always think of her as such a strong person."

"She is." He glanced at Esme and Carlisle, and then back at Bella. "Do you think it's weak to be upset? Or to need support?"

She shrugged, looking down at her hands. "I don't know. I guess."

"I don't. Life is too hard to manage on your own. Everyone needs a little extra help now and then." When she didn't answer, he nudged her chin up and directed her gaze to Jasper and Alice. "You can't imagine how much he relies on her," he breathed in her ear. "He'd be a complete head case without Alice. *Was*, in fact, until he met her."

Jasper shot them a sharp look. Bella didn't think he could hear what they were whispering, but he seemed to know that he was the subject of their conversation.

"Does that make him weak?" Edward asked.

Bella shook her head. Jasper was anything but weak.

"I think it takes a different kind of courage to let yourself be vulnerable to someone." He glanced at Carlisle, who was lowering himself onto the top step of the amphitheater and settling Esme in his lap. "Or, in this case, not hiding your vulnerability from *anyone*. That's something even Jasper can't do. I admire it."

"Thank you all for your patience," Carlisle said. He spoke quietly, but when he did, the rest of the voices around the amphitheater died away. "As you all know, we're facing some serious challenges. The most daunting may be the difficulty of forming an effectual governing body without assistance from a gift like Chelsea's."

"Perhaps we don't have to," Aro said. "Eleazar, is there anyone here who has a similar gift?"

Eleazar inclined his head toward the crowd, his face stony. "Ask them."

"That's a good point, Aro," Carlisle said. "Is there anyone with a talent for strengthening bonds or minimizing friction who would be willing to consider public service?"

There were several seconds of quiet, and finally Benjamin spoke. "Jasper—"

"What I do doesn't last," he said without looking up.

"No one?" Carlisle prompted. "Well, it was worth a try. It looks as though we'll have to come up with a structure that we can manage without outside assistance."

"Who says we need government at all?" Amun asked. "Why not simply allow us all to manage our own affairs?"

"How well do you think our secret would be kept with no law?" Aro snapped.

"Who says it needs to be kept? I lived quite comfortably among humans for hundreds of years and never considered trying to hide what I was."

"You may not have noticed during the centuries you spent in *hiding*, but the world has changed since your anemic glory days."

"Obviously. Otherwise why would you have spent the last three thousand years cowering behind the walls of your citadel?"

Aro leapt to his feet, hissing out his answer. "Your conquest of primitive tribes hasn't prepared you to face modern weaponry. A Röchling shell is somewhat more damaging than a pointed rock tied to a stick."

"Aro's right," Carlisle said, his even voice helping to ease the growing tensions. "If we're going to settle the question of whether we should reveal ourselves to humans, we have to consider the consequences. Humans have the technology to pose a real threat to us now, and they will *if* they perceive us as a threat to them."

"If?" Siobhan asked.

He dipped his chin in affirmation. "It's important that we understand this. The way we present ourselves to humans, should we decide to do so, will determine their perception of us."

Garrett let out a low growl. "The way we present ourselves? Are you suggesting that we try to convince them that we're their friends. That we fool them into thinking we don't have them for breakfast?"

Edward started laughing next to Bella, silently, but she could feel the shaking of his shoulders. She shot him a questioning look.

"He's so close," he whispered. "The poor bastard. He doesn't have a chance."

"What do you mean?"

He just shook his head, still laughing.

"I'm not suggesting that we pretend at all," Carlisle said. "It's too easy for a lie to be revealed."

"You can't be serious!" Amun burst out. "Do you honestly think your little crusade is going to work?"

"No," Carlisle said, an amused smile playing on his lips. "I would love to see us rise above our baser impulses and grow into a more civilized, more evolved race, but I don't really have any confidence that we will. I'm simply pointing out that revealing ourselves to humans is only possible

if we can abstain from drinking their blood. If we introduce ourselves as predators, our race is as good as destroyed."

Aro shot Amun a smug look. "Which is why *I've* worked for so long to keep our secret."

"We should vote on it," Garrett said.

Carlisle nodded, but Bella thought he looked a little bit sad. "All in favor of bringing knowledge of our race to light, and by extension, abstaining from human blood, indicate by a raise of hands."

All of the Cullens raised their hands. Some of the Denali clan did as well; Bella noticed that Eleazar didn't join them, though Carmen did. It was obvious that they were vastly outnumbered.

"Well, that question is settled," Aro said when the opposing vote had been called for. "Now, let's get back to the real issues. We need to figure out how to keep a governing coven together."

"I think the answer is obvious," Siobhan said, stretching her long, denim-clad legs out in front of her. "We already have a large, talented coven that lives together in peace."

"Siobhan, please," Carlisle murmured quietly.

"I know you don't want it, Carlisle, but what choice do we have?"

"I refuse to believe there are no alternatives," Amun grumbled.

Siobhan raised one fine, dark eyebrow. "Such as?"

"I don't know, but surely we can think of something."

The argument heated up then, and the din grew louder as more and more people chimed in with their opinions, raising their voices to be heard over the others. Bella wanted to remain engaged in the process but she couldn't seem to focus. It was all so chaotic and mean-spirited, and what she really wanted was to be out running somewhere, feeling the wind in her hair, maybe chasing down something large and wild, just for fun. Or she could be curled in her tent with Alexander, watching his little eyebrows furrow in concentration the way they did when he studied something new. Anything was better than remaining in this godforsaken amphitheater surrounded by dozens of squabbling vampires. She accepted that they were trying to make important decisions, but for people who could move and speak as fast as they could, they were taking an infuriatingly long time. Everyone had to be heard, even if they were simply rehashing points already made, and the whole business made her want to tear her hair out.

Especially when Joham spoke. Bella was pretty sure he was opposed to Carlisle's leadership, but she couldn't be completely sure because every time she heard his voice she flew into a silent rage. She had to clench her fists and lock her knees to keep from lunging at him and tearing him apart again—that had felt *so* good—which meant she had a hard time focusing on anything he had to say.

It went on for hours. Daylight leaked away while the crowd argued their points, and through it all Carlisle firmly held his position. He had no interest in governing and he would not be persuaded. Nothing could move him until, as the sun began to sink behind the mountains, Siobhan said, "It's a question of *duty*, Carlisle. How can you think of leaving us without a competent governing body? Imagine the death toll—both vampire and human."

Bella had seen Carlisle's breath catch. She'd seen the pinched expression in his face, and the way his hand clutched Esme's. A sick sense of dread settled into her stomach, because she knew Siobhan had found the argument that would work on him. Bella wanted nothing to do with vampire government, and she certainly didn't want to raise her son in the high-risk environment that would come along with being expected to enforce the law. But Carlisle was persuaded, and if the rest of the gathered vampires could be convinced, she knew he would accept the responsibility.

Edward cursed beside her, and she knew without asking that he had come to the same conclusion.

"He won't really do it?" Bella whispered.

"He can't. It would destroy him. We can't let it happen."

"What do we do?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. But we'll have to think of something, because there's no way I'm letting him get trapped into this."

Carlisle's low, tense voice cut through the din.

"I think we need to adjourn for the day," he said. "The cars are at the disposal of any who need them. If you're staying, I think Emmett has some entertainment planned for tonight."

"We're going to dance!" Emmet said in response. "Give me an hour to get the place set up, and come back ready to school us all in your favorite moves."

Alexander's face lit up. "We're going to dance! I want to learn, Mother!"

Bella forced a smile. "Do you think that sounds fun?"

"Yes!" He jumped to his feet and ran over to Emmett, firing off questions about dancing.

Edward chuckled at her expression. "Not looking forward to it as much as Alexander?"

"Ugh. No. More than anything, I want space."

"I wouldn't mind taking a breather myself. How would you feel about leaving Alexander with Rosalie and going out to the meadow with me?"

Bella frowned, her eyes locking onto Joham's back as he headed across the river with the others. "I don't think so."

"Bella, come on." He took her hand and pressed it between his until she shifted her gaze to meet his. "Joham versus Rosalie? Do you really think that's a competition?"

"What if she doesn't watch him closely enough?"

"That's not even possible. She monitors him as obsessively as you do. I promise, there's no better babysitter."

"It would be nice," she mumbled, feeling a loosening in her chest at the mere thought of a brisk run to the secluded meadow.

"Let's go. You can trust Rosalie. Plus, she's got back-up. Emmett, Jasper, Alice, Esme, Carlisle, Tanya, Irina, Kate, Carmen, Eleazar—"

"Okay! Okay." Bella giggled at his extended list of potential bodyguards for Alexander. "I'll ask Rosalie if she minds."

Rosalie didn't mind. She was delighted, in fact, and while Emmett was showing Alexander how to hook up the sound system, Rosalie cursed Joham with enough enthusiasm to convince Bella that she'd be keeping an extra sharp eye out for him. Anxiety appeased, Bella accepted Edward's hand and let him pull her into a run toward his favorite solitary haunt.

The meadow was even more beautiful than she remembered it. Somehow its symmetry seemed more perfect, its carpet of blossoms more abundant—and of course, she was no longer trying to hide from the memories of the son she had left behind. Edward tossed himself down in the center of the meadow and tucked his hands beneath his head, grinning up at her.

"I have a secret."

Bella raised her eyebrows. "Do you?"

"Mmhmm."

"Well?" She nudged his thigh with her foot. "Are you going to tell me?"

"What kind of secret would it be if I went around telling people all the time?"

"Not a very good one."

"Nope." His golden eyes sparkled when he smiled at her that way.

"So do I have to beat it out of you?" she asked, giving his leg a slightly harder kick.

He laughed and curled into a protective ball. "Torture me all you like, but I'll never tell!"

"Then maybe I should . . . tickle it out of you!" She pounced on him, dropping to her knees and attacking his side with the tips of her fingers. He squirmed and howled with laughter, then attacked back, dragging her down on top of him and tickling her as well. They squealed and wrestled until they both finally managed to catch the others' hands between them, and they clung tightly, Bella straddling Edward's stomach, both of them still releasing residual giggles. As their laughter subsided, however, the sparkle in Edward's eyes darkened into a soft smolder.

"That's closer," he said in a low voice, "but I'm still not telling you my secret."

Bella released his hands and leaned over him, bracing her hands in the grass on either side of his head. "Maybe I can kiss it out of you."

He tilted his head back, inviting her kiss, and she let her lips brush lightly over his, giving his lower lip the softest of nips and following it with a light brush of her tongue. He moaned and she pressed her mouth more firmly to his, flicking lightly at his tongue with hers. His whole body reacted this time, arching up against her as his tongue tangled with hers. His hands roamed over her back and sides, leaving tremors of pleasure in their wake. She breathed deeply through her nose, relishing his heady scent and the thrilling pleasure of his touch so much that she actually whimpered when his

hands left her body. After a moment they were at her throat, maneuvering a delicate chain around her neck.

Bella broke the kiss and sat back, peering down at the glittering heart pendant that now rested against her chest. "Edward—it's—" She had started to thank him, to tell him that she liked it, but her eye caught the subtle warping and color fluctuation, and she noticed the way the dim moonlight played on the facets. She had seen the same features in the stone of Rosalie's wedding ring, and had, without really thinking about it, marked the difference in the way that light reflected in the glass jewelry that Rosalie sometimes wore.

"Is this diamond?" she asked, stunned.

"It was my mother's. And her mother's. A family heirloom, I guess."

"It's so beautiful, but . . . it's too much."

He smiled almost sadly at her response. "Then it's just about right."

She furrowed her brow, confused, and Edward pushed himself to a sitting position. He shifted her until she was kneeling over his lap and pulled her body flush against him.

"You make me *so happy*," he whispered. "A few months ago I could never have imagined loving anyone this much. And to have you care for me in return . . . it's more than I deserve. More than I *could* deserve. There's nothing I could do to earn this, and yet here you are." His eyes fluttered closed, and he let out a shaky laugh. "And then on top of that there's Alexander—this beautiful, brilliant, inquisitive, *miraculous* boy—so instead of having one person to love more than I even knew I could, I have two." He gave her a firm kiss and then pulled back and met her gaze. "It's overwhelming. I don't know how to take it all in."

Bella stared at him, barely daring to hope that he was being honest. "You don't . . . resent him?"

"Alexander? God, no. Did you think I would?"

"He takes so much of my attention, and I know you'd like to have more time together . . ."

She trailed off as Edward nodded thoughtfully.

"I would like us to have more time together, but Alexander's not the problem. It's this caucus. It's how closely you have to watch him with all of *them* here. Bella . . ." He kissed her again, wrapping his arms tightly around her. "I could never resent him. I *love* Alexander. I'm completely taken with the way you care for him and even the way you worry over him. I feel so honored when you let me share that responsibility with you."

"Do you really mean it?"

"Every word."

There was no way she could have kept herself from loving him then. She couldn't hold him tightly enough or kiss him deeply enough or tell him clearly enough what he meant to her. But she made a valiant effort to do all that and more, and under the silvery glow of the cloud-veiled moon they peeled back their barriers and bared their souls to one another. Bella invited, welcomed, offering to Edward what she had never willingly given before. He accepted, cherished, returned. Through

whispers and soft touches and the exquisite push and pull of communion they brought each other to the peak of fulfillment and then fell, each catching the other in a fervid embrace.

At the bottom they lay in the soft grass, Edward propped up on his elbow, lazily dragging a cluster of cinquefoils across Bella's stomach. She smiled when he dipped them into her navel, letting the soft petals tickle the sensitive flesh.

He grinned back. "Will you still respect me in the morning?"

"I don't know. Have you got any more diamond necklaces to give me?"

He chuckled and straightened the chain around her neck, resting the pendant on her bare chest. "It looks at home on you."

"I don't think I have any family heirlooms to give you. Maybe my mom's Rodin-inspired incense burner."

"Mmm, you know, I think I might like to have that."

Bella wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. He complied eagerly, but a moment later he stopped and lifted his head, staring off into the distance.

"What is that?"

"What?"

"I hear . . . something. What is it?"

Bella assumed he must be reading someone's mind, because she couldn't hear anything. "Is someone coming? Get off me, I need to grab my clothes."

His eyes widened. "Oh, shit . . . oh, *shit!*" He scrambled off of her, throwing her clothes to her. "We have to go now."

Edward didn't even bother with underwear. He dragged on his pants and then took off running, tugging his shirt on as he did. He was sprinting at top speed, yelling for her to come but not waiting for her. All she could do was follow suit, awkwardly dragging her clothes on as she rocketed after him.

"Someone's coming!" he called back over his shoulder. "We need to warn Carlisle!"

Newborn though she was, Bella couldn't quite keep up with Edward when he ran all out. He glanced back a few times to make sure she was following, but he didn't slow and he gradually gained distance on her. She pushed herself to the limit and only just managed to keep him mostly in sight as he weaved through the trees on his way back to the campsite.

He was yelling for Carlisle before Bella even caught sight of the first tent. The two of them raced through the campsite, and Carlisle exited the house just as Edward was leaping across the river to meet him. He skidded to a stop, actually panting from the exertion.

"An army is coming," he called, his voice carrying easily across the amphitheater to the house. "Approaching from the southwest."

"How close?"

"Close. They'll almost definitely come across our scent and follow it. Should be here in a matter of minutes."

Carlisle spun around and yelled back into the house. "Humans and half-humans, get out of here. Charlie, Billy, can you drive them?"

Bella's breath caught in her throat. Charlie was here? Now? She glanced through the glass wall of the house, watching Charlie, Billy, and a handful of Quileute boys rush to help get Amelia and Maysun ready to go.

"Edward, numbers," Carlisle demanded.

"I can't get a good count. Closer to thirty than twenty."

"Newborns?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"Jasper."

He was already approaching, and took over the questioning as soon as Carlisle deferred to him.

"How many of us are still here?"

Kate scaled a tree and did a quick count. "Eighty-nine, just counting vampires."

"Our odds are better than three to one," Jasper called out, his words carrying across the campsite. "Anybody who's not comfortable with that, leave *right now*."

"Where's Alexander?" Bella demanded. "Rosalie?"

She appeared from the house, carrying the boy. Bella let out a breath of relief and ran toward them. "Alexander, go with Grandpa Charlie. He's going to get you and your sisters out of here."

"No, mother! I can help!"

"Absolutely not. You're going."

"Mother!"

"Go, right now."

"You said you wouldn't leave me again!"

She snatched him out of Rosalie's arms and ran inside, handing him off to Charlie. "It's not the same thing and you know it. Dad, make sure he gets out of here."

"No! It's not fair, Mother!"

Bella left him and ran back outside, followed closely by Sam.

"What does this mean?" he asked. "An army? Someone's coming to attack you here?"

"Us and anyone they come across on the way," Jasper said.

Sam glanced through the windows, and with a ripple of heat he shifted into his wolf form, shreds of clothing flying off around him.

"They're with us as long as we're committed to protecting humans," Edward told Jasper.

"So are we," said Mei Zhen, the young Chinese girl, exiting the house with her fingers buried in the fur of another wolf.

Minh, who came out behind her said something sharp in Chinese. A short, curt conversation passed, and then Minh nodded. "We will help."

"Jasper, listen," Edward said. "You should know . . . Maria's the one leading them."

"I knew it!" Peter snapped, stalking toward them with Charlotte in tow. "I *told* you she was building an army."

"Not alone, though," Edward said. "At least, I do think so. She seems to be deferring to two men. Powdery skin, filmy eyes, kind of short—them." He pointed to Aro, who was conferring with Alec in whispers. "The two you're thinking about. Who are they?"

Aro looked startled, but muttered, "Vladimir and Stefan."

Carlisle sighed. "Terrific."

"Pre-Volturi government?" Jasper asked.

Carlisle nodded.

"Edward, do we have time to head them off farther from civilization?"

"Not if you want to be at all organized when we meet them. They're *close*."

"Jasper," Peter said, jogging to his side with Charlotte, "if they're running, we have to break their momentum."

"Intimidation? A strong front line?"

He nodded. "Wouldn't hurt to have the high ground, either. Got a decent hill nearby?"

"Where do you want it?" Benjamin asked with a grin.

Jasper was nodding. "The river, where Edward and Bella came across. We can use that to provide a barrier and supply you with some extra tools. How's your defensive skill?"

"Fair, but thirty is a lot of people to keep track of."

"Find a nice tall tree to climb that will give you a broad perspective. Do what you can to keep as many back as possible, but ignore the ones who get through. They're my responsibility."

"How tall do you want your hill?"

"Tall enough to be daunting to a vampire; low enough to be inconspicuous to the town full of humans a few miles away."

"Got it."

The ground near the river started to swell, and Jasper called for those who were on the other side to jump across and join him.

"Front line!" he called out. "Peter and Charlotte, Emmet, Siobhan, Bella—"

"Me?" she asked, confused.

"You're a newborn. That means you're strong, and they'll recognize that in the color of your eyes. You're an asset."

Her whole body trembled at the thought of standing on his front line, but she nodded her agreement.

"Arthur," he continued, "Senna and Zafrina, Demetri. Quileutes, we'd love to have you on the front line with us if you're willing. And Minh."

She moved forward.

"Right behind us, in the center of the line. Stay human until you see the whites of their eyes, and then let them see what they're up against."

She smiled.

Ulka stomped forward fire in her eyes. "You forgot about *me*," she hissed.

"No. You're—"

"I'm the *best* you have."

"Kitten, you're four foot nine. The front line is cosmetic; I need you for something else." He pointed to Benjamin. "He's indispensable. You and Tia need to keep him safe and undistracted. Alec!"

Aro and Alec were whispering together, their heads bent close together. At Jasper's call, Alec raised his head and looked at him.

"What can you do for me?"

"I can take away their senses. They won't be able to see or hear anything, and we can pick them off one by one."

"No," Carlisle interrupted. "We may be able to resolve this peacefully, but only if we can speak with them."

"Are you insane?" Aro hissed. "You're talking about a newborn army!"

"To which three of our number relate very well," Carlisle said calmly. "We will, at the very least, try."

"Stay close, Alec," Jasper said. "You're on deck if the peace talks don't work out."

Bella could hear the thudding of approaching feet, and she was so distracted by the sound that she didn't hear Alexander running toward her until he was leaping onto her back.

"I'm not going, Mother!" he cried. "I'm staying wif you and that's final!"

"Alexander! No!" She swung him around in her arms and turned to the house, where Charlie was jogging out the back door.

"Bella, I'm sorry. Alexander, come on! We have to go!"

"You haven't left yet? Dad!"

"I can't get the kid in the car!"

"I'll take him," Edward said, stepping in to pull Alexander out of Bella's arms. "Jasper only needs me in an advisory position. I'll be up a tree and out of the way, just like Benjamin."

Bella didn't like it, but she didn't know what else to do. The army was close, and Charlie needed to get as far away from there as he could. She nodded. "Okay. Go, Dad."

He didn't wait around to argue. He ran back through the house, and a moment later Bella heard his police cruiser drive away from the house.

"Alexander, I need you protecting yourself and Edward," Jasper said. "Anybody gets close, you shut them down. Okay?"

Bella rounded on Jasper furiously, but he deflected her anger with a flick of his hand. "He's got a gift that will keep him safe. It doesn't make any sense to tell him not to use it. Come on." He jerked his head and led his front line up what was now a steep hill. In front of them, the ground dropped off dramatically, and far below the river that was once level with them rushed along on its slightly disturbed course.

Bella positioned herself next to Emmett, standing sideways so she could see Alexander and Edward with a quick turn of her head.

Jasper nodded. "This is good. Carlisle, come on up here. I'll manage most of the negotiations, but if you want to interrupt and recommend that I be nicer every now and then, you should feel free."

"I'm the good cop again, am I?" he asked, moving up beside Jasper.

"You play the part so well." He looked around, making sure that his front line was falling into position. The rest of the group gathered behind them, leaving plenty of room for Minh to change when the time came. When everyone was in place, Jasper started speaking in a low murmur that carried just far enough for them to hear.

"If it comes to a fight, your best bet is to team up with someone. Don't go for the obvious kill. Surprise, distract, confuse."

"Don't let them get your arms around you," Charlotte added. "If it comes down to a battle of strength, you'll lose."

Jasper, Charlotte, and Peter spent the next few seconds giving them tips on how to fight newborns, which made Bella even more anxious than she already was. *She* was a newborn, after all. They were offering a primer on how to defeat her in a fight. But as soon as the first vampire came into view, silence fell and everyone tensed.

"Here we go," Jasper muttered. "Just another minute, Minh . . . hang on . . . now."

Bella heard the tearing of fabric and felt the blast of heat behind her, and she nearly flew into a panic. In front of her was an invading army, and at her back was a dragon whose specific purpose was to kill vampires.

"Keep it together," Jasper said, and a wave of calm passed through her. For a moment she thought Jasper was helping only her, until she noticed the people next to her relax and realized that he was trying to manage the emotions of the entire group.

Fortunately, the dragon's appearance had affected the army even more. A few at the front had skidded to a stop and stumbled backward, and two had even fallen down in their terror at the sight. There was an immediate shift in momentum as the army began to retreat.

"Benjamin, try to keep them close," Jasper ordered. "If they scatter we'll have to hunt them down."

"I can help," Zafrina said from somewhere to Bella's left. "Nobody panic, it's just me."

The vampires who had turned to flee suddenly stopped, staring around in wild terror and clustering into a small group in the center. Three more of them appeared through the trees, running from something Bella couldn't see and plunging into the frightened crowd.

"What's she doing?" Bella whispered.

Beside her, Emmett laughed. "It's perfect. I'd be pissing myself out there."

"Why? I don't get it."

He shot her a querying glance. "Those things don't freak you out?"

"What things?"

He glanced across the river and then back at her again, speaking in a low voice. "You don't see them?"

"See *what*?"

"The dragons."

She glanced back at Minh.

"No, the fake ones. Zafrina's illusion."

Bella's eyes widened. "She's making them see *more* dragons?" she hissed.

Emmett snickered. "Genius, right?"

"Perfect, Zafrina," Jasper was saying. "A few seconds more. Eleazar, what kind of talent are we looking at?"

"The tall blonde with the stain on her jeans," he said. "Mildly persuasive. It's not strong, but if you drop your guard she'll be able to talk you into doing something stupid. And . . . the man at the back. You'll have a hard time noticing him because he's repelling you. It's much more pleasant to ignore him."

"Got it. Zafrina, I think that's enough. Pull them back until you can make them disappear. We can't talk to these guys when they're blind with panic." He waited a moment, gazing down at the now ineffectual army with a small smile. "Hello, Maria."

From the center of the cluster, a small woman tossed her long dark hair off of her face and met his gaze. "Jasper!" She was trying hard not to show her fear, but Bella could hear the waver in her voice. "My old friend!"

"Is that what we are? Friends?"

"Of course, darling. Your betrayal hurt me deeply, but I've forgiven you."

Jasper snorted. "Vladimir and Stefan are a bad influence on you, honey. You're not usually so careless."

She gave a nervous laugh. "I think you misunderstand our intentions. We didn't come to hurt any of you."

"False," Maggie said blandly from behind them.

"We only care about one person," a short, fair-haired man said, pushing his way to the front of the cluster. "Give us Aro and we'll be on our way."

Jasper glanced at Carlisle, who shook his head.

"No dice," Jasper said. "We might have negotiated if you'd come to us like civilized people, but you brought a newborn army into this territory." He raised a hand and flicked his fingers. "Kill them."

"Wait," Carlisle said, gripping his shoulder. "Have some compassion, Jasper."

"For her?"

"For them." His gesture included all of the newborn army. "After all, you were once in their position."

"Perfect," Jasper murmured under his breath. Out loud, he said, "Fair enough. After all, I know how manipulative Maria can be."

"Don't listen to him," Maria hissed. "He's a li—"

She was cut off by an arc of water that shot out of the river and splashed down on top of her. She sputtered and wiped at her face, pushing sodden hair out of her eyes.

"Thank you, Benjamin," Jasper said. "All right, kids, let's have a little talk." He moved to the cliff's edge and crouched down, looking relaxed but, Bella noticed, still ready to defend himself if

necessary. "Carlisle's right. I've been where you are. A hundred and forty-one years ago Maria took my life from me and conscripted me into her service. Sound familiar?"

The newborns below exchanged some uncomfortable looks.

"Like you, I didn't think I had a choice, so I gave everything I could to Maria's cause. So did my fellow soldiers. We fought together, protected each other, survived together. And I happen to have this little talent. Have you noticed it? I can calm a crowd if I need to. Or rile a person up the point where he'll make stupid decisions. It made me useful, so when that first year was up—"

"He's a liar!" Maria shrieked again. "He already admitted he's manipulating you, and now he's—"

She was cut off again when a sinkhole opened beneath her feet and sucked her down into a muddy pit.

"When my first year was up," Jasper continued calmly, "she didn't kill me like she did the others she'd turned."

There was a collective gasp and Maria, covered in mud and clawing her way out of the sinkhole, spat angrily. "That's not true!"

"She didn't mention that part, did she?" he went on. "See, the younger you are, the stronger you are. You guys already noticed that, I'm sure. But after about a year that strength tapers off. That's why newborns are so important in an army. And that's why it's a waste of time and resources to keep anyone who manages to survive the first year—unless, of course, they have something else to offer. Like you." He nodded to the blonde that Eleazar had pointed out. "She'll keep you. I hope you don't mind being the one to kill the soldiers you've fought beside. That's a job she likes to delegate, given the opportunity."

"I warned you about this!" Maria yelled. She was having a terrible time getting out of the sinkhole. The sides she gripped kept collapsing, and there didn't seem to be a solid bottom for her to jump off of. "They play mind games!"

"Well . . ." Jasper nodded. "That's true. But we're not the only ones, are we Maria? Tell me, do you still tell them that there's not enough blood to go around? That their thirst will never be quenched unless they fight? I would think that wouldn't work as well these days, when people are more aware of the billions of humans living on this planet. But hell, maybe you have them convinced that there's more than a few hundred vampires out there in competition with them."

"Jasper, they're getting restless," Edward muttered.

"I was really lucky," Jasper said. "See, it just so happens that my best friend got out. He and his mate. The day I was supposed to kill her, the two of them ran away."

Charlotte snorted. "You left out the part where we beat your ass."

Jasper grinned "She's right. First there was an ambush and a sucker punch because neither of them had the stones to face me one-on-one—" Peter slugged him in the shoulder"—but that actually worked out for me in the end. Because when they left, they discovered what you guys are starting to see: that Maria is full of shit. That plenty of vampires live in peace with each other, so long as we're respectful of one another's boundaries. They found a way to make a really good life for

themselves. And because Peter is a true friend, he came back for me. So now I'm going to pay it forward."

"Zafrina, watch Vladimir and Stefan," Edward murmured.

Bella hadn't noticed, but the two of them had been creeping toward the back of the group. Everyone around her suddenly jumped, and a few of the newborns fell to their knees in what looked like terror. Vladimir and Stefan ceased their retreat and shoved their way into the center of the group.

"Fake dragons?" she whispered to Emmett.

"Yep. You really can't see them?"

She shook her head.

"Freak."

She scowled at him and he grinned.

"With the exception of Maria, Vladimir, and Stefan," Jasper said, "I'll guarantee the safety of anyone who would like to defect. Like . . . you two in the back. Facing death is one thing, but seeing your mate killed? I can't even imagine. That would be infinitely worse."

Bella eyed the pair he had singled out. A young brunette who couldn't be much older than fourteen clung to a teenaged Mexican boy. Marie shrieked in fury as the two of them conferred in quiet whispers.

"Tell me you're not foolish enough to believe him!" Maria hissed furiously. "Jasper is the most vicious soldier I've ever trained. Surrender to him and he'll kill you immediately."

"It's hard to know who to trust," Jasper said gently. "Especially when you know that Maria and I have both been playing a little dirty with you. But think about what's at stake. You stay with her, and even if you live past today—even if I'm lying about the one year limit—you spend the rest of your lives in battle. I can tell you from experience that it's a pretty bleak existence. It's worth the risk to try me and see if I'll make good on my promise."

"You know it's not forever," Maria said, finally managing to crawl out of the sinkhole. "These are the ones who are holding us back. One fight and the world is ours!"

"One fight against wolves, dragons, and three times as many vampires as you have with you." Jasper shook his head. "You're strong, but you're not that strong. Your leaders obviously didn't realize what they were up against."

"If we surrender," the Mexican boy called out, "you'll let us go?"

Jasper hesitated, then shook his head. "Not right away. We're all invested in keeping our existence a secret from humans, and I'm sure I don't have to tell you about the lack of impulse control that comes along with being a newborn. For now . . ." he glanced around, "we'd have to pair you with a guardian. Someone to help keep you in check until your nerves settle a little."

"You see?" Maria cried. "They'll keep you as slaves!"

The girl looked from Maria to Jasper in indecision. "It takes a year?"

"Give or take. It can vary depending on your size or on how much blood you lost during your change. Generally, more of your own blood means it takes longer. But a year is usually about what you can expect."

The blonde woman Eleazar had pointed out hissed at Jasper and then turned to the pair at the back. "You're not going to desert us! Did you forget how powerful we are? He's trying to make us think we're weak by threatening us with wolves. Wolves! Like a pack of dogs is any match for us!"

"What about the dragons?" one of the others asked.

The blonde glared at Minh over her shoulder, her eyes narrowed. "I'd bet it's just an illusion. Maria said they would have tricks. But we're too smart to be fooled into believing in fairy tale monsters!"

"We can win this fight!" Maria shouted. "Don't let them sap your courage with their lies!"

"We surrender!" the Mexican boy shouted.

A ramp formed itself out of the earth near them, bridging the river and leading up to the top of the hill. The pair started toward it, but Maria let out a shriek.

"Traitors! Kill them!"

Most of the newborns held back, frozen in indecision, but the tall blonde and two others obeyed, charging toward the couple.

"Aw, hell no," Emmett muttered. He rocketed forward and leapt across the river, landing with a squelch in the mud at the edge of Maria's sinkhole. And Bella—damn the lack of impulse control!—found herself jumping right after him. Around them, vampires and wolves followed their lead, leaping after them across the river that separated them from the newborns.

By the time she hit the ground, the grassy bank had turned to loose sand, and the vampires running at the surrendering pair found themselves floundering, trying to run across ground that continually sank beneath their feet. The mated newborn pair struggled toward the ramp, but the blonde lunged forward and caught the boy's arm, dragging him back.

"Bella!" Emmett yelled, struggling against the sand himself. She glanced at him, to see him holding his hands low, fingers interlocked. "Alley-oop, kid!"

She stumbled forward, wading through the sand and tangle of grass roots until she was close enough to place a foot into his waiting hands. That was *much* better; finally a solid surface to push against! She aimed herself toward the blonde, who was now wrenching off the boy's arm, and shoved against Emmett's unmoving hands, launching herself over the top of the newborn army.

The blonde heard her coming. She spun toward Bella, dropping the boy's severed arm, just as Bella came crashing down on top of her. She snarled and snapped, sinking her teeth into Bella's shoulder, and when Bella twisted out of her grasp, lunging for her neck. But Bella remembered a thing or two from her encounters with Jasper, and when the blonde came at her, she dove. She went for the knees, knocking the blonde off of her feet, and tumbling into the soft sand with her, she twisted, trying to get on top of her and pin her down the way Jasper had, but the woman was stronger. She had gained the upper hand, shoving Bella down onto her back, when the little newborn brunette joined the fight. She leapt onto the blonde's back and, without a moment's hesitation, sank her teeth into the woman's neck and tore her head free of her body. Bella and the brunette each grabbed one

of the woman's flailing arms and, biting to break through the hard skin, yanked them free and tossed them away.

Bella snatched up the boy's severed arm and tossed it to him. "Get across the river!" She said, pointing to Benjamin's stone ramp.

They didn't hesitate. The pair helped each other to the ramp, sprinting to the top of the cliff where Carlisle met them and drew them back from the front lines. Bella was about to follow when she caught sight of two figures creeping away from the knot of fighting vampires and wolves. She recognized their powdery skin, and rage flared inside of her. It was Vladimir and Stefan, two of the ones responsible for this whole fight. They had brought a newborn army here to attack her family. They had endangered Charlie and all of his friends, and had put Alexander at risk. They were *not* going to walk away without punishment.

Bella scrambled toward the ramp, only instead of running back to the top of the cliff, she used the solid surface to propel herself toward the fleeing figures. She smashed into Stefan, driving him face down into the soft earth and jerking his arms up behind him. It wasn't until that moment, though, that she remembered Jasper's advice to team up. Because two against one was always preferable, and suddenly she found herself in the position of the one. She muttered a word that she would have disapproved of if Alexander had said it. Vladimir came at her, and she just had time to jerk Stefan up in front of her to shield her from his attack. The force was lessened by the soft ground, but he still hit hard enough to send himself and Stefan toppling back on top of her, knocking her to the ground and trapping her beneath them.

Bella shoved at them, but she was surprised when they actually rolled off of her and started to crawl away. Their expressions of mingled distress and disgust had Bella looking the other way to see if a wolf was approaching and bringing his disgusting smell with him. All she saw, though, was a broad-shouldered, fair-haired man slogging his way through the sand toward them. He didn't even glance her way, just reached down and grabbed Stefan's ankle, pulling him back. Bella barely had the presence of mind to do the same to Vladimir, watching as he writhed and gagged, though over what, she couldn't tell.

Not that she was going to wait around to ask him. She took advantage of his weakness to dismember him while the broad-shouldered man did the same to Stefan. They both scattered the pieces, and then Bella turned to him.

"Thank you," she said, eyeing him closely. He was definitely a newborn and had definitely come here with the rest of the army. So why would he help her?

He cocked his head at her, giving her a bemused look.

Bella glanced around. The fighting was essentially over now. A trio of wolves was making slow work of separating a vampire from its limbs, and Peter and Charlotte had a hold on a mostly-intact Maria, but all around them the riverbank was littered with writhing bodies and their separated parts. Bella saw a one-armed vampire locate its head and try to fasten it on, but a large gray wolf ambled over and did a more efficient job of dividing it into pieces.

Bella scanned the fallen, relieved to see none of their own among them. Their side seemed relatively unscathed, though it looked like Rosalie was helping Emmett repair a damaged limb or two.

The broad-shouldered man started to walk away, and Bella turned back to him. "Wait."

He stopped and frowned at her. "You're a strange one," he muttered.

"Where are you going?"

He stared at her, his gaze intense, and finally let out a little growl of frustration. "It doesn't work on you at all?"

"What doesn't work?"

He pressed his lips together into a flat line. For a long moment he was silent, and then he finally said, "I helped you."

She nodded

"You can vouch for me."

"Vouch for you?"

"You and your friend." He gestured toward the cliff across the river, which Bella noticed was slowly lowering back toward its original position. She also realized that the ground below her was hardening again, semi-burying the field of scattered bodies in the crust. She jerked her feet up, freeing them from the earth, and the broad-shouldered man did the same, though more slowly and deliberately.

"Which friend?"

"He means me," she heard Eleazar say from across the river. He jumped it, landing on the now-solid earth and strode over to them.

The man tensed. "I only want to be left alone."

"I'm afraid that option isn't on the table."

"Eleazar," Bella began, but he shook his head.

"I know. I saw what he did, and yes, it will help his case. But he came here as part of an army with designs on killing us, and he didn't give himself up when Jasper offered him the chance." He turned to the man. "Can you control it?"

He nodded.

"Earn yourself some good will and turn it off."

His shoulders slumped, and Eleazar let out a quiet breath. "Thank you."

"I never intended to fight," the man said. "I nearly walked away, but . . . I was concerned about Bree."

"Who's Bree?" Bella asked.

"The girl you came over here to defend."

"You're attached to her," Eleazar observed.

The man hesitated. "She's young."

"Come," he said, jerking his head for the man to follow. "We'll talk to Carlisle."

"If you let me leave I won't bother you again."

"Not on the table." Eleazar stalked away and the man followed, casting an anxious glance toward Bella. She followed them across the bridge.

Alexander's voice drifted to her from high up in a tree across the river.

"Mother! You fought the newborns! You're so fast!"

Bella veered away from Eleazar and stalked toward Edward an Alexander, anger building in her with every step. Edward must have seen it, because he started murmuring soothing words to her as he climbed down from the tree. She leapt the river and stomped over to meet them, hands balling into fists.

"You should have gone with Charlie!" she yelled at Alexander.

He shrank back, his bright smile crumpling into a pout.

"I told you to leave!"

"I didn't *want to!*" he shouted back.

"I don't care what you want! You're a *child!* You have to listen to me!"

"No I don't! I'm a very special young man and I can make my own decisions!"

"Not if you're going to make bad ones!"

"You didn't go with Grandpa Chawlie so I don't have to either!"

Bella let out a frustrated growl, tunneling her fingers viciously through her hair. "Alexander, you're not me! You're very small and very easy to kill! There's danger all around us here, and if you can't listen to me when I'm trying to keep you safe then we can't stay here!"

"Yes we can! I want to!"

"Bella . . ." Edward murmured.

"No. Edward, I'm sorry, but I have to keep him safe. He takes too many chances here, and I can't have it anymore. We're leaving."

"No!" Alexander burst into tears, his little body shaking with sobs. "I don't want to go, Mother!"

"Too bad." She took him from Edward and started marching toward the house.

"I'll be good! I promise! I'll do what you say!"

"Too late."

"No, Mother, *please!* I'll go to bed without my supper, and you can spank me and take my books away. *Please!*"

Bella slowed and looked down at his tearful face. Those could only be punishments Joham had meted out, right? The last thing she wanted was to end up being equated to him. But Alexander took too many risks, she couldn't let him keep doing it.

"How can we stay here when you won't let me protect you? It's too dangerous here for you to disobey me the way you do."

He sniffled "I'll be good."

"Alexander, look around you. Everyone here is scared. We're all being extra careful to protect ourselves, because there are threats all around us. You have to learn to be just as defensive as everyone else. Playing with wolves and dragons, or hanging around to watch us get attacked by an army—it's too careless. You're going to get yourself killed if you don't learn to be cautious."

"I'll be cautious. I promise."

"And you'll do what I tell you?"

"I will. Please can we stay?"

"As long as you obey me we can stay. But if you do something like this again, we're leaving and not coming back until the gathering is over."

"Okay." He peeked up at her, his cheeks streaked with tears. "Mother? Can I still be friends wif Minh?"

Bella glanced at the amphitheater where Minh, still in her dragon form, lay curled in a semicircle around the rim. She sighed. "Minh has been nice to us so far, so you can be her friend as long as you're careful. That means that whenever you're around her, you stay close to me."

"Or Edward?" he asked.

"Yes, or Edward."

"Or Rosalie?"

"Don't push it."

He took a shuddering breath and tucked his face into the crook of her neck. One hand tangled in her hair and the other crept up to play with the diamond pendant that rested beneath her collarbone.

"Do you still love me?"

"Of course I do, sweetie," she whispered, stroking his soft hair. "Everything I do is because I love you."

"How many days do I have to go wifout supper?"

"Oh, sweetie, I'm not going to make you go without supper."

"Not any days?"

"No. You just have to be sure to obey me when I'm trying to keep you safe."

"Okay. I'm hungry, Mother."

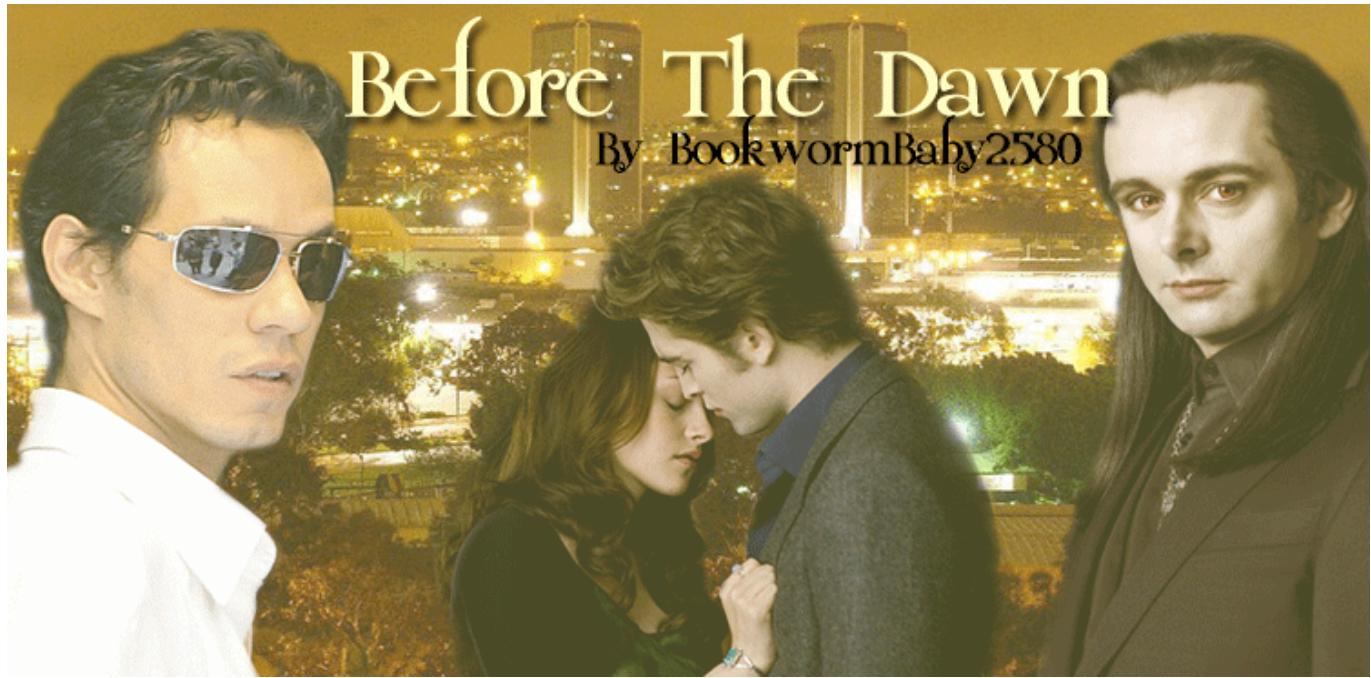
Edward rubbed her shoulder. "I'll make him something quick, but Carlisle and Jasper want us all to meet back at the amphitheater."

"Okay. Why?"

"We have to make some decisions about what to do with twenty-five hostile newborns."

"Fantastic," Bella muttered as Edward jogged off toward the house. "This just keeps getting better and better."

If Thy Right Hand Offend Thee



The bottom of the amphitheater was a writhing mass of disconnected body parts. It made Bella a little sick to look at it, but Alexander was fascinated. He kept running down to look closer, then jumping out of the way when an arm crept too close and running back up to the safety of Bella's lap.

"Why is that one still walking, again?" Charlotte asked, gesturing toward the broad-shouldered newborn. Bella had learned that his name was Fred, and he was standing near the newborn couple, Bree and Diego, who were sitting on the bottom step holding hands. Emmett and Eleazar hovered near them, but it didn't look like they were going to make a break for it.

"He helped Bella," Jasper said.

"He didn't surrender when you offered."

"Actions, words."

Carlisle was talking quietly with groups of vampires milling around the amphitheater, but there were still several who had gone out hunting and hadn't yet returned.

"It seems cruel to leave the newborns in that state," he murmured, almost to himself, "but I really think we should wait for the others to return before we do anything."

"Why?" Tia asked.

"We have decisions to make that could affect all of us. It would be respectful to allow the others time to return."

"You know what they're going to say," Jasper told him quietly.

"I can guess, but I still think it's important to allow them the chance."

"They weren't here for the fight," Maggie said with an uninterested tone. "I think that means they have less right than we do to make a decision."

"Do you?"

"Sure." She shrugged. "We were the ones personally affected. Our opinion matters more."

"You have a point. Still, we gathered to get as much input as we could, and this is a major issue. Proper punishment for crime. I think we need to include everyone."

Jasper nodded his agreement.

Carlisle moved to Bella's side and sat down, holding his phone out to her. "Do you want to call your father and tell him to bring the girls back?"

Bella glanced over at Bree, Diego, and Fred.

"He won't be able to stay. I'm afraid your visits will be more limited now. But we should get the girls back here, at the very least."

Bella took the phone from him. "Did he go home?"

"I think he was headed for Port Angeles, actually, but he took Esme's cell. Speed dial one."

Charlie answered on the second ring, sounding breathless. "*Carlisle?*"

"Dad, it's me."

"*Where is he? Is he there?*"

"Yeah. Hang on." She passed the phone to Carlisle.

"Is everything all right?"

"No. Amelia hurt herself. She fell, and now there's something happening. I don't know what but she's in pain and she's coughing up blood."

Carlisle bolted for the house, phone still pressed to his ear. "I'm coming. Where are you?"

Bella didn't hear the reply, but she turned to Edward, who was holding a half-filled cup of cheese cubes that Alexander had abandoned in favor of his games with the severed limbs.

"They're on the side of the highway," he murmured. "She must have hurt herself while they were driving."

Carlisle ran back out, carrying a black leather bag, and grabbed Esme around the waist. "Darling, can you manage things here?"

"Of course. Go."

He kissed her and then ran, since all the cars had been taken earlier by vampires who had gone out to hunt. He'd probably get there faster running than driving anyway, as there was plenty of tree

cover near the highway.

"Esme," Maggie said, "assuming there are newborns we decide not to kill, what do you plan to do with them?"

"I believe Jasper was on the right track. I think we need to put them under the guardianship of a coven who can supervise them until they're no longer newborns. Carlisle and I have already discussed inviting these three to stay with us." She gestured toward Fred, Bree, and Diego, none of whom met her eye.

"Really?" Aro asked acidly. "Looking to add more talent to your coven, are you?"

"That's not a consideration. We simply want to make sure they're taken care of."

"That seems a bit premature. After all, you don't even know the extent of that girl's crimes." He pointed at Bree, who shrank back against Diego.

"Are you saying you know something we don't?"

Aro fixed Bree with a baleful glare. "That's the girl who lured Chelsea away and destroyed my coven."

"Come now, Aro," Esme said with a touch of impatience. "You thought it was Bella when you first arrived here."

"I thought it *might* be, until I verified that her scent was different. Believe me when I tell you that I've found the culprit."

"True," Maggie murmured.

Esme shook her head. "Jasper offered her protection."

"It wasn't his to offer!"

Esme fixed a hard gaze on him, drawing herself up to her full height. "Wasn't it? Have you forgotten whose territory this is?"

"She destroyed my coven! She must be punished!"

"Why? Because your feelings are hurt?"

"SHE BROKE THE LAW!"

"What law, exactly?"

Aro sputtered through his anger, but didn't manage to get out an argument.

"There are laws against immortal children. There are laws against exposing our secret. But there has never been any kind of moratorium on killing one another."

"She wasn't just out killing nomads!" Aro spat. "She attacked *the Volturi!*"

"And those lives were more valuable than the lives of nomads?"

Amun laughed. "Yes, Aro, please do answer the question. We'll all find it so enlightening."

"We protected you!"

"You protected us?" Esme asked. "Vampires kill each other all the time. Did you protect us from that?"

"Don't be absurd. Vampires have always preferred autonomy. To interfere in a man's personal disputes would be an abuse of power."

"So this hypothetical man ought to be allowed to settle these disputes himself. And if the dispute is with a weaker coven, well, they're just out of luck."

"Everyone knows the benefits of banding together with a strong coven. Including you."

"Indeed. But explain to me why Bree's actions go beyond a personal dispute. All she did was kill another vampire."

"Of course that's not all she did! She killed the one person who bound the Volturi together!"

Esme shrugged. "That doesn't seem like our problem. The Volturi never defended our lives. Why should we defend yours?"

"How dare you—"

"It's horribly callous, isn't it? To dismiss a person's life that way? Especially when there are those who were hurt so deeply by her loss. But after all," she said sweetly, "we're vampires and we value our autonomy; this has always been our way."

"Are you arguing for the girl's safety or angling for a law against murder?" Garrett asked.

Esme flashed him a bright smile. "Bree's safety isn't it question. Jasper spoke as the agent of our coven and we stand behind his word. She's under our protection."

"So this is political."

"Of course. Isn't that why we're here?"

"You might want to save it until we're officially back in session."

"I have no doubt everyone will hear about this conversation. I want you all thinking about it, because come sunrise, we're going to spend a lot of time talking about the value of vampire life—and the ramifications of capital punishment."

"Meanwhile," Amun said impatiently, "we still have these newborns to deal with."

"These three will join our coven. The fate of the others has yet to be determined."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea. After all, you already have a newborn, as well as the little half-breed to care for."

"We're a large coven. We can manage."

"With you living so close to humans, though, it would be a big problem if any of them got out of hand."

"We'll be careful," she said, her voice cool.

"There should be a clear line of responsibility, don't you think? In the event of a slip-up that puts our secret at risk. After all, that *is* a crime, and would have to be punished."

"The line of responsibility is clear. Carlisle and I will vouch for them."

"For all four newborns and the half-breed? And not a useful talent between you?" He shook his head. "No, I think it's wiser to allow no more than one newborn per guardian at any given time. As a general rule, you understand."

"It's not a bad idea," Jasper murmured. "Our kind tends to have an anemic sense of responsibility toward our newborns. If you make one vampire responsible for the care of another, you also make him responsible for passing on laws and cultural expectations. It would be an improvement."

"Thank you, Jasper," Esme said with a warm smile. "We'll discuss whether we want to make it a law in the morning, but for now I'll claim responsibility for Bella, and Carlisle will speak for Alexander."

"I'm sorry," Amun said with a smile that implied he definitely wasn't, "but as Carlisle is not actually here to accept the burden . . ."

"He's already accepted it."

"Yes, but officially—"

"He's *my* son," Bella snapped at him. "I'm responsible for him."

He turned his oily smile on her. "You're still a newborn. I'm afraid you can't be trusted to look out for another's welfare—officially speaking only, of course. I'm sure you're a wonderful mother."

Bella thought he would make an attractive addition to the agitated mass of dismembered parts on the ground, but before she could set Alexander aside to indulge her violent whims, Joham stood up, looking triumphant.

"The boy—"

"I'll speak for Alexander," Edward interrupted, "until such time as Bella is able to do so herself."

"Don't be ridiculous," Joham snapped. "He's my son. If his mother is unfit to care for him—"

Bella let out a snarl, but Edward calmed her with a hand on her knee. "I'm not sure I have enough confidence in your dedication to the task, Joham. Tell me, how many children do you have?"

"Five, at least." He looked smug.

"At least?"

"Yes."

"But there may be others you aren't aware of?"

"I have been with many women. Most of them died, but I have claimed five children from those who carried to term."

"It's possible, though, that you've lost track of someone who might have carried a child to term without your knowledge?"

He glared at Edward. "It is unlikely."

"It seems awfully careless, though, don't you think? Even the slim chance of a half-vampire wandering around with no guidance . . . it's a threat to our secret. But for argument's sake, let's say there are only the five. How many of them did you raise?"

"Are you questioning my paternal abilities?"

Edward arched an eyebrow. "Yes. I thought that was obvious."

"I am a *wonderful* father," he spat. "I observed and documented every moment of Serena's childhood."

"So . . . one?"

He hissed. "I would be raising Alexander too, if not for your interference."

"We'll give you the benefit of the doubt on that one, then," Edward said. "Of the five children you're sure you've fathered, you've raised only two of them. If vampires were in the habit of holding custody hearings, you'd make a fairly poor showing." He fixed Joham with a withering stare. "But I should point out that we're *not* in the habit of holding custody hearings. Whether you're a fit parent is a moot point because you aren't being given the option of raising Alexander. He'll stay with his mother, and I will speak for him."

Amun was smirking. Bella was sure he was just trying to stir up trouble but she couldn't figure out what his end game was. Before she could give it too much thought, though, Eleazar spoke up.

"Esme, forgive my interference, but I think it might be best if I took over supervision of Fred. He's . . . slippery."

"Oh, yes," she said to Fred, "you have a gift, don't you? Will you tell us about it?"

Fred pursed his lips, but his voice was polite when he replied, "I like to be left alone."

"So he makes it happen," Eleazar supplemented when it became clear he wasn't going to say anymore. "He makes himself very off-putting, so those around him avoid him. If you're not careful, you'll forget about him entirely."

"That may come in handy," Esme told Fred with a smile.

"But for now it's a liability," Eleazar said. "The fact that he has a talent makes him stand out to me, where other people might lose track of him. So I think it's best if I manage him until he can be on his own."

Carmen flashed Fred a reassuring smile. "You might like our home. We live in Alaska, and our cabin is pretty remote. You'll have to share it with the five of us, but it still feels fairly solitary."

"I'd guess you're approaching your year anyway, aren't you?" Jasper asked.

He dipped his head in response. "Couple of months off."

"Will you accept their offer?"

He hesitated, his eyes straying to Bree and Diego. "What about them?"

Jasper moved down the amphitheater, crouching in front of the anxious pair. "You two would like to stay together," he observed.

They both shrank back under his attention, but the boy nodded.

"I can offer you that, but there's a price. We don't allow the consumption of human blood in our territory."

The two of them exchanged dark looks, and Edward laughed.

"That's not what he means," he said, shaking his head and chuckling. "We're not going to starve you. Around here, though, we drink animal blood."

They both looked startled, but Bree sat forward. "Only animals?"

"It ain't gourmet," Jasper muttered. "But you get used to it. And after your year's up you can do whatever you want, so long as you don't threaten the humans here."

The two of them gazed at each other in indecision, and Bella was sure it wasn't the blood that held them back.

"I know he looks terrifying," she told them. "And—he is. But he's been really good to me. The whole family has. Carlisle and Esme are probably the nicest people in the world."

"If he gets too pushy," Edward added, "we'll get Ulka back here to rough him up for you."

Jasper's eyes sought Ulka's in the crowd and the two of them grinned at each other.

"It's really fun hunting animals," Alexander said. His eyes were red and droopy, and Bella could tell he was trying to fight off sleep, but he would give in before too much longer.

"It is," she agreed with a smile. "It's a good offer, I promise."

Bree and Diego exchanged a few whispered words and then Diego nodded. "We appreciate your generosity."

"Good." Jasper stood. "I'll take the boy. Alice will manage the girl."

Alice nodded her assent to make it official.

"And you're going with Eleazar?" Jasper asked, pressing Fred for a firm answer.

He nodded.

"At least we have that much settled," Jasper said, surveying the collection of newborn parts.

Across the circle from him, Aro stepped forward. "I believe that's all that needs to be settled. You've kept your word and given rewards for services. The rest of them are our enemies." His gesture encompassed all of the newborns, but Bella noticed that his gaze lingered on the faces of Stefan and Vladimir.

"Possibly," Esme said, "but as we discussed, we'll make that decision when we have full participation."

"I'm happy to save you the trouble."

Bella heard the scratch of a match and saw the little flame burst into life a fraction of a second before Jasper leapt across the amphitheater and grabbed Aro by the throat.

"Throw that match," he growled, lifting him into the air "and you'll go into the fire with them."

Aro kicked out at him, but when his struggles got him nowhere he hissed at Jasper. "So much for your stance against capital punishment."

"Carlisle and Esme are against capital punishment," he said, his voice low and threatening. "I'm not. And if you defy their nonviolence order, I *will* take appropriate action."

The match burned down to Aro's fingers and he dropped it in the dirt. Jasper let him go, and he would have landed on his feet had Jasper not hooked a foot around his ankle and yanked it out from under him. Aro tumbled unceremoniously to the ground, and Jasper turned and stalked away from him.

"Anybody else feel like taking matters into their own hands? Good." He didn't even bother to glance around. "We'll wait for the others to get back before we make any more decisions."

Alexander was asleep when the absent vampires started to trickle in. One by one they returned from their hunts, eyes bright with fresh blood. News of the newborn attack spread quickly, setting the circle abuzz with conversation. Nobody seemed interested in returning to their tents when stories were being passed around the amphitheater, while the fragmented newborns at the bottom tried unsuccessfully to reassemble themselves.

When it was nearly four o'clock in the morning, Edward stood up and moved down into the bottom of the amphitheater. He started picking up squirming bodies and limbs, tossing them to one side and leaving a clear space on one side of the fire pit. He smoothed over the ashes with his hands, then disappeared into the woods and returned with a collection of dead and dried branches. He arranged them carefully in a pit, and then looked up at Benjamin. The wood caught fire and he thanked him quietly before returning to his seat beside Bella.

"Carlisle's coming," he murmured in response to her questioning look. Based on his tone, Bella guessed that he wasn't returning with good news. Her assumption was confirmed when he added, "You might want to hold your breath. The blood isn't completely dried."

A few minutes later, Bella heard Billy's truck pull up in front of the house, and after some rustling, Carlisle appeared carrying a body wrapped up in bloodstained sheets. Bella had already stopped breathing, but she looked away quickly at the sight of the bright red blood. Her eyes fell on Jasper,

who had a tight hold on Diego's arm, while Alice sat behind Bree, rubbing her shoulders and murmuring something that sounded soothing.

Carlisle said nothing as he strode to the bottom of the amphitheater and gently placed the shrouded body onto the fire. For a moment he simply stared, watching the flames lick at the fabric, but then he raised dark, fierce eyes to scan the gathered vampires.

"This never happens again," he said, his words quiet and clipped. "If you want my service, you'll have it on *my* terms. We will not kill one another, we will not torture humans, and we will not rape little girls. I can't lead a band of savages."

"I hardly think—" Aro began, but was cut off by hiss from Jasper.

"Not now," Carlisle said coldly. His eyes sought out Esme, and she made her way to him when he reached out for her. He clutched her hand, and the two of them knelt together in front of the fire and began praying for the soul of the dead girl in the flames.

Bella leaned into Edward, turning her face into the crook of his neck. "I thought she would make it," she whispered.

"I did too."

Carlisle and Esme prayed until sunrise. The full group had gathered well before then, ready to begin the day's discussions, but Carlisle wasn't ready. Every now and then, when the limbs and torsos of the disabled newborns wriggled too close to the fire, Edward would get up and toss them all to the side again.

But finally the sun rose and Carlisle took his place in the circle. He gave a quick description of the newborn attack that had happened the night before—which was entirely unnecessary since there wasn't a person there who hadn't heard the story yet—and then opened the discussion on capital punishment.

It wasn't the best time to debate the topic if you were against it, Bella thought. Resentment simmered over the newborns' attack, and the anger directed at the three leaders was tremendous. So while Carlisle did his best to make a case for mercy, the popular opinion was that a vampire who killed, or attacked with the intent to kill, should be sentenced to death. An exception would be made for self-defense, but otherwise the law would stand. Carlisle did at least manage to reserve for the governing body the right to mete out punishment, officially making it illegal for a vampire to kill for the sake of revenge. And he managed to slip in a rider that the victim of an attack could ask for mercy so the attacking vampire wouldn't necessarily have to face death. It was a small victory, but one that seemed to matter a great deal to him.

He also managed to get an exception for newborns, thanks in large part to Amun's efforts to link each newborn directly to a responsible party. It was decided that the creator of any newborn would be held responsible for any crimes committed during the initial year, and after three hours of debate they were finally ready to deal with the army that had attacked them during the night.

It didn't surprise anyone when Carlisle asked that Vladimir, Stefan, and Maria all be shown mercy. Aro was quick to use his lenience as a weapon.

"It seems you've had a personal agenda during these talks," he said acidly.

Carlisle didn't shy away from his accusation. "We're trying to develop laws to address every possible situation. It would be foolish to ignore the nuances of the one we're dealing with now."

Their argument was long, but in the end Carlisle lost. Amun joined him in arguing for mercy, but they couldn't match Aro and Luca for influence, and the two of them badly wanted satisfaction for the demise of the Volturi. Others fell in behind them simply because of the chaos that the attack on Volterra had caused. The popular vote favored justice over mercy, and Aro and Alec gleefully carried out the sentence while Carlisle looked on, his expression grim.

"Carlisle," Tia murmured, "this isn't failure. They're being held accountable for the loss of vampire life. Surely you understand how that will change things for us. We have legal protection now."

He nodded in acknowledgment, but continued to stare at the raging flames in the center of the amphitheater.

After that came the reassembly and distribution of the newborns. There were six who flat-out refused to cooperate, and they went the way of Vladimir, Stefan, and Maria. But the rest were quick enough to submit to the stewardship of those who were willing to look after them. Various covens volunteered to take on the responsibility of a newborn, until each had been assigned to a guardian.

It was tedious, and yet it was productive. Things were really happening now, and Bella was relieved. Decisions were being made, laws were being codified, and though Carlisle's lofty goals were going unmet, there was real improvement.

But as morning stretched into afternoon, nothing was done to address the fact that there was still no government to enforce the laws. They could come to a general consensus on what they wanted, but while many supported Carlisle's leadership, there was much concern over whether he would push the laws further than the rest of the community wanted him to. He was too quick to show mercy, many complained, where they wanted to see justice done. And they worried about his nerve. Could he really follow through when so much death was on the line? That Carlisle himself couldn't reassure them of his determination to dispense justice didn't help his position.

But no one could come up with an alternative. A peacekeeping force had to be large, and vampires were simply too territorial to live in large groups under normal circumstances. The more they argued, the more it seemed that the general opinion was swaying in Carlisle's direction. During one of Siobhan's more impassioned speeches about the benefits of having Carlisle as a leader, Aro and Alec stood and marched to the top ring of the amphitheater. Bella thought they were going to stalk off in a huff, but as soon as Siobhan finished, Aro used his elevated position to address the group.

"My dear friends," he said, sounding for all the world like a benevolent nanny, "I completely understand your fondness for Carlisle. I myself have been honored to count him among my friends for innumerable years."

"Innumerable?" Edward whispered to Bella. "Apparently he's forgotten how to count."

"But shouldn't the leader of the vampire world put the welfare of vampires above all else? Carlisle is unquestionably a good man, but he frequently places vampires in secondary status to *humans*."

"He's starting to sound like a broken record," Bella murmured.

Edward snickered, but stopped and jerked his head to the right. Carlisle was beside him, tucked between Esme's legs while she massaged his shoulders with a distracted air. Edward didn't look at

them, though, but past them, to where Jasper was seated with Alice.

"Alec?" Edward muttered softly, and then cringed. "He's thinking about his sister. Apparently the two of them were, uh . . . closer than we realized."

Jasper's face showed a deep suspicion.

"What's going on?" Bella asked.

"They're hiding something," Edward said, dropping his voice into nearly a silent whisper. "But they're covering it up. I can't tell what they want—"

Several gasps and a panicked cry cut him off. Bella whipped her head around even as more voices called out in distress. Around the rim of the amphitheater, vampires were floundering, staring blankly ahead of them and groping around them without seeming to feel when their limbs contacted anyone or anything else. The panic was limited to only those on the highest ring, but then the lower ones began calling out for their mates. Esme let out a shriek and her hands clutched reflexively at Carlisle's shoulders, fingers tearing through his shirt and digging into his shoulders.

Beside her, Edward stiffened, his own hand reaching toward her but not seeming to feel her when his arm bumped against her back. "It's Alec."

Bella tasted something that reminded her of a dentist's office on the back of her tongue. Someone darted up from the bottom of the amphitheater only to stumble and collapse, flailing wildly on the earthen steps.

"Get out of here," Edward whispered. "Take Alexander and go. You can jump it if you get high enough—" He broke off with a strangled choke. "Please, God, let her get out of here!"

In front of her, Alexander let out a squeal. "Mother!" he screamed, spinning around but letting his momentum carry him too far. He groped for her, and continued to cry and search when she scooped him up in her arms.

"I'm here, baby," she murmured, but he didn't give any indication that he heard her. He threw up his hand, and in front of her Kate tumbled to the side, rendered unconscious by Alexander's physical shield.

She had to get Alexander out of here. It shattered her to turn away from Edward, but she wasn't sure she could carry both him and Alexander and get any kind of height in a jump. She pushed herself to her feet, dodging a grasping newborn stumbling blindly by, but as soon as she crouched to jump she saw deliberate movement out of the corner of her eye. Aro edging around the top of the amphitheater, holding his head and body back but reaching down into the growling, confused mass of vampires toward Carlisle.

He couldn't reach. Whatever it was that kept him back wouldn't allow him to get close enough to get his hands on Carlisle. So he changed his target, instead grabbing the back of Esme's hair and dragging her away while she flailed and cried out for Carlisle and the rest of her family.

"No!"

The yell came out before Bella even fully acknowledged the impulse, and Aro's head snapped up. He hissed at her and hauled Esme up onto his shoulder, turning and darting around the edge of the

amphitheater on the way to the river.

"No!" she yelled again. She wanted to chase him, but Alexander . . . she couldn't carry him into danger and she couldn't leave him here unprotected in the midst of a mass of violent, senseless vampires. She glanced desperately around until she saw Alec, standing silent and still at the top of the amphitheater.

Alec. He was the source of the chaos.

Alexander was still holding his hand out, and Siobhan, crossing the path of his randomly-directed shield, crumpled into a heap.

That was exactly what she needed.

Alec had fixed her with a chilly glare, aware now that she was somehow immune to what he had done to the others, and when she started toward him he fell into a defensive crouch. He could probably put up a pretty serious fight, she thought idly, especially having had a quick training on how to fight newborns from Jasper and his friends. But they weren't going to fight. As she drew near him she simply turned her son's outstretched hand toward him, and he collapsed.

The response from the rest of the vampires was immediate. Cries of relief rang out as, freed from Alec's influence, covens came together in flesh-cracking embraces.

"Esme!" Bella called out above the noise, pointing toward the river. "Aro took her!"

Edward was off like a shot, and dozens fell in behind him, rushing to Esme's aid. Even the shape-shifters joined in the chase, and blasts of heat came from every side as a dragon, a Han dog, and three wolves leapt into the fray. Bella jumped up into the nearest tree, conscious of the need to protect Alexander from the stampede. She scanned the terrain and found Aro, glancing over his shoulder at his pursuers as he leapt the river. He couldn't outrun them and he must have known it, because as soon as his feet landed on solid ground he dropped Esme and wrenched her head from her body.

"No!" Bella cried in horror as he headed for a campfire that had been left smoldering by one of the gathered vampires. "No! Edward, stop him!"

But he was already in motion, lobbing Esme's disembodied head into the glowing embers. It landed in a puff of ash . . . but the burst of flame that Bella was waiting for didn't come. The coals were suddenly dark. Aro let out a frustrated scream and ran to it, scooping up Esme's head and throwing it once again into the nearest smoking fire pit. But again, the coals suddenly cooled just before the moment of contact, leaving her blinking face ash-dusted, but unharmed.

Bella heard a low laugh behind her and she looked back. Benjamin had climbed a tree a few yards away, and like her, he was watching the chase.

"Benjamin did that!" Alexander exclaimed, reaching the conclusion just as Bella did.

Benjamin chuckled. "Don't worry about Esme. He can't kill her without my cooperation."

It was too late for Aro to even make another attempt. Edward was jumping the river now, with others just a fraction of a second behind him. Carlisle skidded to a stop, scooping up Esme's body before taking up the chase again. By the time he had taken his second step, Edward was tackling

Aro. The older vampire attempted a tricky little evasive maneuver, but Edward was more than up to the challenge. He countered and slammed Aro into the ground, leaving a deep furrow in the earth behind them. Emmett and Rosalie reached them next, and they grabbed Aro's arms and dragged him out from under Edward, holding him fast as he fought for escape.

The rest of the crowd stopped there, but Carlisle continued on to the pit where Esme's head lay. He fell to his knees and lowered her body to the earth, then reached out and gently picked up her head, cradling it to his chest.

"Esme, darling," he whispered, lowering her head to her body. He kissed her mouth, and then her neck, his lips caressing the hard skin, leaving trails of venom that would knit the broken flesh. "My darling, my wife . . . Esme . . . I love you." He whispered and kissed, and everyone looked on in fascination, watching the devotion with which he repaired his wife's injuries.

"Come *on*, Mother," Alexander said, tugging at her shirt. "Go over *there*."

Benjamin was already running to join the others and Bella wanted to follow, but she was all too conscious of the man who had disabled them all in the first place. Alec still lay senseless on the ground below, but Alexander's shield was only effective for so long. She jumped down to the ground and crouched next to him, releasing Alexander for a moment. She bent down and sank her teeth into Alec's neck, then twisted hard, ripping his head from his body. She wanted to take it with her, yet she knew that he would still be aware of his surroundings even with his head severed, and she didn't know if he needed his body to use his sinister talent.

"Can you watch him?" she asked Alexander. "If he wakes up, put him to sleep again?"

"I can," he said with solemn eagerness.

She gave him a squeezed. "Good boy. Come on."

She ran to join the others, and when she got there Esme was sitting up, her arms wrapped around Carlisle. It was she who whispered now, reassuring him that she was safe and unharmed as he lovingly wiped the ash from her face with a handkerchief.

Edward was standing with Rosalie and Emmett, and Bella ran there, stopping before she brought Alexander too close to the snarling Aro. He cursed and threatened, and Alexander watched him wide-eyed, for once content to let Bella keep him away from the center of the action.

Edward moved to her side, wrapping his arm around her. "You got free," he whispered, his hand drifting up to cup her cheek. "You escaped his sensory deprivation."

"Not exactly. It didn't seem to work on me."

"Your shield." He smiled and leaned in to kiss her. "You're amazing, Isabella."

"I'm amazing too!" Alexander said, pushing his way between them. "I made Alec go to sleep!"

"You *brilliant* boy." Edward ruffled his hair and dropped a kiss on his cheek.

Alexander beamed at him.

Everyone was waiting, murmuring quietly but letting Carlisle have his reunion with Esme. As soon as he turned back to look at Aro, though, Rosalie straightened.

"Say the word, Carlisle."

Carlisle's eyes darkened, and his lips pulled back, baring his teeth.

"Kill him."

"No!" Jasper jumped forward to stop Emmett and Rosalie.

Carlisle hissed. "Jasper . . ."

"I understand how you feel, Carlisle, but this isn't the way."

"When it was James—"

"When it was James, you gave me what I wanted. I'm grateful enough to return the favor."

Carlisle got to his feet, pulling Esme up with him. "I want him to burn."

"Right now you do, but you'll regret it. Carlisle, think about what's happening. Everyone is watching. *The boy* is watching."

Carlisle's narrowed gaze slid to Bella—no, not to Bella, to Alexander, and the hatred drained out of his face. Alexander stared back with his deep, penetrating gaze as he sucked thoughtfully at his thumb.

"You've been very clear that you want more respect for life," Jasper said. "Now's your chance to lead by example."

"Carlisle," Esme breathed, her lips close to his ear, "don't let me be the thing that breaks you. Please. I couldn't bear it."

He turned to her, kissed her, got lost in her again.

"What, then?" Garrett said coldly, stepping closer to Jasper than Bella would have dared to during an argument. "We just let him walk free? After he attacked us? After he tried to kill Esme?"

Jasper shook his head, but he didn't have an answer.

"Tia," Edward said, his eyes finding her lingering at the edge of the crowd. "Say it."

She pressed her lips together.

"It's a good idea. Say it."

She didn't speak, but she weaved her way to where Rosalie and Emmett held Aro. "Make sure you have a good hold on him. He's not going to like this."

They both adjusted their grips and the dragon curled around behind them, cutting off any escape in case Aro managed to break free.

Tia reached out and took Aro's gloved hand as if in greeting. She flashed him a fleeting smile and his eyes widened.

"No!" he yelled, his voice pitched high in panic. "You can't! Carlisle! Don't let her do this!"

But Tia was already pulling, twisting the cracking flesh until she had separated it from his arm. She handed it to Jasper and then moved to Aro's other side, tearing the second hand free. Aro was babbling, begging for Carlisle's mercy, but no one was listening. Tia turned to Carlisle and looked at him expectantly.

"His hands are the source of his talent," Edward whispered, leaning close to Alexander to make sure he understood the implications of Tia's actions. "He can only read minds when he touches someone with his palms."

Alexander watched with wide eyes.

Carlisle considered for just a moment, then turned to Esme.

"Is it enough?"

She gave him a small smile and nodded.

"No, Carlisle!" Aro shrieked. "I've been a better friend than you know! I protected you! When others wanted you eliminated for your strange ways I guaranteed your safety!"

Carlisle nodded to Tia. "Burn them."

The nearest fire pit flared back to life, and Tia tossed the hand she held into the fire, having to shake it loose when a finger managed to wrap itself around her thumb. Jasper followed suit, and the air clouded with wisps of thick, acrid smoke and the odor of burning leather. Aro howled. No one spoke until his hands had burned away and he slumped to the ground, sobbing over his loss, the jagged stumps of his arms tucked against his chest.

Carlisle moved to stand in front of him, his arm still wrapped around Esme's waist. He looked down at his old friend while a dozen different emotions played across his face.

"Go home, Aro," he said quietly. "Go back to Sulpicia and make peace with your retirement."

Rosalie and Emmett released him, but he didn't stand.

"You've ruined me," he sobbed.

"And yet, you're alive and free to return to your mate—a luxury you tried to take from me. I won't forgive it. Leave now, and don't ever set foot in my territory again."

Aro didn't meet his gaze, but he did obey. He stumbled to his feet and staggered southeast, heading away from the house and from Forks.

"What about him?" Kate asked, gesturing toward Alec's head, which was still clutched by the hair in Bella's hand.

Tia gave the head a speculative look. "I don't suppose we'd be able to take away his talent without killing him?"

Edward shook his head.

She considered for a moment. "What if we removed his eyes? And maybe his eardrums? He took all our senses from us, after all."

Benjamin moved up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "That may be a bit much. He still has to live, and he has to be able to keep our secret."

Bella glanced around. A lot of people were smiling. They liked Tia's approach to punishment.

"His eyes," Carlisle affirmed, voicing the common opinion. "After we speak to him, though. He should have the opportunity to defend himself."

But Alec had nothing to say. Back at the amphitheater, his head reunited with his body, he sat stoically and refused to answer any questions put to him. So his eyes were gouged out and he was sent on his way. Compensating for the loss of his eyes with his other senses, he followed Aro's path to the southeast.

Once he was out of sight, Carlisle stood. "I think that's enough for today. Emmett, I suggest we suspend entertainment tonight in order to allow everyone to spend time with their covens. We've had some close calls the last couple of days, and I, for one, am desperate for some alone time with my wife."

Emmett smirked. "All right, you guys. Go get kinky. We'll see you all again at sunrise."

Everyone started to scatter, but before they got too far, Garrett darted to the top of the amphitheater and called out, "Kate!"

She turned, tugging Tanya with her since their arms were linked together, and both of them looked at Garrett.

For a moment Garrett looked like he didn't know what to say. Everyone was watching, but he seemed most unnerved by Kate's gaze on him.

"I'm doing it," he said. "I'm giving up human blood."

Kate snorted. "Sure you are."

"I—" He looked affronted. "I am. I'm doing it. For you."

She arched an eyebrow. "You're giving up human blood for me."

"Yes."

"Huh. Let me know how that goes." She started to turn away, but Garrett called out her name again, and she looked back.

"I understand what you need," he said, his voice softer now. "Someone humane. Someone thoughtful. But more than that, someone who will put you first, above all else."

"And that's what you're doing? Putting me first?"

"I'm making a sacrifice." He moved forward, taking her hand and tugging her away from Tanya. "Kate . . . siren . . ." He fell to one knee. "What else can I give?"

"I guess you could make a fool of yourself in front of everyone. That would be fun."

Garrett didn't answer. He simply gazed at her, his eyes demanding her attention, refusing to be deterred by her flippancy. Her smirk faded and she pursed her lips.

"I don't even like you."

"Yes, you do."

A tiny smile tugged at her lips then. "I wish I didn't."

"You can't help yourself." He smiled too. "Kate, I love you. And apparently the madness is catching, because here I am dooming myself to a life of foul-tasting meals. But I haven't any choice. I can live without the blood, but I can't live without you."

She was smiling broadly now, her eyes glistening. "You're a showboating narcissist. And what's worse—you're cheesy."

"And you *adore* me."

She laughed. "God help me, I do."

"I'm afraid the gods have all given up on you. There's no saving you now."

"Would you get off the ground?" Kate said, tugging at his hand. "I can't kiss you when you're all the way down there."

Garrett stood and swept her into his arms, and the whole crowd clapped and cheered when their lips met. Bella whooped along with them while Alexander, who had scrambled up onto her shoulders to get a better view, clapped his little hands.

"They love each other, Mother!"

"They sure do."

"Then how come they always fight?"

Edward laughed and pulled Bella close. "Love is a tricky emotion, kid. More often than not, it makes you act like a lunatic."

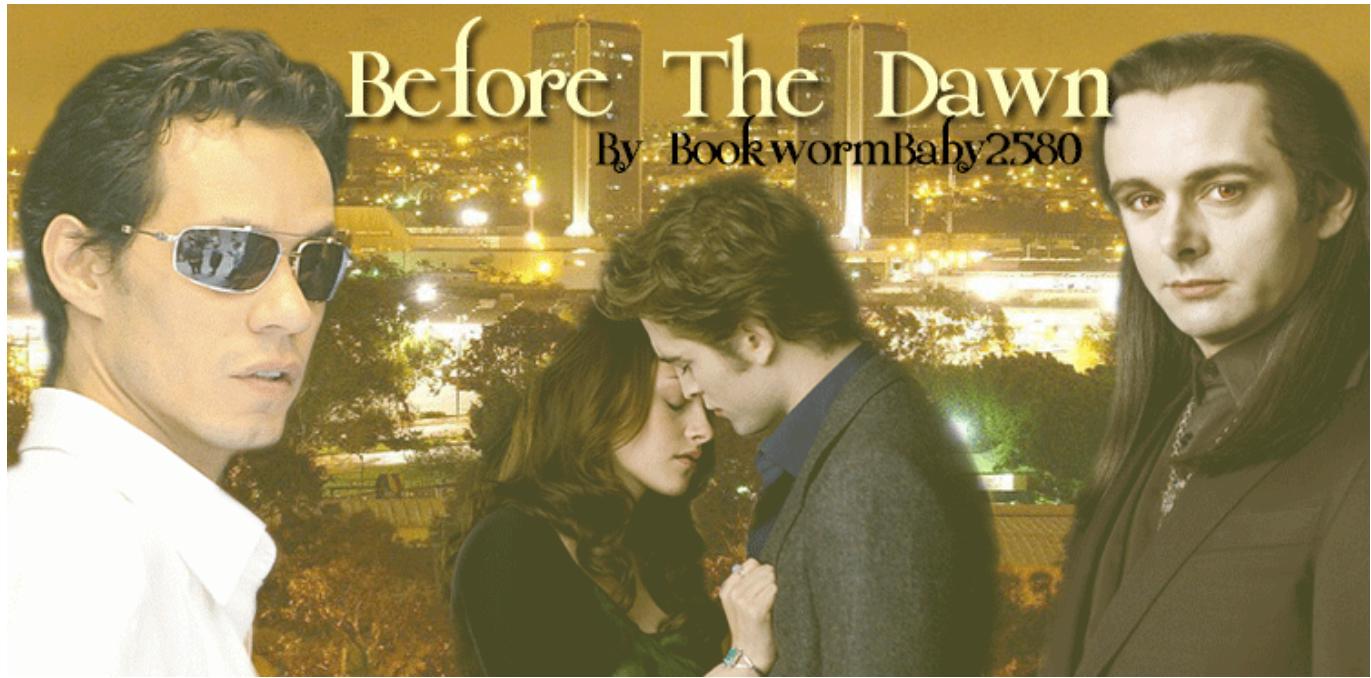
"What's a lunatic?"

"That's a good question. The word has a long history. Have I ever told you about werewolves?"

"Like Sam?"

"No, not like Sam." Edward steered Bella toward the house, strolling slowly while he delivered his etymology lesson. "Real werewolves seem like normal humans most of the time, but when the moon gets full they start acting very strange . . ."

Prelude to the Morning



"It should be Tia."

Edward's declaration was met with silence as all of his extended family regarded him thoughtfully.

Carlisle's and Tanya's covens were gathered in the living room of the Cullens' house, keeping their voices low to preserve their privacy. The old familiar faces were all there, but a few extras were included in their number that hadn't been a few weeks before. Bella and Alexander, of course, had been added, but they were no longer the newcomers to the group. Bella now sat among the family on Edward's lap, with Alexander perched on the back of the chair. Her former refuge in the corner of the room was taken by Bree and Diego, huddling together as though trying to take up as little space as possible. Fred sat against the fireplace, watching over them while still maintaining some distance from the main group.

Garrett, too, had joined their number, as had Laurent, with whom Irina had been spending increasing amounts of time. It seemed both of these men would be accompanying the Denali clan back to their cabin when the gathering was over.

"I don't disagree . . ." Jasper told Edward carefully, "but justify your choice."

"She's sharp. A little manipulative, maybe, but it could be useful that she knows how to provoke a response. She's invested in the idea of promoting respect for life—she was open-minded enough to try your animal blood experiment. And she has a loyal protector who's as good as a dozen of the Volturi guard."

Eleazar was nodding as Edward ticked off his reasons. "She can be cold. Calculating."

"Benjamin tempers her, though," Bella said, remembering what Pythia had told Tia. "You're hard enough, but you're not soft enough . . ."

Jasper shook his head, understanding the reference. "Don't make your decisions based on the predictions of an oracle. It's too easy to get it wrong."

"I like her for the job, though," Rosalie said. "It's just . . . where Tia goes, Amun goes."

"I'm not so sure that's true," Jasper said. "Benjamin's been getting more and more disillusioned with him. One good fight would probably sever their ties."

"Could we start something?" Tanya suggested.

"I wouldn't. Benjamin is sensitive to any perceived criticism of Amun, even when he doesn't disagree."

"I could drop a hint to Tia," Edward said. "I think she could make it happen."

"All right, then," Esme murmured. "Contingent on her separation from Amun, do we all support Tia?"

Everyone in the main group nodded, and Carlisle turned to the newborns in the corner.

"Do you three have any reservations?"

They all looked startled to be included, but before any of them could speak, Joham's voice cut them off, yelling Carlisle's name from outside.

Carlisle raised his eyes to the ceiling, rallying patience, then turned an impassive face toward the back door as Joham stomped across the grass to the house. "Is there something I can help you with?" he asked coolly as Joham burst into the house.

"My tent!" he spat. "Filthy! Those little—one of them did it, I know!"

"Did what? Messed up your tent?"

"It is covered—covered!—in *bird droppings*."

A surprised laugh escaped Bella's throat, and she might have tried to stifle it except everyone else had laughed too. Even Carlisle, taken by surprise by Joham's problem, hadn't bothered to silence his mirth.

"What are bird droppings?" Alexander asked.

Bella grinned as she told him. "Bird poop."

"Poop!" Alexander laughed and tumbled into Bella's lap. "Father, birds pooped on your tent?"

"You think this is funny?" Joham growled, ignoring Alexander and glaring at Carlisle.

"It certainly is unfortunate. There are some rags under the sink in the kitchen if you want to tidy up."

"That's it?" He stared around at the family. "You're not going to *do* anything about it?"

"What would you have me do?" Carlisle asked. "Hunt all the birds on the Olympic Peninsula into extinction?"

"One of *them* is responsible," Joham said, jabbing a finger toward the back door.

"Really? One of them climbed up into the trees and persuaded all of the nearby birds to defecate on your tent?"

"They must have done something. All the other tents are clean."

"All right," Carlisle said, his voice calm and reasonable, "let's say there is someone here who is able to influence the gastrointestinal functions of fowl. What exactly would you have me do about it?"

"I want you to put a stop to it!"

He raised his eyebrows. "I should go outside and tell everyone that they have to be nice to you?"

Rosalie snorted. "Honey, this is grade school stuff. If you want the other kids to like you, you have to be likable."

This set Alexander off again, and he rolled back and forth in Bella's lap, thoroughly enjoying his father's humiliation.

"You refuse to address the problem?" Joham demanded.

"Of course I refuse." Carlisle sat back, fixing him with an amused gaze. "You're a grown man. You have been for a very long time. It's unfortunate that your tent was soiled by the local wildlife, but I have every confidence in your ability to cope with the situation. Once again, there are some rags under the sink in the kitchen."

"I have never been treated so shamefully in all my life!" He spun on his heel and marched back out the door, not bothering with the rags.

Bella burst out laughing again.

"Mother!" Alexander gasped. "The birds *pooped* on his tent!"

Bella was enjoying her son's reaction so much that she nearly missed the knowing smile on Edward's face.

"What?" Carlisle asked him, leaning forward with interest. "What's going on."

Edward shrugged with exaggerated innocence. "It's such a weird coincidence."

Carlisle narrowed his eyes, dropping his voice low again. "What do you know?"

Edward licked his lips, lowering his voice as well. "You know that theory you've always had about Siobhan? That she can will things to happen if she concentrates hard enough?"

Carlisle's eyebrows raised.

"Turns out, you were right."

Carlisle covered his eyes and shook his head, but his shoulders were shaking. "Siobhan," he breathed. "That woman has a strange sense of humor."

"Siobhan made the birds poop?" Alexander asked.

Bella put her finger to her lips, smiling mischievously. "That's our little secret."

He giggled again.

"I'm sorry, my friends," Carlisle said, turning back to the newborns. "I was asking for your input about Tia."

They all exchanged glances and Bree shrugged. "We don't really know her. Or anybody."

"I understand it must be difficult to take a position with such limited information. But if you ever have anything to add to the discussion, please feel free. Your perspective is important to us."

She nodded awkwardly. "Thanks. Um . . . we will . . . if we think of anything."

"Shall we adjourn, then?" Carlisle asked.

"Actually," Jasper said, "Eleazar, could you hang around for a minute? I'd like your help with something."

"Certainly."

He stayed, and so did everyone else, curious about what Jasper wanted. He jogged out the door and returned a couple of minutes later with Peter and Charlotte in tow. They all took seats on the floor, and Jasper leaned back against Alice's legs.

"Peter, how are you feeling?"

"Uh . . . good," he said. "All right."

"Anxious? Nervous?"

"Is there a reason you're asking me questions you already know the answers to?"

Jasper smirked. "It's for the benefit of people who aren't me."

"Okay. I guess I feel pretty good. Relaxed. More than I have been in a while."

"How'd you feel this morning."

"Um . . ."

"You were *mooody*," Charlotte said with a pointed look. To Jasper she added, "He kept muttering about how a vampire who had ruled for thousands of years wasn't going to cede control without putting up a fight."

"Now might be a good time to point out that I was right," he replied. "*Again.*"

"That's kinda what I'm getting at," Jasper said. "You were tied in knots over Maria, and she turned out to be a real threat. And you saw the thing with Aro coming when none of the rest of us did."

"Hmmm . . ." Eleazar was leaning forward, peering closely at Peter. "It's . . . *very* subtle. Enough that I missed it. But Peter, I think your intuition could be developed into something truly useful."

"Intuition?"

He nodded. "It's not foresight, exactly. You won't *see* anything. But you're not often caught off your guard, are you?"

"Never," Jasper said. "You always had incredible instincts and a good head for strategy. And thinking back on it . . . you were always restless before an attack on our army. It's like you knew they were coming."

"I don't always know when *you're* coming," he muttered with a narrow glare.

"What do you mean?" Eleazar asked.

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "Jasper likes to assault Peter at random times. It's supposed to be fun."

"And you're surprised by these attacks?" Eleazar asked him.

Peter nodded.

"Perhaps that's because there's no real danger involved in them. Jasper never means you harm, correct?"

"Except that one time," Jasper said quietly, and Peter met his gaze and echoed, "Except that one time."

"You were ready for me," Jasper said.

"To be fair, I'd been ready for days."

"I'd been thinking about it for days. I kept hoping I wouldn't have to do it."

"Do what?" Emmett asked.

"Kill Charlotte."

Alice reached down and squeezed Jasper's shoulder, and his hand drifted up to clutch hers.

"She's little, and her strength was all but gone. I kept thinking one more fight would do the job for me, but somehow she always survived them."

"Interesting," Eleazar murmured. "Anyway, Peter, I think this could become very useful for you if you worked on developing it."

"How do I do that?"

"I would think . . . by exploring any anxieties you have. Mull them over. Try to figure out what possibilities make you the most anxious. For instance, when you were worried about Maria raising an army, why did you feel personally threatened? What did you think she was going to do with that army that would put you in danger?"

"I'm not sure I could have predicted her using it to bring about the collapse of the government," he said dryly.

"You just might have been able to, if you had taken the time to think it through. Anyway, give it a try and see what you can learn. The more you consciously stretch your talent, the more it will develop."

Jasper frowned at Peter. "What?"

He shrugged.

"What?"

"I don't know. How . . ." He paused. "How sure are you that your human neighbors aren't going to stumble on this gathering?"

"Pretty sure. It's not often that people come out here, and if they do, we can usually deflect them at the house. No reason for them ever to make it to the other side of the river."

Beside Bella, Edward started laughing.

"What?" Jasper asked him, looking confused.

Edward ignored him. "Peter, you're better at this than you think. Mike Newton is on his way over."

Bella heard tires turn onto the gravel road then, and she groaned.

"Why's he coming?" Jasper asked.

"Other than wanting to see Alice?" He smirked. "Mikey's got a little crush on your girl."

"Of course he does. You'd have to be a fool not to be in love with my girl."

Alice beamed up at him.

"He has a case of waterproofing spray with him," Edward added. "Maybe he's coming to protect us from the rain."

Bella let out a huff. "Take Alexander for a minute," she said, rising and plopping the boy on Edward's lap. "I need to go get the perfumes and the wolf scarf."

"Who's Mike Newton?" Alexander asked Edward.

"He's a boy I go to school with. We bought most of our camping gear from his family's store."

"His family has a store?"

"Yep."

"Is it big?"

Bella listened to Alexander quiz Edward as she ran to the bathroom and started loading herself up with the scents that would help deflect the tempting human aroma. The thought of it didn't make her panic like it had only a few weeks before. Time spent with Charlie made her confident that she

could rein in her thirst, and having Alexander around really did settle her down. She would avoid being near Mike in any enclosed locations, but that was probably the only real precaution she needed to take.

She tapped a pair of contacts into place and headed back out of the bathroom as Carlisle was directing everyone back across the river except Alice and Jasper. Edward lifted Alexander up onto his shoulders and reached out for Bella's hand, and the two of them followed. Across the river, they started moving through the campsites, warning everyone that they would have to act as human as possible with Mike in the vicinity. They righted chairs and positioned camp stoves, lit a handful of fires, and encouraged those with red eyes to keep their gazes averted. Emmett even produced several roasting sticks, along with packages of hot dogs and marshmallows, and started passing them around. A few vampires started gathering the newborns together and herding them off into the woods, but most of them stayed to play human and catch a glimpse of the neighbor.

"You're going to have to pretend to be a human baby," Bella told Alexander. "So no talking . . . and you probably shouldn't walk, either. A baby your size wouldn't be very good at it."

"Can I make marshmallows?"

"We'll make them for you," Edward said, "but you get to eat them."

He smiled brightly and tipped himself off of Edward's shoulders and into Bella's arms, snuggling up against her chest.

Across the river, Mike was exiting his car. "Hey, Newton," she heard Jasper say cheerfully. "What brings you all the way out here?"

"There's a pretty serious storm rolling in tonight. The tents all have some waterproofing, but it's a good idea to give them an extra coating if you're going to be out in heavy rain."

"Mike!" Alice's voice answered, "that's so sweet of you! What do we owe you?"

"It's a gift. Sort of a thank you for being such good customers, you know? I'll show you how to use it, if you want."

"That'd be great," Jasper said. "Here, let me help you with that. The campground is across the river, but there's a fallen tree up this way that we've been using to cross to the other side."

Edward's eyes suddenly widened, and he took off running to the east. A moment later Bella heard a loud crack and the thud of a tree falling, and she cringed. It was loud. She doubted whether Mike could have missed it.

"What was that?" Mike asked, confirming her fear.

"Loggers, probably," Alice said, her tone dismissive. "We hear them a lot out here. The acoustics in the area make them sound closer than they are."

Edward reappeared at Bella's side, grinning at her.

"Good job, Edward," Alexander whispered.

Edward winked at him.

"Wow . . . that's a huge amphitheater," Mike was saying.

"Isn't that nice?" Alice agreed. "We meet here for conservation lectures."

"Say, Mike, how did football tryouts go?" Jasper asked, and Bella grinned. Alice was a quick thinker, but distraction was always a good idea. Mike started telling Jasper about training with his dad and practices with the team as they made their way up to the new fallen-tree bridge and eased across the river. Several more minutes of walking brought them back to the campground, and Jasper called out, as though bringing actual news to the group, "Hey, everyone, look who's here!"

Carlisle looked up, feigning surprise. "Mike! How nice to see you! Everyone, Mike's family store supplied us with our gear for this retreat."

There were some whistles of approval and a few people turned and waved, though Bella noticed they were careful to keep a view of their eyes obstructed. Many of them had simply donned sunglasses, which while effective, was a little strange given the heavy clouds above them.

Mike told them once again about the waterproofing sprays he had brought for the tent, and then demonstrated on the nearest one how to reinforce the coating on the tents, paying extra attention to the seams.

"It's also a good idea to dig a shallow trench around the perimeter of your tent, right up against the edge, so you don't get water collecting beneath your tent and seeping up through the bottom."

"That's a great idea," Carlisle said. "Thank you, Mike. Here, I'll start passing those cans around."

Carlisle relieved him of the palates of waterproofing that he and Jasper had hauled across the river, but Mike lingered. He stayed near Alice, helping to supervise the application of the waterproofing, until he caught sight of Bella and Edward. He smiled and waved, and then left Alice and trotted over to them.

"Hey, Edward," he said. "Hey, Bella. Who's this?" He gestured to Alexander, who was feigning sleep in Bella's arms.

"My cousin," Bella said.

"Yeah? Does Chief Swan have brothers and sisters?"

"On my mom's side."

"Oh. Huh. That's funny, I thought he looked a little like your dad. Um. Listen." He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I'm really sorry, but I think everyone knows about you being back in town. I didn't tell anyone, I swear," he added in a rush, "but I think my mom might have. I don't think she knew she wasn't supposed to."

"It's okay," Bella said. "It's not really a big deal."

"I just wanted you to know that I didn't say anything. I *can* keep a secret."

"No worries," Edward said, clapping him on the back. "People are leaving us alone, so it's all good."

Mike started to respond, but something over Edward's shoulder caught his eye, and his mouth fell open a little. Bella turned to see Nahuel strolling through the camp, bare-chested and clad in his animal-skin leggings and his intricately-beaded leather jewelry.

"Whoa," Mike murmured. "He's, uh . . ." He trailed off and then glanced at Bella and Edward and cleared his throat. "Die-hard naturalist, huh?"

One corner of Edward's mouth pulled up in a smirk. "Totally."

"That's . . . really cool."

"You want to meet him?" Edward asked, and Bella thought he looked a little more amused than the situation warranted.

"Yeah! Um—sure. That'd be cool."

"Nahuel!" Edward beckoned him over, and Nahuel veered toward them. "This is our friend Mike Newton."

Nahuel gave him a long, intense look. "Hello," he finally said, continuing to stare.

"Uh. Hi." Mike offered him his hand, and Nahuel took it and shook it stiffly.

Jasper drifted over to them with a smirk that matched Edward's. "Nahuel, Mike was just telling me that he made the football team."

"What is football team?" Nahuel asked.

"Football? It's, uh . . . a sport. You've never heard of it?"

"Die-hard naturalist," Bella reminded him. "Nahuel has spent a lot more time in the Amazon than in a stadium."

"Right, yeah, of course." Mike started describing his sport, and Nahuel surprised Bella by remaining completely absorbed in his words, asking frequent questions that revealed his unfamiliarity with American society. Mike sometimes seemed surprised, though more than happy to keep talking.

Edward nudged Bella's elbow and jerked his head, and the two of them eased away from Mike and Nahuel. Jasper followed, leaving the boys alone, locked in an intense conversation about high school sports.

"What's going on there?" Bella asked.

Jasper chuckled. "That, Bella, is the beginning of something special."

"Special?"

"Very, very special."

"You mean, they're—"

Edward nodded. "Rather attracted to each other."

"Mike is gay?"

Jasper shrugged. "He wasn't a few minutes ago."

"Good thing he can keep a secret." Edward hooked an arm around Bella's waist and steered them to the nearest palette of cans. He plucked one up, and the two of them made their way to their own tent.

"Alexander, you want to try?" Edward asked him.

He peeked an eye open. "Am I allowed?"

"I suspect Mike won't be kept in the dark about us much longer," he said. "You might as well stop pretending."

"Good! Being a human is boring." He reached for the can and, holding it with both hands, began spraying where Edward directed him. Bella lifted him high so he could reach the top of the tent while Edward held the fabric taut for him, and together they coated their little temporary home to protect it from the stormy weather.

"Can I dig the trench?" he asked when they were done, and before they answered he dropped down onto the ground and started digging at the earth with his fingers.

"Does that hurt?" Bella asked. "Do you need a shovel?"

"No, this is good."

He worked quickly, and was just finishing the tent when Bella heard rapid steps approaching from the direction of the house. She glanced back and saw Jennifer leaping the river, then searched quickly for Mike and found to her relief that he was looking away and hadn't seen the display of superhuman strength.

"Doctor!" Jennifer called, and Carlisle hurried back toward the river to meet her.

"What's wrong?"

"Maysun. She's in pain."

"What kind of pain?" He was already heading back toward the river, and with a quick glance toward Mike's back, he jumped back across with Jennifer.

Edward frowned after them.

"Did something happen?" Bella asked Edward.

"No, she's just having really bad cramps."

Bella froze. "That's what it felt like when I went into labor. I cramped really bad in my stomach and my lower back."

"Maybe that's it. It's almost a week earlier than we estimated, though."

"Is that bad?"

"Bad for the fetus. Maybe not for Maysun."

"What do you mean?"

"The pregnancy is really hard on her—I'm sure you know that."

Bella nodded, grimacing.

"And you know Carlisle's been afraid to abort, especially with what happened after Amelia."

"Why? What happened?"

"She somehow moved in such a way that some of the connections to her internal organs were severed. The fetus fought back against being denied what it needed. It shredded her from the inside out."

Bella cringed.

Alexander looked worried. "The baby might kill Maysun?"

"It could," Edward said. "But if she's going into labor, it's possible that the fetus will accept the natural process and allow removal. Even if it's premature, we might be able to get it out without it causing any extra harm to Maysun."

"Will the baby die?"

"I don't know," Edward said. "It's possible that either of them could die—or both of them, like what happened with Amelia. But Carlisle is going to do everything he can to help."

Bella glanced up and saw that Nahuel was hurrying Mike back toward the fallen tree.

"Good," Edward murmured. "There could be blood. It's not particularly tempting, but it will still be best to have the humans out of the way."

"Stay close to me," Bella told Alexander.

"Maybe we should go with them," Edward suggested. "You're the only one here who's been through this. You might be able to help."

"I can help, too," Alexander said. "I 'member everything."

Edward nodded and raised his eyebrows at Bella in query. Bella waffled a little, but eventually decided that nothing happening in the house would be any worse than the things Alexander had seen already. She took Edward's hand and the three of them made their way to the house, lingering downstairs while Carlisle examined Maysun. Everything Bella heard solidified her suspicion that Maysun was in labor, and after a couple of minutes, Carlisle came to the same conclusion.

"Edward, scrub up," he said. "And Bella, if the blood isn't too overwhelming for you, I'd appreciate any advice you can give."

They both darted up the stairs and headed into Carlisle and Esme's room, where Maysun was sprawled across the bed, a grimace distorting her face. Alistair sat beside her, pressing his cool hand to her sweating forehead, and on her other side Jennifer clutched her hand

"Bella, your delivery was essentially a C-section, wasn't it?" Carlisle called from the bathroom where he and Edward were washing.

"Yes, but . . . Alexander made the cuts. I don't even know how."

"With my fingernails," he supplied. "The baby has to cut the placenta, and then the uterus, and then the skin."

Bella blinked in surprise, unaware that her son even had the vocabulary to describe the birth.

Edward and Carlisle re-entered the room, gloved and wearing paper gowns.

"Maysun, we need to talk about further pregnancies," Carlisle said.

"*What?*"

"If you're going to be in a relationship with a vampire, there's a possibility that you could get pregnant again. I may, however, be able to perform a partial hysterectomy to prevent it, if you want me to."

"Ow—*fuck!* Do it. I am *not* going through this again."

Edward shook his head. "The fetus is getting distressed, Carlisle. I'm not sure we can wait for it to figure out what to do."

"Is there time for anesthesia?"

"I'm sorry," Edward said, directing his apology to Maysun. "I think we shouldn't try to wait."

"Just get it out!" she cried.

Carlisle began stripping off her leggings. "Alistair, hold her down," he murmured. He tossed the leggings aside, lifted her shirt, and placed his thumb nail against Maysun's skin. He glanced over to make sure Alistair had a good grip, and then dug his nail in, slicing through the skin. She screamed and arched nearly off the bed as thick, red blood welled up from the wound in her stomach. Bella looked away quickly, burying her nose in Alexander's hair. She could hear Maysun screaming while Edward and Carlisle coordinated their efforts in low voices.

"There it is," she heard Carlisle whisper.

"Quickly. It's not reacting well to the exposure."

The whole process sounded wet and sucking, and there were smells that were a lot less pleasant mingling with the mildly-appealing hybrid blood. Bella heard a quiet, approving sound from Carlisle, and then suddenly he hissed in what sounded like pain.

"Well," he said, his voice strained, "she has venom."

"Now she has to bite the cord," Alexander said. "No, the baby has to do it. That's the best blood."

Bella glanced back. Carlisle was trying to use a silver tool to cut something inside of Maysun, but he paused now and looked down at the surprisingly small child that Edward had cradled in his

hands. The baby groped blindly, eyes squeezed shut, while Edward directed the umbilical cord to its mouth.

"Work faster," Alistair hissed, and as if in agreement, Maysun turned her head and vomited blood onto the sheets.

Carlisle tossed the tool aside and leaned in to use his teeth on whatever he was doing. Bella looked away again when he started lifting a mass of tissue out of Maysun's stomach.

"Edward, help the baby seal the cut," he ordered, his voice coming from the direction of the bathroom.

"She's losing consciousness!" Alistair snapped.

"The baby has to bite her," Alexander directed.

Bella peeked at Carlisle, who was back at the bedside. He shook his head. "I don't know how she'll react to the venom. We'll do that only as a last resort. Jennifer, what's your blood type?"

"Um . . . A-negative."

"How do you feel about donating?"

"That's fine."

The baby was still licking at Maysun's now-healed stomach. Edward poked a needle into Maysun's veins while Carlisle prepared to draw blood from Jennifer.

"Hold her head," Carlisle was telling Alistair. "Don't let her choke. Count her breaths for me. Bella, fill the sink in the bathroom with water just a couple of degrees warmer than Alexander's body temperature. Run the shower too—hot. Get the room warm and steamy."

She complied immediately, fleeing to the bathroom and finding it littered with medical paraphernalia. She pushed some things back and set Alexander on the counter, but he jumped down and slipped back into the bedroom. She let him go, but called out a warning for him to stay out of Carlisle's way as she cranked the shower water on. Once steam started pouring into the room, she turned back to the sink and fiddled with the taps until the water ran just warmer than Alexander's body.

"Good," Carlisle was saying. "Edward, as soon as the bag is full, get it to Maysun." A moment later he was pushing his way into the bathroom, the undersized baby cradled in one arm. She fussed weakly and smearing gore all over his paper gown. There was blood on his sleeve too, Bella noticed, and a streak of it still on his cheek.

"Here we are," he shifted the baby into Bella's arms, then leaned down and licked the stump of the umbilical cord. "Go ahead and bathe her. You shouldn't have to keep the cord dry, but if it starts to bleed again, do a quick repair and hold it out of the water."

Bella nodded.

"We're going to need an incubator," he murmured to himself.

Edward answered from the other room, "Rosalie already went to get one."

Carlisle smiled. He fished a soft wash cloth out of the closet for Bella and then headed back into the bedroom.

Bella lowered the little girl into the water, carefully running the cloth over her underdeveloped body. The baby let out a cry when she was first settled into the sink, but soon she seemed to grow used to it and even to like it. The water quickly stained pink as Bella dabbed the gore from the baby's body, thoroughly cleaning all her crevices and folds.

She couldn't help comparing her to the newborn Alexander, which made it even more obvious that there was something distinctly lacking about the child. Her eyes would hardly open, while Alexander had been wide-eyed and alert right from the start. Alexander had moved with a confident agility, but this baby showed the same lack of control that Bella would have expected to see in a purely human newborn. The week of development she had been deprived of showed in her spasmotic movements.

"It's helping," she heard Edward say from the other room, "but we could use more."

"Can I give another pint?" Jennifer asked.

"It won't endanger your life," Carlisle responded, "but you probably won't feel very good."

"It's okay. Do it."

The water in the sink was already starting to cool. Bella opened the drain and lifted the baby out, wrapping her in a soft towel from the closet. She squawked in protest, and Bella whispered soothing words to her as she drained the sink and filled it again with warm water. Once again, she settled the baby into it, and she cooed her appreciation at the comfort of the water.

Maysun, it seemed, was significantly stronger than Bella had been. They got her stabilized with surprising speed, and after a few minutes she was conscious but exhausted, her head tucked in the crook of Alistair's arm as Carlisle and Edward cleaned her up and changed the bed linens beneath her. Bella heard the crinkle of plastic and realized that someone had had the foresight to protect the mattress from the mess of childbirth.

"Keep an eye on her and make sure she doesn't get too cold," Bella heard Carlisle say. "If there's any more vomiting, let me know right away. Jennifer, how do you feel? Steady? Are you strong enough to go downstairs and get something to eat?"

"Will Maysun be hungry?" Alistair asked. "Should she eat?"

"Not right now. Rest is the best thing for her. We're going to get out of here and let her sleep."

Carlisle stepped into the bathroom again, a blanket draped over his shoulder, closely followed by Alexander. Bella dried the baby again and let Carlisle take her. He had produced a tiny cloth diaper from somewhere, but even an appropriately-sized newborn diaper was too big on the little girl. He took pains to fold and pin it so it would fit comfortably on her, then wrapped her snugly in the blanket. He gestured for Bella to follow, and she swept Alexander up into her arms and trailed after him. He led them down to the living room, where he turned to address Alexander.

"Premature babies often have a hard time regulating their body temperature, but it helps if they're held by someone whose body is the right temperature. Do you think you could help Maysun's baby stay warm?"

"Yes, I can help," he said eagerly.

Carlisle beamed at him. "I thought you would. Will you take off your shirt?"

Alexander pushed away from Bella and hopped to the floor, tugging his shirt over his head.

"Good." Carlisle unwrapped the blanket from around the little girl, who fussed at the chill, and spread it out in one corner of the couch. "Come sit here . . . good, now I'm going to put her on your lap." He settled the baby into Alexander's arms and wrapped the blanket securely around the two of them.

"It's okay, baby," Alexander said, and Bella could see him patting her beneath the blanket. "I'll help you be warm."

She settled against him, soothed by his body heat, and he looked up at Carlisle. "If I keep her warm, will she be healthy?"

"I don't know," he said. He sat down on the couch next to them. "Her breathing is too shallow, and I think her heartbeat might be a little too fast. But we'll get a cannula on her and get her into an incubator as soon as we can."

"Or," Maysun said from upstairs, her voice raw and tired, "you could just let it die."

Bella winced. She remembered all too well the horror of her own birth and how she had felt about Alexander at the time. She wondered if Maysun would bond with her daughter the way Bella had with Alexander, and if she would regret saying what she had. If she did bond with her, though, and then the baby died . . .

Carlisle was gazing up at the ceiling in indecision, but he finally shook his head. "I'm a doctor," he said, and his words seemed to settle something for him.

Edward came down the stairs then and handed Carlisle an opaque plastic container. It was sealed, but Bella could still smell the blood scent lingering around it.

"That was as much as I could get from the cord," he said.

"Thank you. It should help."

Edward moved up behind Bella and wrapped his arms around her. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

"Fine. Why?"

"I can't help thinking this must bring up some rough memories for you."

She nodded. "It's in the past for me, though. Maysun is still going through the worst part."

There was a tap at the glass and Bella turned to see Nahuel standing on the back porch, surrounded by dozens of curious vampires.

Carlisle shook his head. "It's best if we limit the baby's contact," he said by way of explanation.

"She struggles?" Nahuel asked.

Carlisle nodded.

"And my sister?"

"She's stable for now, but I have concerns. I'm keeping an eye on her."

Nahuel turned away, lowering himself into a patio chair with an air of a man who expected to be waiting for a long time.

Carlisle heated the blood in the container Edward had given him and then tipped it into the baby's mouth in small sips. She drank it eagerly but gracelessly, and Bella thought she would have benefitted from a bottle. Once she was fed, she drifted off to sleep in Alexander's arms as he hummed tunes to her that Bella recognized as one she had hummed to him while rocking him to sleep.

And then no one quite knew what to do. Carlisle hovered, monitoring the baby's vital signs and listening for any problems upstairs. Bella and Edward just stood there, ready to help Alexander if he tired of holding the girl. He was proud of his contribution, however, and showed surprising patience.

A couple of hours later, Rosalie returned home with a large crate. She and Carlisle set up the incubator in the library, and then relieved Alexander of his burden and placed the baby inside of it. Carlisle set her up with an oxygen line, drew some blood, and then left her to sleep in her carefully controlled environment.

Maysun was stirring by that time, and Edward headed into the kitchen to heat some canned soup on the stove. He filled a second pot with water and set it on the stove to heat, then reached into the refrigerator and pulled out a bag of donated blood and dropped it inside.

"How much blood do you have left in there?" Bella asked.

"Enough for now. We may need to get more, depending on how Maysun's baby takes to human food, but we had planned to have plenty for Amelia and her baby, so . . ." he trailed off with a gloomy shrug.

Bella helped him prepare the soup and blood, and when they were ready he poured the soup into a bowl and the blood into a glass. He arranged them on a tray and carried them upstairs, tapping lightly on the bedroom door with his toe.

"Come in," Maysun called groggily, her voice rough.

Bella opened the door for him and he carried the tray to the bed. She followed, lingering at the foot of the bed while Alistair helped Maysun sit up and got the tray settled over her legs.

"How are you feeling?" Edward asked.

"Hungrier than this," she said, but she gave him a weak smile.

"Good. Appetite is a positive sign. Any nausea?"

"A little. And I'm pretty shaky."

"Yep. Blood loss will do that to you." He waited until she started to eat and then cleared his throat uncomfortably. "We should talk about the baby."

"Or not," she muttered, dropping the spoon.

"I know," Edward said, his voice conciliatory. "The way you feel right now is perfectly understandable. But Bella had a lot of the same feelings, and they changed when she held Alexander. I think it would be irresponsible of us not to at least see how you feel when you see your daughter again."

"She's not my daughter," she spat. "She's my father's science experiment."

"I understand. I do. But you see where I'm coming from, don't you?"

She sighed and nodded.

"Go ahead and eat. We'll be right back."

Edward took Bella's hand and guided her out of the room and into the library. He moved to the incubator in the corner and unplugged the cord.

Bella peered inside. The baby was awake, but her eyes still seemed to have a difficult time opening all the way. She looked up at Bella, her gaze unfocused, but her legs kicked in what might have been a reaction to a familiar face.

"She'll be okay with the incubator unplugged?" Bella asked as Edward started wheeling it down to Maysun's room.

"For a little while. Right now it's just maintaining her temperature. The oxygen is coming with us." He tapped the metal container strapped to the trolley.

Bella followed him back into Maysun's room, where he wheeled the incubator to the side of her bed. He produced a bottle of hand sanitizer and had her rub it over her hands, then Alistair lifted away the food tray and helped her scoot close to the incubator.

"Reach in through here," Edward said, showing her the access portals.

She did so, reluctantly, sliding her hands under the undersized infant and lifting her up. She peered in through the plastic and the baby looked back.

Maysun shook her head and set the baby down again, her eyes filling with tears.

"You want to know what I see when I look at her?" she asked, her voice quiet. "I see the reason my father let his friends rape me."

"Okay." Edward wheeled the incubator to the side of the room and plugged it in, then returned to the bed and sat down beside Maysun. He started to take her hand, but she jerked it back.

"*Don't*," she hissed. "I know what you think of me, and I don't care. You didn't have to live through what I did."

"I'm not judging you," he said soothingly. "I can't even imagine how all this feels."

A sob burst from Maysun's throat. "I can't do this! I can't raise her, and if I don't—she should have died!"

"You don't have to raise her. You have options."

"If I don't, my father will," she spat. "And even if I don't want—" She broke off and glanced tearfully toward the incubator.

"It doesn't have to be that way."

"Of course it does. You heard them." She gestured vaguely toward the window and the vampires beyond. "Someone has to take responsibility for her."

"That's true," Edward said. "We have a child in need of a parent. But I happen to know a couple of parents who are in need of a child."

She furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?"

"Rosalie and Emmett. Their greatest sorrow is that they have no children of their own. You can't imagine how happy they would be if you asked them to adopt your daughter."

She sank back onto the pillows and turned toward Alistair. "Joham would never stand for it."

"It's not his decision. You're her mother; it's your choice to make."

"He'll fight you for her."

Edward snorted, and a reluctant smile graced Maysun's lips.

"Maybe that doesn't matter."

"It *really* doesn't matter."

"They'll give her a good life?" she said, glancing toward the incubator again.

"She'll be spoiled rotten. But other than that, yes."

She took a deep breath. "I'd like to talk to them."

Edward grinned. "They're on their way up." He stood and grabbed Bella's hand, pulling her back out of the room even as Rosalie and Emmett pushed their way inside.

Outside of the house, the birth of Maysun's baby was something of an event. A dozen different cultural welcomes were being played out as the new day dawned, and the air was thick with burning incense, celebratory songs, and a lingering drizzle leftover from the previous evening's storm. A myriad of charms and protective talismans had been offered, and Nahuel had collected them and passed them to Carlisle to place around the baby's bed. Practical gifts had been offered too, and baskets full of blankets, clothes, and other baby paraphernalia littered the living room. Everyone wanted to offer their good wishes for an event that most vampires had never experienced before.

At sunrise, all but a few were back at the amphitheater, sodden and muddy but in good spirits. Maysun was still resting inside with Alistair, and now Rosalie and Emmett remained indoors as well. They sat at the window in the library, listening to the gathering, yet unwilling to leave their baby's side. They were careful about touching her, since their cold hands introduced a disruption into her warm environment, but Rosalie had taken to tucking her hands into an electric blanket to warm them so she could reach inside and offer comforting strokes when the baby cried.

"What are you going to name her?" Tanya called as she waited at the amphitheater for the day's proceedings to officially begin.

"Lula Mae," Emmett said, at the same time that Rosalie answered, "Dorothy."

"*Lula Mae?*" Rosalie demanded.

"It's better than Dorothy. What are you going to do, send her to Oz?"

"Dorothy is a beautiful name."

"For someone's great aunt, maybe."

"Oh, and Lula Mae has such a youthful ring to it?"

"Hey!" Emmett looked affronted. "My mother's name was Lula Mae."

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "Your mother's name was Mary."

"It *could* have been Lula Mae. Grandma said she considered it."

"There's no way in hell I'm naming my daughter Lula Mae."

"Well, it ain't gonna be Dorothy."

They continued to squabble until Carlisle and Esme finished wrangling the group together and called the meeting to order.

"Welcome back, everyone. As I'm sure you all know by now, congratulations are in order. Maysun has given birth and her condition is stable. She's resting and healing now."

Applause and whistles met his words, and he waited until they died down to continue.

"And as you also probably know, she has arranged to have Rosalie and Emmett raise her daughter.

In the library, Rosalie carefully removed the little girl from the incubator and cradled her in her arms, turning toward the window so everyone could see her. The amphitheater burst into applause again, and Rosalie beamed down at them.

Bella was startled by the change in her. Even in a crowd of vampires, she had always been startlingly beautiful. But there had been something cold and hard about her beauty. Something defensive and off-putting. Since being chosen to raise the baby, however, her countenance seemed to have taken on a welcoming warmth that it had been missing before. Some pain, some deep, nagging sadness, had been removed, making room for a happiness that left her glowing. Even squabbling with Emmett, she looked happier than Bella had ever seen her.

Emmett could hardly take his eyes off her. While she was showing the baby to the crowd, he was moving around behind her to wrap his arms beneath hers and hold the little girl with her. He gazed down at Rosalie when he did, and Bella saw him tilt his head down and breathe in Rosalie's scent.

Joham, on the other hand, was livid. Bella caught a glimpse of his face as she turned back from the house, and it made her want to start cheering all over again. She took a deep, vindictive pleasure in the fact that all the work he had done to further his agenda had left him with nothing. If she couldn't kill him, she could at least find consolation in his utter failure.

"I couldn't be happier about the addition to our family," Carlisle said when the cheering once again subsided. "And yet, it would be a mistake to ignore the horror that brought about this conclusion. Joham's methods involved kidnaping, rape, and torture of humans—even of his own daughters. Bella, Jennifer, and Maysun have suffered deeply. Amelia lost her life, as have others. I think we need to be very careful in considering the ramifications of what we have learned. It is miraculous that vampires can produce offspring . . . but it involves the kind of cruelty that will taint us in the darkest of ways. I move that we outlaw further attempts at sexual reproduction."

"Preposterous!" Joham leapt to his feet. "You are a coward! A fool! Only the truly ignorant try to impede the progress of science!"

"I agree with Carlisle," Tanya said.

Amun rolled his eyes. "What a surprise."

"We've already decided to outlaw rape and cruelty toward humans," Tanya said, ignoring him. "Both of these are fundamental to the process of creating a vampire child."

"I object to your characterization," Amun snapped. Bella suspected he was more irritated by being ignored than by anything Tanya had said, but he took up the debate as though it were his main concern. "Your argument is entirely invalidated by a willing human."

Tanya snorted. "What kind of human would willingly go through all of that?"

Carlisle shifted in his seat. "To be fair, there is a long history of women taking on great risk for the sake of having a child. We're used to the relative safety of childbirth aided by our modern conveniences, but I can't see how, with proper medical care, the carriage of a vampire child is any more dangerous than the carriage of a human child was in less technologically advanced eras. And no one suggested then that women should be restricted from having children."

The argument raged for hours. Bella could only stand in opposition to sexual reproduction, given the horror of her own experience, but there was a small part of her that wanted to recognize the problems with denying people the right to have children. It seemed the lesser of the two evils, but this was one of those times when it was frustrating not to have a clear choice between right and wrong.

Finally, early in the afternoon, Tia made her contribution. "I don't think we can trust that a vampire fully has his human partner's interests at heart when the subject of offspring comes up," she said, "but that doesn't mean that he won't. I think it's best if an outside opinion is sought."

"What kind of outside opinion?" Amun asked suspiciously.

"I'm thinking along the lines of a government registry. If you want to have a child, you have to convince whatever coven ends up leading us," her eyes flicked toward Carlisle, "that the human fully understands the risks and is willing to accept them. If you convince the government, you're allowed to try. This way there's a chain of responsibility and the government is aware of any half-vampires roaming the world."

"That sounds fair," Bella found herself murmuring.

Carlisle turned to her, his eyebrows raised. "Do you think so?"

She shrugged, glancing at Tanya. "I really can't imagine anyone agreeing to it . . . but it still allows people to make that decision for themselves."

He gave her a long look, but finally nodded. "Then I agree. Tia, that's a very good idea."

Amun clapped his hands in victory. "Excellent! Benjamin, we'll need to find you a girl."

"What?" Benjamin leaned away from Amun, giving him an incredulous look.

"Talent is hereditary!" he said, clearly growing excited. "Look at Bella and the boy. They're both shields. It's not exactly the same, but imagine what your children could do!"

"Amun, I'm *not* having a child with a human."

"Don't be ridiculous. What could you possibly have against it?"

Benjamin was looking at Amun like he'd grown a second head. "For one, my mate. I'm not going to disregard her feelings by joining with other women."

"Nonsense. You're being sentimental. I'm not talking about a tawdry affair; this is a means to an end."

"You've completely missed the spirit of Tia's suggestion!"

"I think this is a good time for a recess," Carlisle said. "Take a break, discuss the suggestion if you like, and we'll vote on it when we meet back here again in an hour."

"I'm hungry, Mother," Alexander said.

Bella smiled. Of course he was. His appetite seemed to increase every day. She had started bringing snacks out with her to see him through the meetings, because he rarely went more than a couple of hours without wanting something to eat.

"We've got some elk steaks in the refrigerator," Edward says. "I'll cook up a bunch of them for anyone who wants human food for lunch."

Amun and Benjamin were stalking back toward the tents, arguing heatedly, and Bella smiled. It seemed Edward didn't even have to find a way to provoke a fight. She only hoped it separated them as effectively as Jasper thought it would.

Edward slung an arm around Bella's shoulders as they headed back toward the house.

"Listen," he said. "I know things have been a little crazy around here."

"I hear a 'but' coming."

He smiled, but it disappeared quickly. "You haven't told your mom about Alexander yet."

Bella felt the heavy weight of guilt settle on her chest. "I know."

"Is there any particular reason?"

"Um. Because it's hard, and I have a bad habit of ignoring hard things in hopes that they'll go away?"

Edward chuckled.

"I should call her now, huh?"

"She's not going away."

She sighed. "Do you mind keeping an eye on Alexander while I explain things to her?"

"Of course not. Alexander, you want to learn to cook elk?"

"Yes!" He scrambled from Bella's arms to Edward's shoulders and settled down onto them. "Do we need spices again?"

"We definitely need spices."

Bella fell back a couple of steps and followed them into the kitchen for long enough to pluck the phone off of the counter. She wandered into the living room, surprised somehow that her steady movements didn't betray the quivering anxiety she felt inside. Renée had been good about the whole vampire thing, Bella reminded herself. She would be fine when it came to Alexander, too. The years of lecturing Bella on waiting to have kids . . . well, the circumstances were different . . .

She dialed the Phoenix phone number before she could lose her nerve, and after a few rings her mother's voice answered, sounding cool and flat.

"Hello."

"Hi, Mom, it's Bella."

There was a pause. "Yes."

"Um." She hesitated. "Are you okay?"

"Of course. Everything's fine." But the emotionlessness in her voice was so foreign that Bella only grew more concerned.

"Okay . . . um . . . do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure."

"Are you sure there's nothing wrong?"

"Bella, I have things to do, so if you want to talk about something, please get to it."

Bella blinked, stung. She wanted to forget the whole thing and hang up the phone, but she doubted she'd get her nerve up to call again after this. "I have something to tell you. It's . . . kind of a big deal."

"Uh huh."

"Um." She didn't really know how to approach it, so she just blurted out, "I have a son."

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line, and then Renée said simply, "*I know.*"

"You . . . know?"

"Yes, Bella, I know," Renée said, irritation finally breaking through the flatness in her voice. *"I called Charlie the other day to see if he had any news from you, and all he could talk about was how wonderful Alexander was. Can you even imagine how that feels? To know that my daughter—who I always thought of as my best friend—had a child that she didn't even tell me about? Can you imagine what it's like to find out you mean so little to your daughter that she never got around to sharing the most significant experience of her life with you?"*

"Oh, Mom . . . I'm so sorry."

"Uh huh. Is there anything else?"

"What?"

"Is there anything else you haven't told me? Have you been elected president lately? Traveled to Mars? Solved global warming?"

"Uh . . . no?"

"Well, then, if you'll excuse me, I have things to do."

Before Bella could gather her thoughts to reply, the line went dead.

For a moment, she just stared at the phone in shock . . . but then that streak of unruly newborn stubbornness flared up and she dialed the phone again, her fingers moving almost too fast for the phone to keep up.

"Yes," her mother answered, her voice cool and uninflected once again.

"You don't get to hang up on me," Bella snapped. "You have *no idea* what I've been dealing with."

"I wonder why that is."

"No! That's not okay. I have way too much going on right now, and you don't get to criticize me for the way I'm handling it. I've got a literal ton of my own problems, but I can barely get around to thinking about them because newborns are attacking, ex-dictators are trying to assassinate my friends, people are having babies—or dying in the attempt—and every now and then I look up and see the man who raped me staring back at me. Meanwhile I'm trying desperately to figure out how I feel about my own shit, so maybe you could just *back off* and try to understand why maybe I don't have it in me to manage your feelings on top of all that."

She fell silent, seething, and Renée let out a huff.

"Well. Maybe you think you've cornered the market on stress, but let me tell you a little something. My daughter was just kidnaped because I left her alone in Mexico. I thought for weeks that I would never see her again, and then when I did, she said she wasn't coming home because she'd been turned into a monster and I can't take care of her anymore. And fine. I can deal with that. In fact, I was ready to rearrange my entire life so I could be there for her. Except she didn't want me. She told me to stay away, stopped talking to me, started keeping major secrets. And while I'm over here trying to be supportive and keep from giving her too much grief, she's spilling her guts to her father because apparently, he's the one she'd rather confide in."

"Because he doesn't demand anything from me!" she burst out. "You want me to feel sorry for you, for all you've had to go through, but I just can't! I can't take on your problems because it takes everything I have deal with my own. You ask too much!"

"If this is what happens when someone becomes a vampire, it's no wonder Sarah had such a low opinion of them."

The line went dead again, and Bella saw red. She was about to dial again when Alexander ran up to her and plucked the phone from her hand.

"Mother," he said seriously, "I think you need a time out."

She stilled, caught somewhere between surprise and amusement. "What?"

"You're not being very nice. You better take a break and let me call."

Bella slumped down onto the couch. It wasn't a terrible idea. He certainly couldn't screw things up worse than she already had.

Alexander took the phone from her. "What numbers do I push?"

Bella told him her mother's number and he dialed carefully.

This time Renée didn't answer with a hello. She started right in as soon as she picked up.

"Isabella, if you cop an attitude with me again I'll only hang up. You can talk to me when you've remembered a few of your manners."

"Hi," Alexander said as though she hadn't spoken. "This is Alexander. I'm your grandson just like Grandpa Chawlie."

There was a startled silence. *"Oh. Alexander. You sound so . . . so much older than . . . and smart!"*

"Yep, I'm pretty special—" He caught Bella's sharp look and amended, "I mean, thank you."

"Did Bella ask you to talk on the phone?"

"No. Mother's having a time out."

Renée laughed hesitantly, and then more fully. *"I see. Did you tell her to do that?"*

"Yes, because she was fighting with you. She fights with me *all* the time. It's okay, though, because then she's nice again."

"Oh, well, I'm glad to hear that."

"Yep. It's pretty good." Alexander settled onto the floor, crossing his legs in front of him. "Do you like to eat fish fry like Grandpa Chawlie?"

"Ew, no, I don't like fish at all. I have to plug my nose to eat it."

"Why do you plug your nose?"

"It's supposed to help you not taste it, but fish is so yucky that I always taste it anyway."

"It's not yucky! It's good! Did you ever eat a rabbit?"

"Once. I thought it was okay. Do you like it?"

"Yes, wif lots and lots of spices. What food do you like?"

"Hmmm . . . I like tamales."

Alexander continued to chatter with Renée about trivial things for a few minutes more before he finally stood up.

"I think it's okay if Mother is done wif her time out. Do you want to talk to her now?"

"Yes, please," Renée said. *"It was very nice talking to you, Alexander. I hope we get to do it again very soon."*

"We will. I know what numbers to push now." He passed the phone to Bella and she put it to her ear. Listening to Alexander's chatter had drained all the anger out of her, and she sighed into the phone.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm sorry too!" Renée gushed. *"Bella! What do I always tell you? You can't keep things bottled up like that or you'll explode!"*

"I know, you're right. And I should have called, but I just got anxious and . . . didn't."

"That was always your thing. Too anxious for your own good—while I wasn't nearly anxious enough. What am I going to do without you, Bella? I'm like a yin without a yang."

"I miss my yin!"

"I miss my yang! I was supposed to have two more years before you left home!"

"This sucks," Bella muttered.

"It does." She groaned. *"I'll never figure out how Charlie takes these things so easily. And as crazy as it makes me, I do understand why you talked to him first. He's so grounded."*

"Sometimes he seems like the only solid thing in the world."

"That's why I married him." She let out a soggy laugh. *"And probably why I divorced him, too."*

Bella glanced into the kitchen at Edward and smiled. Alexander had wandered back to his side and the two of them were carefully turning the elk steaks on the stove. "I'm going to marry Edward," she murmured. "I mean, not right away. We're not making plans or anything, but . . ."

Edward looked up at her and grinned, and she smiled back.

"*Unf,*" Renée said. "*He's so cute.*"

"Oh my god, *so cute.*"

Edward winked at her.

"He said we might be able to go away for a little while," Bella said. "Esme has some island property near Brazil. He thought maybe we could go spend some time alone."

"Ooh, really? Do you—I know this is a lot to ask, but do you think you could stop by for a couple of days on your way south? Just so I can meet Alexander?"

Bella was glad to see that Edward was already nodding. "That would be great. And I'm going to start emailing you pictures. Every day. He grows so fast I can't even keep up."

"You have some lost time to make up for, young lady," Renée admonished. *"You'd better take an awful lot of pictures today."*

"I will, I promise. But I should probably go now. I have to get Alexander fed before the meeting starts again."

"Okay. I love you, baby. I'll be waiting for your email so don't forget!"

Bella said goodbye and hung up, hugging the phone to her body.

"Good job, mother," Alexander said, his attention still focused on the steaks.

Bella laughed and placed the phone back in the cradle. She was about to head back outside when she heard Rosalie murmur her name from the library. She veered toward the stairs instead and hiked up to the third floor. She was leaving a trail of dingy footprints throughout the house, but she was hardly the first. The carpet and hardwood floors were already muddy from the traffic, so she simply went along with it. Things could always be cleaned up later.

"Are you okay?" Rosalie asked when she got to the library.

"Yeah. Absolutely."

She smiled. "Hot tempers or not, I hope someday my relationship with her," her hand caressed the top of the incubator, "is like the relationship you have with your mom."

"How's she doing?"

Emmett, who was squeezing a bag of blood into a bottle, chuckled. "She eats like it's going out of style."

"Yeah, I bet. How often do you feed her?"

"Every hour or so if she's awake. She lets us know when she's ready." He held up his index finger, which was grooved with tiny little gouges in overlapping crescent patterns.

Rosalie smiled and displayed matching bite marks on her own finger.

Bella winced. "That looks painful."

Rosalie shrugged and turned a beatific smile on the baby. "There are worse things."

"Does she just drink blood?"

"We've given her some baby formula too. She seems to like it."

Inside the incubator, the baby was kicking and starting to fuss. Emmett worked the bottle inside and held it for her, while she gripped it with her hands and tried to get her feet to hold onto it as well.

"A little enthusiastic this time, are we . . . Melissa?"

Rosalie screwed up her face thoughtfully and shook her head. "Lynette."

"Gabrielle?"

"Pretty, but . . . people will call her Gabby."

"Or Brielle."

"We already have a Bree."

"You know, Pythia saw her coming," Emmett pointed out. "Or Apollo did, I guess. Maybe we should name her after Apollo."

"Apollonia?"

They both shook their heads.

"Sorry, dude," Emmett said, looking heavenward. "No offense or anything. It just doesn't suit her."

"'Joy shall be your reward,'" Rosalie said thoughtfully. "Maybe Joy. Or not. Because then it's like, Joy is your reward, and that's a little dehumanizing."

"Whitney."

"Beatrice?"

"What about Laura?"

Bella smiled and retreated from the library, leaving them to try out names for their daughter. Back downstairs, she set places at the table for Alexander, Nahuel, Jennifer, the three Chinese shape-shifters, and Embry, who must have had orders to stay and keep an eye on things because he hadn't left since the newborn army attack. He remained in human form for the most part, but hovered near the Chinese shifters and always looked, Bella thought, on the verge of phasing.

It wasn't long before the smell of cooking food filled the house. Bella helped toss together a quick salad and set out some rolls to go with the steaks, then put together a plate and took it upstairs to

Maysun. She was looking better, with more color and appetite than she'd had so far, but not as boisterous as the group in the dining room.

Bella and Edward got everyone fed and the dishes washed, and they were just heading back out to the amphitheater when Carlisle started calling everyone together again. Edward took a quick detour to pull Tia aside and whisper something in her ear, and then he and Bella sat back down on the muddy tier with Alexander in front of them.

Carlisle welcomed everyone and, as promised, called for a vote on the issue of half-vampire children. Tia's suggestion of prior approval from the governing body carried easily, but that didn't seem to make Amun as happy as Bella thought it would. He and Kebi were sitting opposite Benjamin and Tia now, and Amun looked furious. Benjamin . . . didn't. He kept leaning over to kiss Tia's temple, and Bella thought he looked like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"Now," Carlisle said, transitioning to a new issue, "we've put together a good foundation of laws, but we have yet to create a body to enforce them. This has proven to be a daunting task, but I'd like to invite anyone who has come up with any ideas to share them with us."

There was a heavy, expectant silence, but finally Tia cleared her throat softly, flicking a quick glance at Edward. "The problem, if I understand it right, is that vampires are too territorial to live in a confined space together?"

Several people murmured in confirmation, and no one contradicted her.

"It seems to me that it wouldn't be a problem if there were no territory to squabble over."

Carlisle leaned forward. "What do you mean?"

"Most of us don't live like you do, Carlisle. We don't live like the Volturi did. Well over half of us are nomadic."

He nodded thoughtfully.

"So . . . why shouldn't we be governed by nomads? Why shouldn't the people who enforce our laws live like the rest of us do? Then there's no designated territory to fight over."

There was a thoughtful silence, then Garrett said, "I like the idea. Seems less privileged—less elitist."

"It might keep the governing body more in touch with the issues vampires face," Siobhan said, "but what if someone needs them? How would we find them?"

"Cell phones," Carlisle said, but Peter was shaking his head.

"We don't all come home to electrical outlets. It's a pain to keep them charged."

"I could help you," a quiet voice said from the back of the circle to Bella's left. She glanced up to where Demetri was sitting with his shoulders hunched forward as though trying to be inconspicuous. "A stationary agent might be the solution. I could stay somewhere—at Volterra, maybe, since we're used to it, or possibly somewhere with fewer . . . associations. Whatever we decide, I could be a contact for anyone who needs help. I'll always know where the head coven is, so I can connect them with people who need them."

Carlisle nodded. "I like the idea."

"A large group of nomads traveling together could draw attention," Luca warned.

"But it doesn't have to be attention that would threaten our secret," Tia said. "I'm thinking about how Alice managed our trip to Nevada. If the new Volturi traveled the country on motorcycles, people would notice them but they wouldn't be at all suspicious."

"Plus, the gear gives full coverage," Benjamin said, "and people aren't surprised by it even in hot weather. That's an advantage."

"Governed by a motorcycle gang," Carlisle said with a smirk. "It *is* rather clever. And I'm happy to donate the vehicles."

"It could work," Tanya said. "Now the question is, who's the best person to lead?"

Carlisle smiled softly. "Tia, I'm impressed with the way you've handled yourself here. You've suggested a plausible government structure as well as creative punitive methods, and Edward tells me you're a remarkable judge of character. I wonder . . . would you consider government service?"

She hesitated. "That's very sweet, but . . . you understand, don't you, that this animal blood thing is just an experiment? I'm not going to keep it up forever."

"I suspected as much. But it means a lot to me that you tried it. It's something Aro never agreed to do."

"She's got a built-in bodyguard," Luca mused.

There was a little more discussion, but after a few arguments in Tia's favor and one or two against, a vote was called for and Tia received almost unanimous support.

She stared around at the group, looking a little overwhelmed. "I'm going to need a lot of help," she said. "Advice, for sure, and anyone with a useful talent who would consider joining me."

Amun stood. "I will, of course, advise you."

She met his gaze, a hard smile on her face. "Thank you for the offer, but I'll have to decline. Jasper, I wonder if you would—"

"No," he said firmly. "However, you might consider Peter."

Peter and Charlotte both turned to stare at him.

"Turns out, Peter's got a talent that could be really helpful. This might be a good way for him to develop it, if he's interested."

"I'm . . . interested," Peter said. "What do you think, Char?"

"As long as we don't have to be cooped up inside all day, I'm game. I like the idea of those bikes."

"I'd be honored to have you," Tia said.

"Tia!" Amun snapped, irritated at being dismissed. "After all I've done for you, it would be ungrateful of you to ignore me now."

"I'm not ignoring you. I've acknowledged your offer and rejected it. I don't feel that your contributions would be congruent with the kind of government that we've envisioned."

"I agree," Benjamin said, meeting Amun's angry glare with a steely one of his own. "This is where we part, Amun. Please accept it with grace so that no further animosity arises between us."

Amun gaped at him for a moment, then rose and stalked away with Kebi trailing after him. That, Bella thought, was probably as gracious as he was going to get.

Maggie was whispering with Siobhan and Liam, and she leaned forward. "Would you consider me for your crew?"

"I wouldn't even need to consider," Tia answered. "Your ability to detect lies is invaluable, Maggie. I'd be delighted to have your help."

Luca suggested two of his family, one of whom had the beginnings of a tracking talent that he believed she might be able develop if she were allowed to assist Demetri, and a couple of others volunteered their skills. Tia accepted them all with gratitude, then looked around her gathered group. "For the sake of proper representation, I'd like to see a yellow-eyed council member. I don't suppose any of you would like to join us? Edward?"

He smiled and shook his head. "I don't think anyone wants another mind reader in government."

"Tanya," Esme said. "What about you?"

"Me? Why?"

"Because you're *bored*, darling."

"What?" Tanya gave an unconvincing laugh and looked away. "That's crazy."

"You've been chasing after Edward for years, not because you have particularly strong feelings for him, but because rejection is the most interesting thing you've come across in a while." When Tanya didn't reply, she prodded, "Am I wrong?"

"Not . . . *wrong*, exactly . . ."

"Unless I miss my guess," Carlisle added, nodding toward where Garrett held Kate's hand and Irina leaned into Laurent, "your cabin's going to get a little crowded."

Edward grimaced. "Give that some thought, Tawny. You've got Fred with you for now, but once he's finished his year you'll be the only single person living with a bunch of couples. Take it from me—that's not the most comfortable situation."

"But what do I have to offer?"

"Experience," Carlisle said. "Perspective. You've been hurt by government before. It will be good to have someone on the council who is cautious of overreach."

"And, as I said," Tia added, "I'd like to have someone to represent the interests of those who drink animal blood and participate in human communities."

"I suppose could give it a try."

Kate grabbed her hand. "I don't want you to feel like we're chasing you out of your home. You're important to us."

"Sure, but . . ." she smiled. "This *is* interesting."

"You'll visit often, though?"

"Sure. We'll be a roaming government, after all. There's nothing to keep us from roaming our way up to Alaska every now and then."

"More often than every now and then," Kate said sternly, and leaned in to kiss Tanya's cheek.

Carlisle called for a vote to confirm each member of the new head coven, and when that was done he sat back and looked around at everyone.

"Unless anyone else has business to address . . ." he paused and looked around. When no one spoke up, he said, "I believe our objectives have been met. I hereby adjourn this caucus, though I invite you all to stay this evening to celebrate our new beginning."

Bella hadn't been aware that the others had been as impatient with the tedium of the gathering as she was, but the cheer that went up at Carlisle's words held a distinct note of relief. There were even a couple of hats thrown in the air, and immediately Tia and her new council were swarmed with well-wishers and advice-givers.

Alice shooed everyone out of the amphitheater and managed to claim Benjamin's attention long enough to get him to fill it in. With the official ending of the gathering, she was reclaiming the space as a dance floor. The soggy weather showed no sign of clearing up, though, so she started recruiting volunteers to help her erect a massive frame over which she could rig up an oversized tent. Bella joined her volunteers, and once they managed to get a large area closed off, Benjamin ducked inside and coaxed the water deep into the earth, leaving dry ground inside the tent.

But that was only the beginning. Esme started setting up sound equipment, while Alice gathered flowers and fairy lights, transforming the impromptu dance hall into an elegant fabric ballroom.

Meanwhile, the others were doing their best to clean themselves up. Several borrowed the facilities in the house to shower and wash their clothes so they could present their best selves at the celebratory closing ceremonies. Jasper and Edward raided everyone's closets and passed out newer, less worn items to anyone who wanted them. By the time evening fell, the whole crowd was looking sharp and sophisticated, despite the muddy conditions.

Some hadn't bothered to stay. As Carlisle fired up the music and led Esme to the center of the tent to begin the dancing, Bella took stock of the missing, starting with Amun's glaring absence. He'd headed back across the river before Carlisle's official adjournment, but that was the last sign there had been of him. His friend from Chad, too, had disappeared after the official end of the gathering. One or two others had drifted away as well, weary of the crowds, but the group that remained was friendly and in good spirits.

After opening the dancing, Carlisle and Esme barely had a moment to glance at each other for the next hour. They were popular partners for all of their guests, waltzing and twirling around the tent with one friend after another, both looking more light-hearted than Bella had seen them in a while. They seemed to sparkle even without sunlight as they laughed and traded partners again and again.

Alexander, too, got a lot of attention. Minh was the first to sweep him up into her arms and carry him onto the dance floor, and after that everyone wanted a turn with the little charmer. He ran from one woman to another, bowing formally as he issued invitations to carry him into the fray.

Bella loved it. She was thrilled to see him so happy, and wasn't at all disappointed that his occupation with the others left her free to spend the festivities in Edward's arms. She'd never been much of a dancer, but now a quick tutorial from Edward was all she needed to fall into a rhythm, and he guided her expertly into variations and embellishments that made her giggle with delight.

Everything was going beautifully until Joham ducked into the tent and made his way toward Alexander.

Bella, ever on the lookout for both Joham and any threat to Alexander, spotted him immediately. She darted over to Pythia, Alexander's latest partner, and plucked him from her arms.

"Alexander," Joham said imperiously, "you've had your fun, but it's time to go home. We have serious studies to attend to."

Alexander peered up at Bella. "Mother, can this be my home?"

"It *is* your home," she said, glaring at Joham.

Joham ignored her, continuing to address Alexander. "Your talents are wasted here, son. Come with me, and I'll train you properly. Under my tutelage, you'll become the most powerful political figure in the world. I'll make you a king."

"I don't want to be a king. I want to be a doctor."

"Don't be absurd. Your mind would be wasted in such a petty profession."

"It's not petty. Carwile's a doctor and he made Maysun and the baby get better."

"You are beyond such concerns. Come with me and I'll make you a legend."

Bella wanted to snarl at him, but Alexander was holding his own.

"What about Grandpa Chawlie?"

Joham frowned. "That human? Who cares? He is beneath you, Alexander."

"He's not beneath me, he's my friend. He gives me fish fry and candy and tells me stories about Mother when she was a baby." He giggled. "She went poop in her pants."

Bella let out an indignant squeak, which made Alexander laugh harder.

"ALEXANDER!" Joham roared. "You will not ruin your future for the sake of a human!"

"It's not ruined," he said reasonably. "I have Mother, and Edward, and Carwile's whole family, and the new baby, and Grandma Renée, and Minh, and Nahuel, and my sisters—"

"ENOUGH! I have plans for you. We've wasted enough time already."

"I don't like your plans. I like Mother's plans. And she has lots of books."

Seeing that he was losing the argument, Joham tried again, his voice taking on a weeding note. "But your mother doesn't recognize how special you are. And don't forget, she won't let you have blood. How can you grow if you're denied your natural food source?"

"I can have some fish and hallapainos instead. They're pretty good." He was reaching for Pythia again, his patience with the conversation at an end.

"I won't stand for this!" Joham yelled, but Jasper, Ulka, and Peter all darted between Bella and Joham, and the sudden approach of three accomplished warriors seemed to shake his nerve.

"Your persistence is tiresome," Ulka said. "For *all* of us."

Jasper grumbled in assent. "In fact, I think it's time you left. You're not needed here any longer."

"You can't—" He began, but he seemed to recognized that he was once again badly out-muscled, and he swallowed the rest of his sentence."

"You have five minutes," Peter said. "Collect your things and be on your way."

Joham roared in frustration, but spun around and stormed out of the tent.

Peter looked back at Bella and she flashed him a smile.

"Thanks. I might just have to forgive you for trying to convince Jasper to kill me."

"Nothing personal." He winked at her, and she laughed, giddy over the thought of finally being rid of Joham.

Edward had been hovering behind her, and he turned to Pythia and Alexander, giving them a little bow. He started to speak, but a girl's loud sob burst out from one corner of the tent, and everyone turned to see what was wrong.

It was Mei Zhen, the youngest of the Chinese visitors, clinging to Embry as she faced off with Minh and Bo.

"I can't just leave," she said, burying her tearful face in Embry's T-shirt.

"Don't be silly," Bo said, though not without some sympathy. "We can't go back without you. What would your parents say?"

Carlisle excused himself from his dance partner and moved to join them. "What's wrong? Can I help?"

"These two have grown attached," Minh told him with a sad smile, gesturing to Mei Zhen and Embry.

"Ah. As in . . . permanently attached?"

Mei Zhen just clutched at Embry's shirt, but he nodded soberly.

"And now you're faced with separation. Obviously, that can't happen. Maybe you could spend a couple of months together in China and then come back here for a couple of months . . . but you both have responsibilities that need to be considered, don't you? Mei Zhen, when does your school year begin?"

She wiped her eyes, though she didn't look at him. "September first."

"And Embry, yours starts next week."

"Yeah."

"Which makes visiting difficult."

Esme moved up beside Carlisle, taking his arm. "I've filed the paperwork to home school our family. If their parents are willing to pull them out of school, I could teach them."

Bella blinked in surprise and turned to Edward. "She's going to home school you?"

"You can't attend public school this year," he pointed out, "and even if you could, you have Alexander to think of. Emmett and Rose have their new baby. And Jasper and Alice need to be looking after Bree and Diego—who also need to continue their education. Esme keeps her teaching certificate current in case anything comes up that makes obligatory school attendance inconvenient for us. This is one of those times."

Embry and Mei Zhen were worrying over the expense of flying back and forth internationally, but Carlisle waved their concern away. "Alice, we can add plane tickets to the monthly budget, can't we?"

"Easily," she called from the dance floor, where she and Garrett were performing a series of quick, complicated little steps.

"There," Carlisle said, settling the issue. "We'll make this work. You may have to study from written lessons and submit some of your work to Esme online when you're in China, but we'll manage all right. As long as your families are amenable, we'll make the arrangements."

"We'll need to discuss it with your mother," Minh told Mei Zhen.

"Rosalie!" Alice suddenly cried, and with an excited gasp she abandoned Garrett on the dance floor and darted to the door of the tent, where Emmett and Rosalie were ducking inside. Rosalie cradled a thick bundle of blankets in her arms, a tiny face with alert eyes peeking out the top. Alice stopped before colliding with them and leaned down to coo at the baby.

"This is going to be all right, isn't it Carlisle?" Emmett asked, concern in his voice. "She heard the music and started trying to crawl out of the incubator. I think she really wants to be out here."

"She ought to be okay for a little while, at least. Keep a close eye on her breathing and body temperature."

"I think there are some space heaters in the basement," Esme said, and darted inside to find them.

Emmett guided Rosalie toward the middle of the tent. The dancing was all but forgotten, as nearly everyone crowded around to peer at the baby. Alexander leapt out of Pythia's arms and used the shoulders of other vampires as stepping-stones to get to Emmett, finally settling down on his broad shoulders.

"Hi, baby," he said, leaning over her.

Her eyes found his and she broke out into a wide smile.

"We have a little announcement," Rosalie said, "if you don't mind us interrupting for a minute."

Dozens of voices assured her that no one was bothered by the interruption.

"We finally settled on a name," Emmett said. "I know you'll all be disappointed to know that Lula Mae didn't make the cut, but we're pretty happy with what we chose."

"May I present," Rosalie murmured, gazing down at the baby, "Kyra Abigail."

The baby smiled again, working her arm out of the blankets and reaching up toward Rosalie's face. Rose kissed her tiny hand and pressed it to her cheek.

"Aw, that's a sweet name," Alice asked. "Kyra Abigail . . . McCarty? Or Hale?"

Rosalie opened her mouth and then closed it again, apparently not having considered their daughter's last name. She looked up at Emmett, who returned her gaze with a tender smile. "Cullen," he said, and Rosalie smiled.

"Cullen."

Bella glanced up at Carlisle, who looked startled and deeply moved.

"The baby's last name is like Carwile's?" Alexander asked.

Emmett nodded. "It's our family name. The one that ties us all together. I think it's perfect for her."

"Is my name Cullen, Mother?"

"Um. I don't know. I never really thought about it. Do you want your last name to be Cullen?"

"What's your last name?"

"Swan, like Grandpa Charlie. Though," she looked around her, picking out the faces of her coven in the crowd. Each of them had given her something different—help, or acceptance, or inspiration—and all of them had become infinitely precious to her. "Though I have to say, being welcomed into the Cullen family is one of the best things that has ever happened to me. If Carlisle doesn't mind, I think Cullen would be a very good last name for you."

Carlisle's eyes were glistening now. He made his way through the crowd toward Bella and pulled her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I'm so glad to have you in our family," he whispered. He released her and went to Rosalie and Emmett, enveloping them and their baby in his arms. "My children," he murmured. "I'm so happy for you."

Bella glanced up and caught Maysun's eye. She had come down with Alistair for the dancing, though her stamina was still lacking and she spent more time being carried than walking or dancing herself. Still, she was recovering with remarkable speed, and Carlisle was confident that all she needed was time and rest.

Bella eased around the group to where Alistair stood with Maysun in his arms.

"Are you comfortable with all of this?" Bella asked.

She nodded, and Bella was glad to see that there weren't any signs of unease or hesitation in her expression.

"She should be loved that much. As horrible as it sounds, I could never be that happy to have her."

"It's not horrible." Bella watched as Emmett bent over the baby, coaxing another smile from her. "I think you made the best decision for everyone . . . as long as you don't regret it."

She let out a breathy laugh. "You don't have to worry about that. I'm so relieved that they stepped in."

"Good." Bella squeezed her arm. She felt an odd connection to Maysun, despite the limited contact they'd had. Both of them had experienced the horror of a forced pregnancy and a terror that led them each to reject their own children. That rejection eventually led them down different paths, but the commonality was too deep to be ignored.

Maysun seemed to sense the direction of Bella's thoughts, and she gave her a sad smile.

"We've made things right," she said.

"I think so."

Emmett was calling for more dancing, now, and the clustered vampires in the center of the tent were pairing up and spreading out. Emmett lifted Kyra out of Rosalie's arms and held her against his chest, his hand cupped around the back of her head as he moved with the music. He swung her around in a gentle turn, drawing a laugh from her, and Bella saw it in his eyes when he fell in love all over again.

She knew the feeling. Rosalie had claimed Alexander as her dance partner, and Bella could practically feel the threads that bound her heart to his, forever tugging her in the direction of her little boy. His eyes were bright with mirth as Rosalie hopped and swayed in exaggerated dance moves, and his giggle was the most beautiful sound she had ever heard.

Carlisle made his way toward Bella, stopping to exchange a few pleasantries with Alistair and Maysun before turning to her, holding out a hand to her.

"Would you honor me with a dance?"

She took his hand and let him guide her into a simple two-step.

"I'm afraid I haven't been attentive enough," he said, an apology in his eyes. "I wanted to be there for you to help you through all of these changes, but you haven't had as much of my time as I would like to have given you."

"I understand. You had bigger things to deal with."

"Other things, but not bigger things. There is nothing more important to me than my family."

"Carlisle, I understand."

"And then there was Joham."

Bella grimaced.

"I was trying very hard to mitigate my own bias by allowing other opinions to be expressed, but it wasn't fair to you to invite him here. I can't say I would make a different decision in retrospect, but I am sorry for the additional anxiety I caused you during an already difficult time."

"Yeah, well . . . I'll forgive you eventually." She smiled to show him she wasn't really holding a grudge, and he pulled her in for a hug.

"I'm so glad you're with us," he murmured in her ear before pulling back and resuming their dance. "I've really come to admire you during the weeks you've spent here."

"I admire you, too. And I'm so grateful to have found you. I can't imagine what my life would be like right now if I hadn't run into Jasper when I did."

"Unfortunately, I *can* imagine what ours would be like. Edward . . ." he trailed off, his eyes drifting to where Edward was engaging in an exuberant display of flips and turns with Tanya.

"He wasn't happy before?"

He shook his head. "He tried so hard to be. He loves music, so he threw himself into the study of it. Learned to play nearly every instrument he's ever come across. Raced his car. Goaded his brothers into competitive sports. But beneath it all there's always been a restless melancholy to his actions. Until he met you. You've given him a tranquility that he's never known before."

His eyes were glistening again, and he swallowed hard.

"I love him, Bella—I don't know how to express the depths of it. If you'd brought happiness to him and misery to everyone else, you would still have my boundless gratitude."

Her eyes widened. "*Have I brought misery to everyone else?*"

He chuckled and shook his head. "Of course you haven't. Forgive my verbal failures. Words aren't always my strong suit."

She let out a little sigh of relief.

"We're so happy that you're a part of our family. And I'm deeply, deeply honored to have Alexander take my name."

"He's crazy about you," Bella murmured, her eyes seeking her son again.

"The feeling is mutual." He let out a breathless laugh. "What a brilliant, unexpected joy to have children in our family!"

"Not for long, I'm afraid. They're literally growing up way too fast."

"Then we'll have to be extra sure to cherish every moment." The song faded out and he stepped back. "I'm going to go get you a camera so you can start taking those pictures you promised your mother. I can't think of a more perfect evening to capture on film."

He left her at the edge of the dance floor, but before he could duck out, Nahuel intercepted him.

"Doctor," he said hesitantly.

Carlisle stopped, turning to him.

"I . . . I wish to . . ."

"Go ahead, Nahuel. What can I do for you?"

He seemed at a loss, but he finally managed, "The boy . . . Mike Newton . . ."

Carlisle smiled. "The two of you had a connection, didn't you?"

"I wish to know him," Nahuel said, managing to look sheepish.

"That should be simple enough to arrange. My boys are friends of his. We'll invite him over."

"I . . . would not want to be a burden to you."

"Nonsense." Carlisle clapped him on the shoulder, steering him toward the door of the tent. "I've never found family to be a burden. I'm afraid you might find *me* to be something of a nuisance, however, with all of the questions I have." He ducked out of the tent, taking Nahuel with him. "Will you walk with me? There are some things I want to know about your early development . . ."

Bella smiled to herself. Carlisle claimed not to be particularly good with words, but he had a knack for putting people at ease. She turned back toward the dance floor and spotted Edward making his way toward her, twisting a rain-dappled forget-me-not between his thumb and forefinger. He meandered toward her, one hand shoved into his pocket while the other spun the little blossom back and forth.

"So . . ." he said, a smirk playing at the corners of his mouth. "I heard a rumor earlier today."

"A rumor? Really?"

"Mm-hm. I heard that you'd made up your mind to marry me."

Bella grinned at him. "That's true, I did. But that was before Carlisle told me about how moody you are. I'm not so sure about you now."

"Is that how it is?" He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against him, tucking the flower behind her ear. "You're just going to steal my virtue and abandon me?"

"Don't make such a big deal out of it, baby. We were just having a good time."

Edward laughed and spun her out onto the dance floor. "Bella . . ." He tugged her back to him again, then dipped her low and held her there, leaning over her with his lips hovering near hers.

"Marry me."

"Not yet."

He pulled her upright and guided her through another turn, then drew her back into his arms.

"When?"

"When my parents don't have to sign a consent form."

"We can adjust your legal documents to say whatever we want them to say."

"I know." She pulled out and spun back in again, wrapping his arm around her as she did so. "But marrying you is important. I want it to be as legitimate as possible. And I want to actually be old enough that my decisions are legal ones."

"That's fair." He dipped her again, this time touching his lips to hers in a quick kiss before pulling her upright. "But I'm warning you now . . . if you give Alice two entire years to plan a wedding, she will get absolutely out of control."

Bella giggled. "Let her. She ought to have something fun to do, and you know she'll make it beautiful. Marrying you should be a memorable event."

Alice let out a whoop from across the tent, and Edward shook his head. "There's no saving us now. You've unleashed the beast."

"Shut up, Edward!" She darted across the tent and, ignoring Edward completely, barreled into Bella and hugged her tightly. "I'm going to design the most beautiful dress for you! Where do you want to get married? Paris? Honolulu? Ooh, what about Mt. Everest? You two could stand right on the peak at sunrise—"

"Pine cones," Bella said, interrupting her.

She blinked. "Pine cones?"

"Yes. I don't care what you decide. Arrange it wherever you want, decorate however you want, but somehow you have to incorporate pine cones."

"That's doable," she said. "But . . . why?"

Bella turned back to Edward and smiled, sidling into his embrace once more. "Because I started to fall in love with him when he threw a pine cone at me."

Alice practically melted. "That's so sweet! Could you show me the exact spot where it happened? Maybe that's where we should hold the wedding. And we could use pine boughs to—"

"Go away, Alice," Edward said. He was gazing down at Bella, his eyes soft and warm, and she stared back up at him.

"I love you," she whispered, ignoring Alice as she skipped away, still talking to herself about wedding arrangements.

"I loved you first," Edward whispered back.

"You did not."

"I did. When I looked up and saw you crouching on the stairs looking so lost and scared—and when I realized that you *were* lost, that Charlie had been out looking for you—I wanted to give you a home. Somewhere you could be safe. I've never wanted to *take care* of anyone like that before. I wasn't sure where it was heading, but I knew I wanted to do something to make you feel better."

"Well." She looked down, smiling to herself. "That was the most romantic display of one-upmanship I've ever heard."

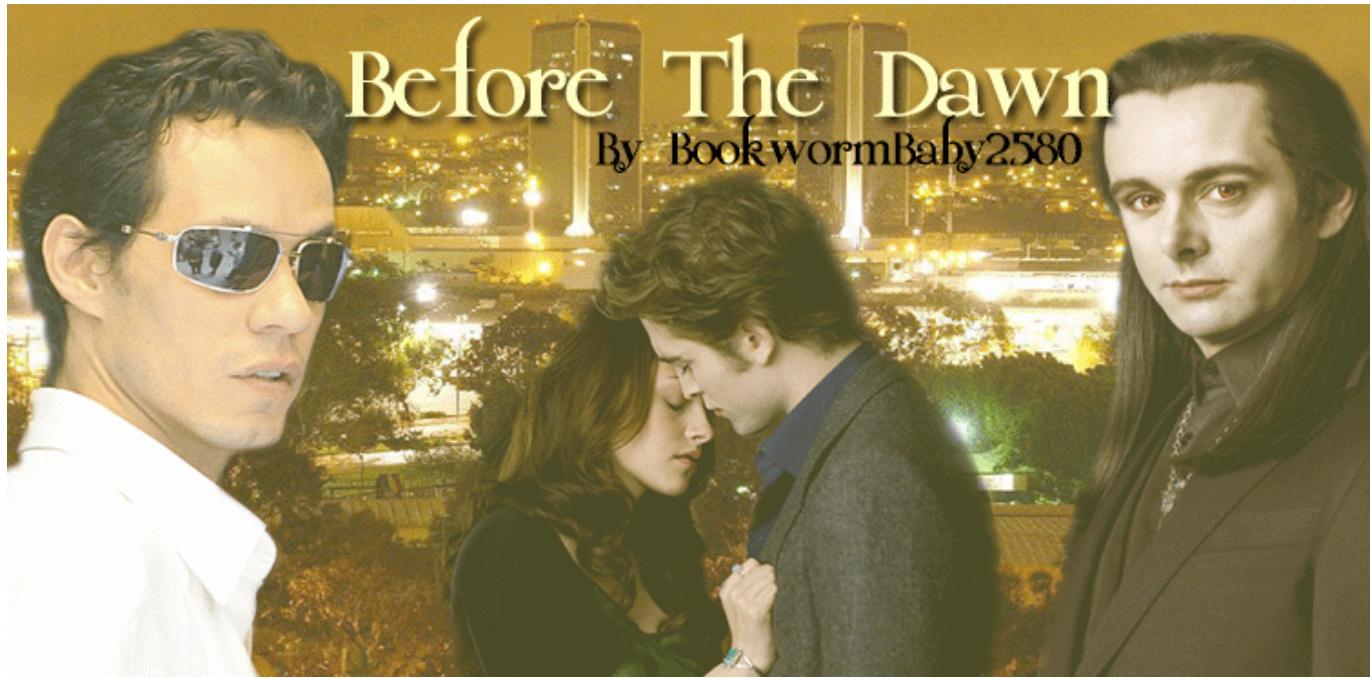
He let out a laugh and crooked a finger under her chin, nudging her face back up again. She grinned at him and he leaned down and kissed her hard, wrapping her up in an enthusiastic embrace. She clung to him, feeling weak in the knees, but exceptionally strong everywhere else. She thought back over the last few months—the terror and pain of Joham's kidnaping, the confusion over her feelings for Alexander, the anxiety and then the hope she found with the Cullen family, the suffocating fear of the gathering, and the tender, tremulous trust in Edward that had grown since their first meeting. Right at that moment, she felt invincible. She had faced unspeakable horrors, and yet here she was, alive and well, clasped in the arms of a man she adored while nearby her son danced and laughed with a woman who could turn into a dragon at will. When Edward broke their kiss, she laughed at the insanity of it all and then kissed him again. He spun her into an exuberant reel and she found herself giggling just as freely as Alexander.

Tonight was about joy. The morning would bring goodbyes, some of which would be melancholy even as they brought relief. But for tonight she would celebrate not only the beginning of a new vampire government, but the beginning of her own new life. One where she wouldn't be intimidated by everything around her. One where she was secure in the love of her family, and where her passions would be nurtured alongside her son's. She looked forward to learning with him, reading everything that made him curious and in sharing her own interests with him. She was already making a mental list of novels and poetry that she wanted to read him, to balance his fascination with politics and science. Together, the two of them were going to explore *everything*.

"You look happy," Edward murmured, his feet moving effortlessly to the rhythm of the music.

"I am," she whispered. "I'm *so* happy."

Daybreak



The following morning was affectionate madness. The collected vampires, chafing against the crowded conditions of the gathering, were all anxious to be on their way. Yet no one wanted to leave without having one more private conversation with their good friend Carlisle. He and Esme spent the better part of the day helping their friends break camp and take down their tents, using the time to say their goodbyes in a more intimate way than a collective conversation allowed.

Bella was kept nearly as busy. Alexander had become a little celebrity among their kind, and only a couple of hours after his need for sleep had overtaken his desire to participate in the closing festivities, he was being awakened again to say goodbye to his new friends.

Never having had the same reservations as Bella had, he gleefully passed out hugs and kisses to any who came to him. He quizzed many of them about how to say goodbye in their native tongues, and promised each of them that he would learn to speak the language properly by the time they met again. Bella thought it sounded like an ambitious undertaking, but then, Alexander *was* a very special young man. Ambition seemed to be an essential part of his being.

Minh, though, got the most affectionate farewell from him. She indulged him by phasing into a dragon, and Bella consented to let him crawl up onto her back while she did some gentle cavorting in the clearing behind the house. It was hard for her to release him into the care of a literal monster, but the pure delight in his laughter was some consolation. After taking to the air and flying a low lap around the house, Minh returned him to Bella safe and sound, his cheeks pinked with excitement. He slid into Bella's arms, crowing over the thrill of riding a dragon, while Minh phased back to her human form and calmly re-clothed herself. Once finished, she reached for Alexander again and drew him in for a tight squeeze.

"Beautiful child," she breathed into his curls. "I'm going to miss you so very much."

"No! I don't want you to go! You can stay here, right Mother? Can't she live with us?"

Bella was spared the necessity of answering by Minh's low chuckle. "I'm sorry, dear one, but I can't. I have so much to do. My friends back in China will want to know what you have done here, and perhaps they'll want to follow your example. You see, we have no central government, and no means of finding and supporting our sisters when they learn they can change their form. We must come together as the vampires have, for the good of our kind."

"But China's very far away," Alexander said, his lip quivering.

"That's true. The distance is far. But very smart people have given us gifts to make it seem smaller. Has your mother shown you how to send an email?"

He sniffed. "Yes. We sent one to Grandma Renée."

"Well, then, we will send each other letters with many, many pictures so we will always feel close together, even when we're far apart."

"It's not the same," he said with a pout, and Minh hugged him again.

"No, you're right. It's not the same. Sometimes we must put our preferences aside in order to see to our responsibilities. But I promise you that I will try very hard to come back and see you again. And perhaps, if my sisters will consent, someday you might visit my home in China."

"Really?" he asked, perking up.

"Perhaps. My kind and yours have not historically been friends. Yet, being here with you, I've felt that we have more in common than I'd realized. I must try to convince my sisters of this."

"Okay. But you promise you'll come back?"

"I'll do everything in my power."

Alexander tagged along after her while she, Bo, and Mei Zhen packed their belongings and made preparations to leave. Minh and Bo were headed back to China that day, but Mei Zhen would be staying for another week as guests of Embry's family, and would then fly to China to spend several weeks with Mei Zhen's parents. The two of them were almost embarrassingly grateful to Carlisle for helping them manage their travel and education, and their appreciation seemed to have bled into the pack. The Quileutes' hostility had cooled, and many of them even seemed willing to enter into a guarded friendship. Sam still remained mostly aloof, but the deep hatred that had made Jasper so jumpy had been replaced with a protective mistrust. It wasn't perfect, but it was progress.

The shape-shifters were the first to leave. The Quileutes, many of whom had eventually joined them for the evening's festivities, collected the Chinese women and headed back to the reservation. There was to be a breakfast with the tribe's council, Bella heard, before their flight home.

Their departure seemed to cue the others. Vampires started to disperse, breaking off in pairs or small groups, with the occasional large fracture. Tanya's coven, now without Tanya, had a long and fond goodbye session that involved no fewer than three invitations to Fred to come back for a visit when his newborn year was up. He, Bree, and Diego huddled in a tight knot, talking in low whispers until Kate finally urged the coven into their SUV.

Tia's new council, too, made a show of their departure. Their members came from such varied groups that a large crowd had gathered for their last goodbyes. The absence of Amun and Kebi was

glaring, but Carlisle stepped into their vacancy, taking Tia's hands in his and kissing her on both cheeks.

"I'm so glad you've accepted your commission," he murmured to her. "You're going to be a wonderful leader."

"I hope you know that I'm going to be calling you for advice on pretty much everything."

Carlisle chuckled. "I'm not sure how much I'll have to give, but we'll do our best."

They said goodbye to everyone, Benjamin spending an extra few moments to play with Alexander, shaping him figures out of the earth and creating a fountain of water that shot up out of the ground and high into the air. Alexander clapped with glee and threw his arms around Benjamin.

Bella joined in the farewells, but mentally she held herself apart, watching what was happening all around. Nearly everyone sought out her son to say goodbye, and she saw just how many friends he had made and how attached he had grown to some of them. At barely a couple of months old, he was already well known and well loved in their world. She thought of Joham's political aspirations for him and of Pythia's confirmation that his future held some sort of broad significance. She didn't necessarily like where the road led, but it was hard to imagine a more auspicious beginning for someone who had his sights set on political power.

With the council gone, the rest of the vampires quickly followed, peeling away like fragments of a cracked shell. Their departure left a peculiar sense of openness behind. There was room to move, air to breathe, and a sense of possibility and new beginnings. Bella stood in the clearing behind the house feeling newly hatched. There was a whole world open to her, and she finally felt like she could begin to explore it.

She looked around, her eyes falling on Edward, who was waving to the last of the departing guests, and for a moment her throat closed, trapping the breath in her chest.

Had he always been that beautiful?

Maybe it was the sunlight that had finally broken through the clouds and was now glittering on his skin and shimmering in his copper hair. Maybe it was the lightness of his smile, or the way his eyes crinkled at the corners, or the strength in those broad shoulders. She had seen all of that before, had surreptitiously admired his effortless beauty, yet somehow she seemed to have missed how every curve and angle came together to form such a flawlessly cohesive whole. How his hands were somehow a perfect extension of his arms, and that brow could only ever shadow those remarkable eyes. Everything about him blended in such a way as to define perfection, and Bella gazed at him with a startled obsession.

With all of the time she had spent staring at him, how had she never realized how remarkable he was?

She watched as Alexander ran up to him and he bent to scoop the boy up into his arms. And suddenly, standing there holding her son, he was even more perfect than he had been before. That wasn't supposed to be possible. Perfection didn't have degrees. Wholeness, by definition, lacked nothing.

Alexander was asking for books, and Edward lifted him up onto one shoulder and carried him into the house, quizzing him on the subjects that he wanted to read about today. Bella watched them

through the glass as they moved up the stairs, disappearing for a moment into a room and emerging again with a small satchel that Edward adjusted so that the strap would be short enough to lay over Alexander's shoulder. They went to the library and Alexander started going through the books, loading several into his satchel and then switching them out when the bag was too full to fit any more. Two of the books he chose were too large for the bag, so he handed those to Edward to carry while he perused the selection and finalized his choices. Edward watched patiently, assisting him when a book was too high for him to reach, and Bella gazed with affection on his indulgent demeanor.

After a moment he glanced out at her, and when he saw her watching him he smiled—not just any smile but *that* smile. The same one he'd worn when he had lain naked beside her in the meadow, tickling her bare stomach with wildflowers.

And it happened again. Perfection got better. Edward's essential being was a defiance of logic.

She watched again as they made their way back down the stairs to the couch and settled in to read. Rosalie appeared after a moment, asking Alexander if he would hold Kyra for a while, and he eagerly agreed. He tugged off his shirt and let Rosalie place the little girl in his arms and wrap the two of them up in a blanket. Settled once again, he sat back to listen as Edward read to him.

Within minutes, both children were asleep.

Edward brushed back Alexander's hair and kissed his forehead, then slipped away to let them rest. He left the house and crossed the yard to where Bella had been watching.

"Hey," he said, stopping in front of her.

"Hey."

He reached out and brushed her cheek with the back of his fingers, and then his soft smile turned playful. "Tag," he said. "You're it."

He took off running and Bella tore after him, laughing as he weaved and dodged around the clearing. She dove, just missing him as he leapt around Bree and Diego, who were sitting with Jasper and Alice looking anxious. Their expressions were all wrong, given the joy that filled Bella up inside, so she picked herself up and darted over to Bree.

"You're it!" she cried, slapping her shoulder and running away.

Bree looked at her in surprise, and then at Diego. Then she smiled too. "You're it," she said, shoving him back and leaping to her feet.

Diego dove for her, but she danced away. He spun and lunged for Alice, but she managed to jump back and shove Jasper in front of her so that Diego ended up colliding with Jasper instead.

Diego scrambled back, a look of utter terror on his face as Jasper glared down at him. But he only had to squirm for a moment, because Jasper's dark gaze shifted to Alice and one eyebrow arched in a challenge.

"You'd better *run*, girl."

She did, but it didn't do much good. Jasper's long legs gave him an advantage when it came to speed, and Alice hadn't made it very far before Jasper tackled her to the ground and planted a kiss on the side of her neck. "You're it," he whispered in her ear, then hopped up and ran away.

They played for nearly an hour, dragging Emmett and Carlisle into the game as well. Rosalie bowed out, preferring to sit with Nahuel in the living room as he told her stories of his childhood, and Esme joined them after a moment, drawing quietly on a sketch pad while she listened to them talk.

When everyone tired of the game, Bella wandered inside to check on Alexander and peek at Esme's drawing.

"What's that?"

"Oh, just some ideas right now. But they're starting to come together."

She sat down beside Esme, her eyes picking out the layout of the land across the river. "Are those houses?"

"That's right. I have some rough plans here." She flipped back a couple of pages, showing Bella a set of schematics, but then came back to her current page. "But I want to give the exteriors a cohesive theme that makes them all look nice together. What do you think of stone work? Is it too . . . storybook?"

"No, I like it, but . . ." she frowned. "What's all this for?"

"We've outgrown our house. I was planning a remodel to accommodate you, but now we have Bree, Diego, Nahuel, Alexander, and Kyra to find space for as well. Trying to fit us all into one home has gotten impractical."

"So you're building us . . . a neighborhood?"

"Something like that," she said with a smile. "It will take some work to get plumbing and electrical across the river, but I think we're up to the challenge. And wouldn't it be nice to have your own little cottage with Edward and a proper nursery for Alexander?"

Bella glanced over at her sleeping son and smiled. He hadn't done much sleeping in an actual bed since she'd brought him home. "That does sound good. What's this building in the middle?"

"A school room. We could meet here in the living room, of course, but it would be convenient to have some proper desks and a place to store our supplies."

"What's that big one?" Edward asked, sitting down at his piano. "Yours and Carlisle's?"

"No, this one is ours," she said, pointing to the house closest to the river, directly opposite the largest house in the drawing. "I thought we might put in a guest house. Something roomy enough for the Denali family when they come to visit."

"That's a wonderful idea," Carlisle said, joining them and leaning down to kiss her forehead.

She smiled warmly up at him "We'll see how wonderful you think it is when you're digging trenches to lay pipe."

He shrugged carelessly, moving off toward the stairs. "It'll be nice to have a project."

"What about this house?" Bella asked. "We won't use it anymore?"

"Not much, probably. I think we'll keep it up as sort of a show house. The neighbors still see us as a single family unit, after all, and if they drop by they'll expect to see the place where all of us live."

"Ooh, can I see the plans for our house?" Alice asked, falling to her knees on the floor in front of Esme.

She flipped the pages back to where she had drawn the sketch of Alice and Jasper's house. Alice examined it for a moment and then raised reproachful eyes to Esme's.

Esme erased the line that divided the bedroom from the closet and drew it in again so that the bedroom was smaller than it had been before, making the closet larger.

"I love it!" Alice declared.

"What about mine?" Edward asked. "Did you put in a music room?"

"Don't worry," Esme said with a laugh. "I'll consult with all of you before I finalize the plans. Alice, you may want to start putting together some ideas for the interiors. We'll have a little more to do than just bedrooms this time."

The plans were beautiful, but guilt interfered with Bella's appreciation of them. "I feel a little bad," she admitted. "I didn't mean to make you go to all this trouble."

"Oh, darling." She slipped an arm around Bella's waist. "Taking care of our family isn't trouble. I can't tell you how blessed I feel to have so many wonderful people to love."

"It's a huge expense, though."

Esme waved a dismissive hand. "We have plenty. Much of our wealth, in fact, comes to us as dividends from large corporations where we hold shares. Projects like this one give us the opportunity to invest some of that money back into the local economy by buying building materials and hiring help from small businesses. It's good for our community."

Bella grimaced. "Do you think you'll be hiring humans to come out?"

"Some, perhaps, though I was thinking about offering the work to the Quileute boys. It sounds like Sam is going to be getting married soon, after all. He might want to earn some extra money to set up house."

"Great idea," Edward said sarcastically. "Infuse our new houses with their stink."

Esme ignored him.

Jasper laughed, and for a moment Bella thought it was because of Edward and Esme, but when she glanced up at him she saw that it was Nahuel he was looking at.

"Just ask me," he said, and Nahuel smiled sheepishly.

"I . . ." he began, then hesitated. "Do you know . . ."

Jasper arched an eyebrow, clearly amused.

"When do you think . . . I might . . . see Mike Newton?"

Laughing silently to himself, Jasper pulled a little silver phone from his pocket and dialed a number. "Hey," he said when it was answered. "What are you doing today?"

Bella heard Mike's voice on the other end, explaining that he would be working until that evening.

"You want to come out and throw the football around after you get off?" They made plans, and when Jasper hung up he looked back at Nahuel, his expression still amused. "That doesn't seem to have made you feel any better."

"I'm grateful," he said quickly. "I wish to see him. But . . . what . . . what does one . . . talk about?"

"You have intentions for this relationship, don't you? The permanent kind?"

Nahuel opened his mouth to speak, hesitated again, and then nodded.

"Then I guess you'd better start by letting him in on our secret. You don't want to have any lies between you."

"And if he . . . does not take it well?"

Jasper shrugged. "Then you give him some time to process, I guess. But trust me, mating isn't something you can ignore for very long. He'll come around."

Nahuel flashed him a grateful smile.

"Look at you," Edward said to Jasper with a smirk. "Playing matchmaker."

Jasper shrugged one shoulder. "I didn't make the match. I'm just helping."

"You old softy."

"Finding my mate was the best thing that ever happened to me. Wouldn't be decent of me if I didn't help out where I can."

"I see your point," Edward said, reaching down for Bella's hand. "What do you say, Bella? Wanna go mate with me?"

Bella flicked a quick glance toward the sleeping form of her son before taking his hand and letting him pull her to her feet. "You're such a romantic."

He grinned broadly and trotted to the door, dragging her with him. They jumped the river together, and then Edward paced the area that had, until this morning, been dotted with tents. He stepped carefully, looking around him until he was satisfied with his position,

"This looks about right."

"Right for what?"

"Our house. Based on Esme's drawing, this is around where it would be, right?"

She scanned the terrain around her, trying to convert the drawing on paper to the reality of the woods. "Yeah, right about here."

"Good." He grabbed her and pulled her against him, smiling down at her with a playful glint in his eyes.

"What are you up to?"

"This is a very special plot of land," he said, his voice solemn but his eyes alight with laughter. "It's only proper that we consecrate it."

"Consecrate it?"

"That's right. This particular plat is going to be home to a lot of action in the future. We should give it a proper breaking-in."

Bella stepped out of his embrace and propped a hand on her hip, eyeing Edward's exquisite, smirking face. "You're telling me," she said, trying to force herself not to get distracted by the perfect line of his jaw, "that you want us to just strip naked and throw down right here."

His sparkling eyes darkened a shade. "*Hell, yes.*"

His voice ignited a stirring of desire in her, but she tried to hide her reaction, arching her eyebrow. "Right out in the open, where your family could just walk in on us."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem, Bella. I'm pretty sure they all know what we're up to, since they can hear us right now."

"Yep, we can," Esme's faint voice assured them from back at the house.

Bella clapped her hands to her cheeks. Had she still been human, she would definitely have been blushing. "You want to do this where they can hear us?"

"Yes," he said, gazing down at her with a predatory gleam in his eyes. "After all the times I've had to listen to them? Yes."

She fell back a step, pressing her lips together to keep from smiling. "So this is about your ego? You're proving to your family that you can get some too?"

He leapt at her and she didn't bother to dodge, letting him tackle her to the ground and pin her down in the bracken. "This," he whispered in her ear, "is about ushering in new era." He nipped lightly at her lobe. "Say yes, Bella."

She wriggled beneath him, deliberately pressing her hips against the growing evidence of his desire. "I don't know. Are you sure we're in just the right spot?"

"Baby, if you want we can consecrate every square inch of this forest."

"That seems awfully time-consuming," she said, looking at the expansive growth around them.

"Aren't we lucky," he murmured, "that we have so much consumable time?"

She giggled as she tugged at the fabric of his shirt until she managed to pull it over his head. "You know, the last time we did this we ended up getting attacked by newborns."

His lips kissed a trail down the column of her throat. "Maybe you should be quieter this time."

Bella let out a squeak of indignation and pushed him away. She glared at him as he sat back on his knees, still straddling her. "I wasn't that loud!"

"I'm just saying, I can't really blame them. If I heard you making those sexy little noises of yours, I'd come running, too."

"I'm sorry, was that supposed to be charming?"

He grinned and worked the hem of her shirt up to expose her stomach. "Not as charming as this." He shifted back and leaned down, dipping a tongue into her navel before kissing his way up to her sternum. And that *was* appealing. His mouth on her skin, coupled with the caress of his hands on her hips, turned her insides to jelly. She let out a little moan and he responded with a light nip to her skin.

"There it is," he whispered.

She let her hands drift to his hair, tangling her fingers in the rusty locks. "Don't stop."

This was different than it had been before. Their first time together had been full of devoted intensity and sealing of promises. Now, however, Edward was playful, teasing her and withholding the payoff, building tension with promising kisses and then denying her the exquisite release. He toyed with her until her body quivered and her fists clenched in frustration, and as he continued to deny her the climax she craved, the only thing to do was the tease him in return. She let her hands play over his body, creeping toward his most sensitive places before dancing away again. They groaned and panted, rolling together on the forest floor until neither of them could resist the pull for a moment longer. They gave up the game, falling together and surrendering to the delicious desperation of passion.

When they finally collapsed onto the ground in languid satiety, Bella rolled onto her side and snuggled against him, compelled by an unacknowledged need to feel his hard skin pressed against hers.

"Well?" he drawled, grinning lazily at the canopy of branches above them. "What do you think? Is this a good spot to build the house?"

"It's just right," she whispered, and in her mind she saw the little nursery where Alexander would sleep, his furniture and decor growing as he did. And just down the hall would be the bedroom that would belong to her and Edward.

"We should have a library of our own," Edward said. "For both music and books. Maybe we could put the piano in there, too."

"I guess we'll need a decent kitchen," Bella added, "since Alexander likes human food."

"Maybe we could mark off some space for a vegetable garden."

Bella looked up at the trees towering over them. Some of them would have to get cleared out to make way for the development, but it was still going to be surrounded by trees on all sides. "It might be better to put that up by the main house where there's more sunlight."

"Fair enough."

There was something thrilling about lying naked next to Edward while they made plans for their future, and a little shiver of excitement shook her body.

Edward raised his head to look down at her. "Are you actually cold?"

"Just happy," she murmured. "I thought . . . I thought I'd lost this. When I was with Joham, I thought my life was over. And even after I left him, when I didn't have Alexander, I really thought I'd never be happy again. Now, all of a sudden, I have everything."

Edward shifted onto his side and propped himself up on his elbow, looking down at her to gauge her mood. Her face must have convinced him that she wasn't turning melancholy because he smirked. "Not *everything*. We haven't actually built the new house yet."

She just smiled. "That's part of it. A future to look forward to. It's hard to explain how it feels when you're sure there's no future. It's a horrible kind of claustrophobia." Now she *was* turning melancholy, so she smiled up at him. "But now I have countless tomorrows and they're all open to a million possibilities. And I get to spend them with *you*. Do you know how incredible that feels?"

"I have some idea," he said with a little laugh, then pulled her close and hugged her tightly. And somehow, once again, he got more perfect. She wondered at it, but there was nothing to do but surrender to the beautiful truth of it. Edward would always be changing the benchmark of perfection, and she would always be grateful that he had chosen her for his companion.

"You're perfect, Bella," he breathed earnestly, and she laughed into his chest, her throat tightening in the rush of emotion elicited by his words.

"Is that funny?" he asked, his fingers playing idly with a lock of her hair.

"I've spent all day thinking about how perfect *you* are."

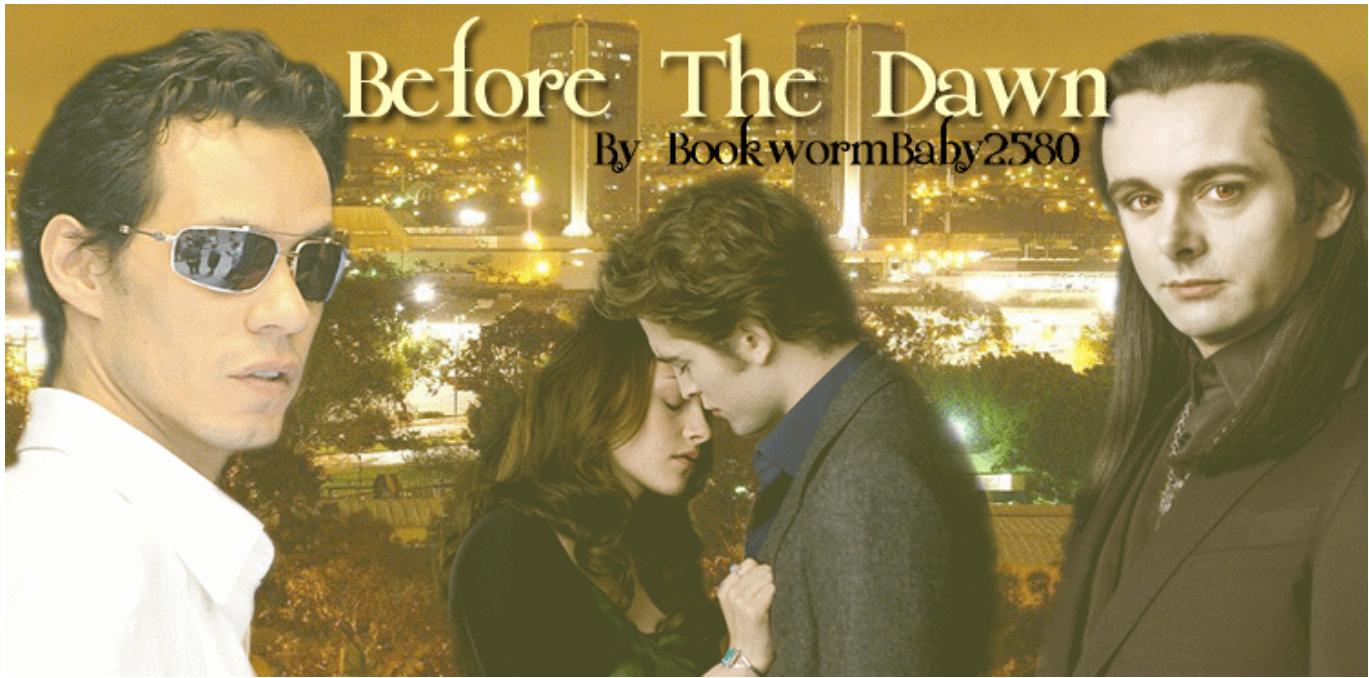
"Damn," he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "We are *such* a fantastic couple. The entire world is going to be viciously jealous of us." He dropped her hair and his fingers zeroed in on her stomach, tickling her until she laughed and wriggled away from him. He started to crawl after her but she shoved him onto his back, pinning him to the ground with her body.

"Viciously jealous," she murmured, and they made love again under the canopy of trees where Bella had finally found peace.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)



December 20, 2056

"Ugh. My hair is so staticky."

Alexander smiled, watching Xiaodan try to brush down the strands of fine black hair that kept reaching out toward the back of the sofa. "It's been too long since you've phased. It's like your pent-up energy is leaking out through your head and getting caught in your hair."

She shook her head in frustration, which only made more of her hairs rise up in a stubborn cloud around her face. "If this room were bigger and less full of antiques, I'd do it right now."

"Hang on." Alexander ducked out of the Blair House drawing room and passed through the short hallway to the bathroom near the foyer. He wetted his hands and shook them off, then returned to the drawing room and smoothed them over the Xiaodan's hair. The water weighed down the baby-soft strands enough to temporarily ease the static.

"Careful," she said with a grin. "If you drip water on the antique furniture, you could end up starting a war."

He made a show of wiping his hands on his suit pants and Xiaodan laughed.

From across the street, Alexander could hear the sounds of business carrying on in the White House. The staffers were in full transition mode, preparing for the transfer of power from one president to the next. They had one month to pass off the business of running the country, and the atmosphere held a frenetic edge. The incoming president's voice could be heard over the din, complaining that the entire day had been blacked out for one charity benefit, thus preventing him from meeting with potential staff.

"I think I like him," Xiaodan said. "At least he's eager to get to work."

"Oh, is that what you like about him? His work ethic? Here I thought it was his chin dimple."

She laughed, her dark eyes lighting up. "His chin dimple is *adorable*. We haven't met with a dignitary this cute since Darkan Safiullah."

"Yeah, don't think I didn't notice how enthusiastic you were about stripping down for *him*."

She gave a breezy shrug. "It's the job." Then with a sly peek at him out of the corner of her eye she added, "It's just a nicer part of the job when your audience is as attractive as President-Elect Castillo."

Alexander pursed his lips. "Jimmy Soul tried to tell me. Never make a pretty woman your wife, he said. Why didn't I listen?"

"You might have, if you'd been able to find any ugly dragons. Here, let me fix your tie. They'll be here in a minute."

Alexander smiled at her. "You're a marvel, you know that?"

"I do." She grinned and dragged him closer by his tie. "I'm pleased you noticed." She kissed him soundly and then sat back, smoothing the skirt of the black wrap dress that she wore—Alexander was all too aware—over nothing at all. He straightened his jacket in an unconscious imitation, trying not to think too hard about all that wasn't beneath her dress. North America was technically his responsibility, so he wouldn't have the luxury of standing back and admiring Xiaodan while she did all the talking. Which was too bad, really. The big reveal was always amusing, and he enjoyed being the silent spectator.

Delivering the news himself was almost as fun, though, and he tapped his foot impatiently as he waited. This was the good part. He always got a merciless little thrill over meeting with an uninitiated world leader.

The party from the White House finally exited and made their way toward the city-block-sized guest house across the street where Alexander and Xiaodan waited. When they entered the room dressed in their daytime formals, Alexander rose to greet them.

"President Beckett," he said warmly, taking the hand of the plump, gray-haired woman who led the group. He pressed her fingers between his and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "It's been too long."

"Yes, thank god. I wouldn't have wanted to see you any sooner." She smiled at his chuckle and waited while he turned to the man beside her, who was looking age-spotted and a little stooped in the shoulder these days. "You remember my husband."

"Of course. It's good to see you, Logan."

He returned the greeting and stepped back to make way for a tall black man who had acquired a generous sprinkling of white in his hair over the last eight years.

"Oscar," Alexander greeted warmly. "No Vivian tonight?"

"She asked me to give you her best, but she's feeling a little under the weather."

Alexander recognized the lie, but ignored it. Vivian had been deeply shaken by her last meeting with Alexander, and though she had handled it tactfully, it was no surprise that she wasn't anxious

to repeat the experience. "Of course. I hope you'll pass along my regards."

With the old acquaintances acknowledged, Alexander turned to President Beckett and allowed her to take the lead in the introductions. She gestured to Castillo, who stepped forward with his hand outstretched.

"President-Elect Castillo, this is Alexander Cullen and his wife Xiaodan. I had a meeting just like this with them when I first took office."

"Really?" Castillo asked, his dark eyebrows raising in surprise. "You must have been, what, around ten years old?" he asked Alexander.

Alexander smiled broadly. "Mr. President-Elect, I'll ask you to put a pin in that question for now. We'll come back to it again when we've had a chance to talk."

He dropped the subject graciously, moving on to take Xiaodan's hand. "Show-don? Am I saying that right?"

"Close enough."

He released her hand and turned to acknowledge the other woman in the room. "This is my National Security Advisor, Marla Nivens."

Nivens was a somewhat dowdy woman with mousy brown hair and very little make-up. She was the kind of woman who didn't draw anyone's attention right away, but given her sharp-eyed gaze, Alexander suspected that she made her unremarkable appearance work for her. She shook his hand and gave him just enough of a smile to be polite, but he could tell that she was already wary about what was about to happen.

Clever woman.

Beckett asked their Secret Service escorts to wait outside of the room, and before Castillo could take a seat, Alexander clapped his hands together. "Shall we go?"

"Go?" Nivens asked. "The benefit isn't being held here at Blair House?"

"There's no benefit," Alexander said, "and no, we're not staying here. We're going to Washington State."

"This is one of those intense moments I was telling you about," Oscar told her. "Just remember, you can still back out."

She pursed her lips. "Cute."

"You think so now . . ."

"Come now, we're not that bad," Xiaodan said, taking Oscar's arm. "We serve good food and we almost never bite our guests."

"It's the 'almost' that has me worried." He took the lead, guiding them through one room after another, winding their way through the enormous guest house to a little-used side door. Outside was parked a dark gray SUV, and Alexander popped the lock and opened the rear door for them.

Castillo hesitated. "We're not taking the motorcade?"

"Nope," Beckett said, stepping past him to slide into the car. "Nor Air Force One. They draw attention, and this is one of those times when confidentiality trumps everything else. Including Secret Service protection."

His eyes widened a little at the reminder that he no longer had a Secret Service escort, and his anxiety helped to hurry him into the car. "Then why is your husband here?"

"That's a peculiarity of the Price Coalition," Xiaodan explained. "They have deep respect for marital relationships, and refuse to ask anyone to keep them a secret from their partners. You and Ms. Nivens would also have been expected to bring your spouses if you were married."

"The Price Coalition? That's who we're meeting?"

"We'll tell you all about them on the plane."

Alexander hopped behind the wheel, and as he navigated away from the curb, Nivens leaned forward. "This isn't actually a Guardian SUV, is it?"

"Very observant of you. It is."

"I didn't know they made an SUV."

"They don't," he said with a grin. "But with enough money, you can get a custom job done."

"The Price Coalition has money, huh? Is that what this is about? They're potential donors?"

"I'm afraid not. There may be donation money to be had from some of the individuals we'll meet tonight, but this evening is about giving you important information and helping you understand what to do with it."

"And we can't do this without taking a field trip with a couple of high school students?" Castillo asked drily.

"You'll need to learn to check that kind of talk, Nestor," President Beckett said. "I know our ambassadors look young, but this isn't the kind of group you want to piss off."

"Are they a threat?" Nivens asked.

Oscar laughed, long and low. "Oh, yes. If you're not careful."

"And yet we're going there without Secret Service?"

"Don't worry about it," Beckett said. "I survived my first meeting and you'll survive yours."

She pursed her lips. "If you're taking us on a snipe hunt, I'm not amused."

Alexander grinned at her in the rearview mirror. "We won't abandon you. Tonight is supposed to be pleasant, for the most part. Carlisle Cullen has invited you to enjoy his hospitality, and the man throws a pretty good party."

"So this is a party," Castillo said.

"It's a meet-and-greet. With really good food, and a long, boring lecture that you have to listen to on the plane."

"Uh," Oscar interjected, "I take issue with the boring part. That lecture is stressful as hell, and I couldn't be happier to pass this responsibility off onto somebody else."

"Oscar," Xiaodan chided, "you're going to hurt my feelings."

"Sweetie, I don't even want to hear it. You took ten years off my life when you did your little magic trick." He winked at her and she laughed gamely.

Alexander maneuvered his way through the DC traffic until he reached the airport, where he veered off onto a service road and drove them back to a private hangar. The group exited the car and filed inside, but Alexander stopped them before they could proceed to the airstairs that led up to his small private jet.

"The things I'm about to tell you can be difficult to accept," he said, backing up with Xiaodan to give them space. "I've found that it's helpful to provide a demonstration to show how very serious I am."

"This is where it gets weird," Oscar muttered.

Nivens shot him a sidelong glance. "You're not going to start talking about aliens, are you?"

"No, ma'am." Alexander grinned. "We're way more interesting than aliens. I'm going to make you uncomfortable for a second or two, but I must ask you not to avert your eyes. I need you to be aware that there is no illusion or sleight of hand at work here."

Xiaodan was already kicking off her shoes. She reached for the tie that held her dress in place and tugged, letting Alexander slide the garment off her shoulders.

"No, no, no—" the President-Elect tried to protest, but Xiaodan didn't give him a chance to say any more. A flash of heat radiated from her body and the long, lithe form of a dragon burst from the place where she stood, growing so quickly that Alexander had to scuttle backward to avoid being knocked over.

Nivens stumbled back as well, and Castillo cursed loudly. They gaped at the dragon as she stretched out her forelegs and shook her head. Her hide gleamed rusty-red in the artificial light, and her body was so long that it curved around the front of the hangar, the tip of her tail whipping lazily back and forth on the other side of the plane.

"My wife is a shape-shifter," Alexander said, not bothering to keep the note of triumph out of his voice. "Isn't she marvelous?" He strode over to her, and she ducked down to let him stroke her snout. "I assure you that she is not dangerous. She's is fully rational, whether in human or dragon form, and she has no interest in hurting anyone. She is taking this form simply to show you that things you have thought impossible are, in fact, quite real."

Logan heaved a sigh. "I'd almost convinced myself that it was all an illusion."

"Then I haven't done my job very well," Alexander replied with a smile. "Mr. President-Elect, I need to make sure you get on that plane knowing beyond doubt that shape-shifters are real, and that the world is fundamentally different than you thought it was. Otherwise I'll end up spending the

entire trip trying to convince you that I'm not lying, and we simply have too much to cover to waste that kind of time." He beckoned to Castillo and Nivens. "If you would please come forward, I would like you to touch Xiaodan in her current form. Breathe in her scent. Engage as many of your senses as possible so that you won't be able to talk yourself into disbelief."

Neither of them made a move, so Oscar gulped in a breath and strode up to Xiaodan. He skirted her head and moved to her shoulder, reaching out to touch the leathery red skin of one foreleg. Xiaodan let out a little contented grumble at the contact and settled down onto the concrete floor, the movement beginning at her shoulders and rippling back along her serpentine body to her tail.

"Perfectly safe," Oscar said, though his voice trembled. "I've met with Alexander and Xiaodan a handful of times during the last few years. We've never had any problems."

"I'm an ambassador," Alexander said as President Beckett and her husband strode up beside Oscar to encourage the new president and head of national security to interact with Xiaodan. "It's my job to facilitate a relationship between the United States and the coalition I represent. The sooner you accept this as reality, the sooner Xiaodan can shift back and we can get on the plane."

Nivens took a slow breath, took a step forward, then immediately stepped back again. She clenched her fists, released them, and then before she could lose her nerve she walked forward and put her hand on Xiaodan's snout where Alexander had.

Xiaodan rumbled in approval.

"That should be enough," she said, jerking her hand away. "The President-Elect doesn't need to be put at risk."

"I assure you, there's no risk," Alexander soothed. "But yes, he does need to have this experience. Mr. President-Elect, please."

Fortunately, he was already striding forward, choosing to keep his distance from Xiaodan's teeth and moving to touch her leg. To his credit, he seemed fully invested in experiencing her presence. He stroked her scaly hide, examined the short, sharp spines at her joints, then took a slow, deliberate walk down the length of her body. He circled her, occasionally reaching out to touch a part of her body that promised a different texture. When he reached her head again, he stood in front of her and fixed her with a wide-eyed gaze.

"Incredible," he breathed.

Alexander beamed.

"She smells like . . . something," he murmured. "Spices."

Alexander nodded. "She always does, though it's stronger when she's in this form. And it's a little different for each animal. Chinese shifters can take—well, theoretically, up to twelve different forms, but currently we've only managed to find nine—and I'm almost to the point where I can identify a shifter's animal by scent alone."

Castillo turned toward him, looking a little dazed. "Different . . . animals? Other kinds of dragons, or . . ."

"No, dragons are just the most impressive." He grinned as he rocked back on his heels. "Horses, rats, monkeys, dogs, oxen, sheep . . . is this starting to sound familiar?"

"The zodiac," he murmured.

Alexander nodded. "It's a trait inherited from very old families, and we fear that a few lines may have died out entirely. At present, we've been unable to locate a line of rabbits, snakes, or tigers. But then, it may be that the lines have just gone dormant. It's impossible to know."

Castillo shook his head in wonder. "Unbelievable."

"They're not the only shifters, either," he continued. "We've found eleven different cultures worldwide in which certain individuals have the ability to shift into animal forms. The dolphins in New Zealand—"

The dragon grumbled and Alexander smiled sheepishly. "You're right, darling. I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's get on the plane." He held up her dress, and she backed away from those touching her. With another burst of heat, the enormous dragon was replaced by a diminutive Chinese woman, and Alexander hurried to help her into her clothes again.

"Do you turn into an animal, too?" Castillo asked Alexander as Xiaodan slipped her feet back into her shoes.

"Me? No, I'm not a shifter. I'm just your everyday, run-of-the-mill half-vampire." He clapped Castillo on the shoulder as he passed him, heading for the airstairs. "Let's go, kids. Time's a-wasting."

Xiaodan kept step with him but the rest of them lagged behind, trying to adapt to this new information.

"You enjoy this way too much," Xiaodan said with a roll of her eyes.

"I know. I blame my father for my character deficiencies."

She snorted and headed for the room at the back of the private jet. "I'm going to put some underwear on."

"That's completely unnecessary," he called after her.

The others were entering the plane now, and Alexander invited them to take seats around the long, slim table that ran down the center of the forward cabin. He stood at the head, where a wall of display glass separated the cabin from the cockpit. Currently it was clear, and he tapped on the glass and gestured for the pilot to come back. She opened the door in the glass and poked her head out, giving them all a wave.

"Hi, guys! I'm Rosalie Cullen, and I'll be your pilot today."

"Rosalie is a full vampire," Alexander said. "Note the color of her eyes. We're going to talk about that in just a minute."

Rosalie widened her eyes, then batted her lashes, hamming up her part.

Castillo frowned. "You don't actually expect us to believe that there are vampires roaming around, do you?"

"Did you believe in shape-shifting dragons this morning?" he countered.

Castillo pressed his lips together in a hard line.

"Shifters are members of only one of three categories of beings in the Price Coalition. The second is vampire and the third is werewolf—not to be confused with shifters who change into wolves. By the end of the day, you'll have met at least a couple of each."

"What, no mummies?" Castillo asked with a small smile. "Creatures from the Black Lagoon?"

He smirked. "Not yet, but if Carlisle ever meets any, I'm sure he'll try to recruit them."

Nivens looked hesitant. "Do you . . . have fangs?"

Rosalie smiled and shook her head. "Just very sharp teeth."

"And you drink blood."

She nodded.

"As do I," Alexander said, "when the mood strikes. Unlike Rosalie, I have a constitution that allows me to eat other things as well. Full vampires can't digest anything but blood."

Rosalie stepped through the door just long enough to kiss Alexander on the cheek. "I'm going to get us in the air," she said, disappearing into the cockpit again.

Alexander swiped the display glass to increase its opacity, then turned back to the group. "We should get started as well. Tablets out, please."

They withdrew their handheld tablets from pockets and purses as Alexander plucked his own from his inside pocket. He loaded up the essential files and, with a flick of his finger, cast them to the other devices. He turned then and flicked the first two image clusters up onto the display glass so he would have a large visual aid.

"The files I've sent you have very limited information," he said. "The risk of hacking is real, and if information about us is leaked, we're likely to have a panic on our hands."

Nivens looked offended. "Our cyber-security is the best in the world."

"If humans can build it, humans can break it. Even the best systems have vulnerabilities."

She looked dissatisfied, but remained silent.

"Therefore," he continued, "I've only given you photographs and names of the members of the Price Coalition Head Council. You don't have to remember everyone, but should absolutely remember Tia and Benjamin." He pointed to them on the display glass. "Tia is the Chair and Benjamin is her mate. You're also going to want to know Minh, Prokopios, and Celena."

"The second file, here, contains names and photographs of the Cullen family. Yes," he smiled, "that's all one family. You'll recognize Rosalie, Xiaodan, and myself in the group. Most of my

family aren't members of the Council, but they're highly influential and have helped shape the world we live in today. Again, you don't need to memorize all of them, but you need to know me, because I am your ambassador, and you need to know Carlisle Cullen."

Xiaodan reappeared then, still in her wrap dress but now wearing silk stockings and jewelry, with her hair bound up in a sleek french twist. She pushed a cart that contained flutes of mimosas and platters of finger food, and she started passing them around the table while Alexander gave his presentation.

"One thing that will make your day easier is if you can dissociate appearance with age," he told his audience. "With few notable exceptions, most of the people we're going to talk about can or must remain in physical stasis. Mr. President-Elect, you pointed out earlier that I don't look old enough to have been doing this for very long, but in fact, I've got a few years on you. I'm fifty-two."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Xiaodan is forty-four. Rosalie is a hundred and forty-one."

"Thank god," Nivens muttered.

Alexander shot her a questioning look.

"I'm more than happy to believe that this plane isn't being flown by a teenager."

He winked at her and jumped back into his spiel. "Most of the people we'll be discussing today have lived longer than a normal human life span. For vampires, life continues indefinitely unless interrupted by lethal force. For shape-shifters, as long as they're regularly changing form they can prevent aging and are resistant to injury and health problems. Werewolves age naturally, but slowly. The average uninterrupted life expectancy is probably somewhere between nine hundred and twelve hundred years, though it's been tough to get good data. The werewolves are a relatively new addition to the Coalition, and they're justifiably reluctant to share information with a race that once hunted them nearly to extinction."

Alexander spent the next couple of hours telling the president-elect and his new NSA director about the fall of the Volturi and the government that had been created to take its place. He gave them an in-depth description of each of the Council members, and included personal details about himself, like being allowed as a child to sit in on calls between Tia and Carlisle. His intensive study of government and economic philosophy had allowed him to contribute intelligently to the conversations as he grew up, and eventually he had worked with Tia to put together a program that enabled them to connect with world governments to solve shared problems.

He told them about how the Chinese shape-shifters had begun a concentrated effort to find not only their own sisters, but to locate shape-shifters throughout the world. They encouraged people with the shifting ability to send representatives to join the vampires' Council, though they ran into significant difficulties when they came across a clan of werewolves who held a deep-seated hatred toward vampires. The werewolves were willing to work with the shape-shifters, however, and years later allowed a representative to join the Council.

"This, by the way," Alexander said with a smirk, "is how the Coalition got its name. The Council came to visit our Alberta home once, and my Uncle Emmett looked around and said, 'It's like a horror movie marathon in here. Every single one of us has been played by Vincent Price.' "

Nivens, apparently a fan of the old classics, got a good laugh out of that.

"This is Prokopios, the werewolf," he said, pointing to a picture of a silver-haired man. "His mother is responsible for most, if not all, of the existing werewolves today. When the former vampire government waged war against them, she took a band of family and friends to Siberia and hid them effectively enough that they were never found. The clan has grown, but their numbers are still small. Female werewolves have difficulty carrying fetuses to term, and there isn't a lot of mingling with humans. The clan also tries hard to see that the strain is not spread to unwilling recipients through bites. They are what you might call a protected species. Their numbers are low enough that their continued survival requires conscious maintenance."

He moved on to address vampire feeding habits, and while Castillo had difficulty accepting the tens of thousands of human lives taken each year by vampires, a reminder of his voting record regarding military action soon silenced him. Alexander suspected he was embarrassed to be confronted with the death toll that he himself had directly influenced.

But for the most part, it was an easy meeting. Castillo took things better than Alexander had expected him to, and Nivens wasn't any more difficult than Oscar had been. As soon as she was able to accept the reality of the situation, she jumped in to a discussion of policy and responsibility.

They were just turning their attention to etiquette when Rosalie announced that they were approaching Denver, where they would stop to pick up two more passengers before continuing on to Forks.

Alexander frowned and opened the door to the cockpit, leaning inside. "Who are we picking up?"

"Your parents."

"Oh, did someone finally pry them out of that cabin of theirs? I was starting to think they were never coming home."

She laughed. "They couldn't pass up a visit from you. You really ought to drop in more often."

"Is Kyra going to be there?"

"Yep. The whole family's coming, plus the Council. It's going to be a party."

"Maysun and Alistair?"

"Okay, not the *whole* family. But everyone else."

"Excellent." Alexander ducked back out and closed the door behind him. "Okay," he said. "Etiquette. Vampires are addressed both formally and informally by their given names. There are a handful of reasons for this, but first and foremost is that many of them simply don't have family names. That's a connection to their human lives, which most of them had to give up when they became vampires. Some, like my family, tend to use multiple aliases. Some have forgotten their names, and some simply feel no affiliation with them. Of course, there are exceptions. Carlisle, for example, was determined to hang onto his humanity after his change, and for him that included the continued use of his father's name. He has also dedicated hundreds of years to medicine, so he responds well to 'Dr. Cullen,' if you prefer a more formal construction."

"Another of our number who regards his family name highly is Luca Farrugia. He's among the oldest vampires I've known, born somewhere around twenty-five hundred years ago, and he has been something of a patron to his family ever since. Pietra, here," he pointed to her picture, "is a member of his family, and she won't have a problem with her surname being acknowledged. The shifters and werewolves, too, are perfectly content to use either family or given names, but they lean toward given names when on official business, as a matter of conformity. A good rule of thumb is to stick with the given name unless you're introduced to someone in a different way."

"Will they be addressing us by our first names, then?" Castillo asked.

"That's up to you. They'll use the name I give them when I make the introductions, so just tell me how you'd like to be known."

He looked at Beckett. "What did you use?"

"I used my title, but Logan and Oscar both went with first names."

"Do they care?" he asked Alexander. "Does it seem impersonal or . . . I don't know, more official if I ask them to use my title?"

"Not at all. They'll respect your right to be addressed the way you're comfortable."

He rubbed his forehead. "President-Elect is a little cumbersome. I think we'll just go with Nestor, but not at the White House. If you come for . . . whatever it is you come for, you should . . ."

"I should behave the way human politicians expect," he said with a smile. "Of course." He turned to Nivens for her decision.

"Marla is fine."

"Very good. Now, the first introductions I'll make will be to the Council, starting with Tia and Benjamin . . ."

He walked them through the evening until the plane landed in Denver and Rosalie stepped out to let on the new passengers. As soon as Bella saw Alexander, she darted over to him and wrapped him up in an overenthusiastic hug.

"My baby!" she squealed.

"Hey, Mom—" he started to say, but she had begun peppering his face with kisses and he rolled his eyes. He knew exactly what she was doing.

"My little boy!" she crowed. "Look at you in that fancy suit! You look so grown up!"

He had to hold back a snort. "Mom—"

"Oh, honey, your hair has gotten so long. Don't you think you should get it cut? You look so much nicer when it's short."

"Mom—"

"And look how skinny you are! Aren't you eating? We need to get you home and get some food in you before you waste away to nothing!"

"Mother." He took her face in his hand and forced her to look at him, grinning. "You can't embarrass me. I'm too happy to see you."

She laughed gaily and pulled him in for another bone-crushing hug before releasing him and turning to Xiaodan. "It's so good to see you!"

Alexander turned his attention to the figure lingering in the doorway. "Edward," he said with a smile, and moved to hug him.

Edward hugged him back, long and hard, and then pulled away and smiled down at him.

"Look at you," he murmured.

Alexander smiled back until Edward's grin turned mischievous.

"So you really are done growing, huh? Five-eleven is the best you can do?"

"Hey! Leave me alone. I have short genes. Joham topped out at five-eight, and you've seen *her*." He jerked his thumb at Bella.

Edward laughed, clapping him on the back and moving them both back toward the table.

"Sorry to interrupt, everyone," he said, moving to a chair at the end. He and Bella looked excessively rustic in their jeans and winter coats next to the plane full of people in formalwear.

Alexander couldn't keep the glowing smile off his face as he made the introductions between his parents and the American dignitaries.

"You'll have to forgive us our enthusiasm," he said. "It's been several months since we've seen each other."

"Try a year," Bella said. "You haven't been home since last Christmas."

"You're one to talk. Have you even left that cabin of yours since Edward's birthday?"

Edward leaned into her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Nope."

He waved them away, desperately hoping they weren't going to start talking about their sex life in order to tease him. "You two be quiet. We're still doing the etiquette section."

"Don't plug your nose around the shifters," Edward said. "Yes, they smell bad, but we try not to make a big deal about it."

Xiaodan wandered behind his chair and flicked him in the ear.

Alexander arched an eyebrow at him. "Do you want to do this?"

He pantomimed zipping his lips and folded his hands in his lap.

"We've talked briefly about the importance of mates to the Coalition, but it's worth mentioning again. You'll want to avoid insulting anyone's mate, or making jokes that disparage them. Nagging wife, oblivious husband, ball and chain . . . these don't go over very well."

"Don't flirt with someone else's mate either," Xiaodan added. "You might actually see people doing that—"

"Garrett," Edward muttered.

She nodded. "But it's a risky thing to do, and the ones who do it only get away with it because of a long history of friendship. You don't want to mess with couples in this group."

"Which is not to say you can't flirt with the single ones," Alexander teased. "We've never had *two* unattached dignitaries before, and after all, it *is* a party . . ." He waggled his eyebrows at them, and Castillo smirked. "Just make sure you're not putting the moves on someone who has a jealous lover with sharp teeth."

They ran through a few more etiquette points, and then Alexander flicked a picture of Joham up on the screen. Bella let out a string of curses, and he fixed her with an admonitory glare.

"Mother, we're in polite company. You want to tone down the language a little?"

"As soon as you get that useless sack of shit off the wall, sure."

He laughed under his breath and addressed Castillo and Nivens. "We're almost done, but there's one more thing we need to go over: *personae non gratae*."

"It's clear there are some personal feelings here," Nivens said, "but are we talking about this in a political sense? Are these people who are sanctioned in some way?"

"That's a fair question, and the answer is complicated. Joham is . . . I suppose you might say he's under official observation. He's caused a lot of harm to multiple people, so he's in somewhat poor standing with the Coalition, though he hasn't technically committed any crimes."

"Technically?" she pressed.

He let his eyes drift to his mother, holding her gaze while he gently explained her history. "When my mother was sixteen years old, Joham kidnaped and raped her." He looked back at Nivens. "He's my father."

She gave a bewildered shake of her head. "I'm sorry—that's not an official crime?"

"Under the Volturi regime, it wasn't. The only real laws then were related to keeping the secret of our existence. Certain patterns of etiquette arose, but there was no legal punishment for violence that stayed off the human radar. Vampires pretty much policed themselves—in an unruly, Wild West sort of way."

"That changed when the Volturi fell and the new government was put in place. Murder of vampires was made illegal, as was inhumane treatment of humans. But I'm sure you understand why he couldn't be punished for what he had done before the laws were put in place."

She nodded slowly, but looked displeased.

"With Joham, though, it was a pattern of behavior. I have a handful of biological siblings from his various assignations. My father had grand ideas about raising up a super race of half vampires—for purposes not entirely clear, though I'm sure there was some vague intention of world domination." He allowed a small smile. "My father is an intelligent and determined man—"

Bella snorted.

"—but foreplanning isn't one of his strengths."

Bella bared her teeth. "Intelligent and determined? Darling boy, I *will* take you over my knee."

"Relax, Mother," he said impatiently. "I'm not complimenting him, I'm pointing out the things that make him dangerous." He addressed Nivens again. "He wasn't at all happy about the new laws, but Carlisle gave him the chance to defend his actions and he could offer no legitimate reasons why he should be allowed to continue. So restrictions were placed on vampire reproduction and Joham was sent away. The Council keeps tabs on him, though, because he's known to be tenacious."

"So, to answer your question . . . in Joham's case, his questionable standing is probably more personal than legal. But with Aro, it's definitely legal." He cast Aro's picture onto the glass, replacing Joham's.

"As head of the Volturi, Aro has made a lot of enemies in his time. But his first official strike occurred just before the new regime was fully organized. Carlisle had managed to talk everyone into placing restrictions on violent crimes, and it was looking like he and his family were going to be asked to take the place of the Volturi. Aro imagined he still had a shot at regaining power and didn't appreciate the competition from Carlisle, so he tried to kill Esme in an effort to neutralize him."

Both Castillo and Nivens blinked in surprise.

"There was no formal government at the time, but there were laws that had been agreed upon, so Aro had committed a real crime. And because Carlisle was trying to make a case against capital punishment at the time, the consequence decided on was the loss of his hands." Alexander gestured to the picture. "As you can see, he's had some prosthetics made, but they have limited function and will never come anywhere close to the strength or agility of his own."

Bella and Edward exchanged looks. They knew exactly what he was leaving out, but the Council had decided that their little extra abilities didn't need to be shared with humans just now, so the real repercussions of the loss of Aro's hands had to remain unexplained.

"A while back he managed to worm his way into North Korea and encourage the development of their nuclear program," he continued. "That was his second strike. For that, he lost his teeth. If there's a third, he'll forfeit his life. But because he *has* made attempts at gaining access to weapons of mass destruction, all countries with nuclear capabilities are asked to keep a member of the Price Coalition on staff."

Castillo's eyes widened and he stared at Beckett. "You have one of *them* working at the White House?"

"Oh, sure. Tanya's wonderful. She's willing to stay on, if you want to keep her, and she gets my enthusiastic endorsement."

"She's got a thing for human men, though," Edward said, "so watch your back."

"She'll be perfectly professional," Alexander said with a sharp look at Edward. "And she does enjoy the position, so it's not a bad option. But really, nearly anyone you meet tonight is an acceptable

choice, if you can convince them to take up the post. Just don't ask Tia, Benjamin, Minh, Prokopios, or Celena. And Carlisle would definitely say no."

"Which one was Minh again?" Castillo asked, consulting his tablet.

"My grandmother." Xiaodan rose, collecting the dishes that had been set aside. "She's the senior shape-shifter on the Council."

"That's right. So, if she's your grandmother . . ."

"She's a dragon too," she said with a smile.

"How many of . . . you . . . will be there?"

"Grandmother and I are the only dragons coming today, but there will be plenty of shifters. You ought to see how big those Quileute wolves are." She winked at him.

"And this is safe?"

Oscar passed the last of the dishes to Xiaodan. "Long as you don't flirt with anybody's wife."

Xiaodan giggled as she steered the cart away from the table.

"There's really nothing to worry about," Alexander assured him. "You'll be there as honored guests, and Carlisle is a very good host. We won't let you get yourselves into too much trouble."

"Is that the same airstrip we flew into last time?" President Beckett asked, peering out the window nearest her.

"It looks nice, doesn't it? We've done a little work out there."

"You put in new lights."

"Some of the shifters don't have great night vision. We figured we ought to make it usable for everyone."

Xiaodan reappeared and settled into a seat just as the plane started to descend. He reviewed a few of the highlights in their last minutes, reminding Castillo and Nivens who the key figures were and brushing over the points of etiquette again. Once on the ground, though, he tapped the power button and slid the tablet back into his inside pocket.

"That's it. The hard work is over. Let's go have some fun."

The whole crowd disembarked and loaded into a pair of SUVs waiting at the hangar. Xiaodan took the wheel of one, and Alexander herded the visiting dignitaries inside, finally climbing in beside his wife. Rosalie took the lead in the other car, and Xiaodan fell in behind her.

"It sure is pretty here with all the snow," Logan murmured, gazing out at the scenery.

"It's my favorite time of year," Alexander agreed.

"Mine too," Bella said from the other car. "You should have seen it up at the cabin—"

"Mom!" Alexander said, clamping his hands over his ears. He glared at her through the rear window of her SUV. "I do *not* want to hear about what you two were doing at that cabin."

"Really good hearing," Xiaodan explained to the confused-looking dignitaries.

"If you would just listen," Bella continued from the other car, "you might learn something—"

"Stop! That's not even right."

Bella pulled a face at him through the rear window, and he couldn't help but laugh.

It wasn't long before they were turning onto the drive that led to the cluster of houses that the Cullens kept outside of Forks. They would be crossing a bridge and heading beyond the houses to a large lodge tucked deep into the trees. But before they even reached the bridge, Xiaodan nudged Alexander and pointed.

"How come everyone's still at the old house?"

Alexander looked, taking in the cluster of cars parked at the house that had been abandoned shortly after he had come to live there.

"Maybe they walked up to the lodge?"

"In the snow and the mud? Alice would have their heads if they showed up in dirty clothes."

Edward let out a loud laugh from the car in front of them. "Mei Zhen went into labor!"

Xiaodan's eyes lit up. "Really! Oh! We have to take a detour!"

Rosalie was already turning off to park in front of the house, and Xiaodan followed.

"What's going on?" President Beckett asked.

"Uh . . . okay, so one of the Quileute wolves is married to one of the Chinese rats, and they're having a baby. Like, right now."

"It's their first girl," Xiaodan explained. "Which is important because the Quileutes pass the shifting through the male line, but we Chinese pass it through the female line. So all three of their boys can shift into wolves, but this will be the first one to go rat."

"Mei Zhen's a member of the only active rat line that we know of," Alexander said, opening the door as Xiaodan turned off the car. "So this is sort of a preservation of heritage, too. It's a big deal for us."

"So . . . we're going in there?" Castillo asked. "We're not intruding?"

"They're upstairs in a bedroom," Edward said, hopping out of the other truck. "Everyone else is gathered downstairs."

Alexander sighed. "So much for protocol. I guess we'll just take it as it comes. Come on." He beckoned for them to follow and headed for the house.

"Hey, old man!" Edward called up the stairs as he entered. "You guys need any help up there?"

Carlisle didn't raise his voice, but the sound drifted down to them easily enough. "That's all right. Embry and I have it well in hand."

"Okay." He clapped his hands together and looked around and the family and friends mingling around in the living room. All of the extensive Cullen family were present except for Alice, as well as the Denalis, minus Tanya. There were also at least two dozen Quileutes scattered around the room. "We ought to get this party started right here. I'm going to call up to Alice and have her bring us some food."

"Yes! Please tell me she made those little things with the chevre and pine nuts," Alexander said.

"How would I know? I haven't been around." He raised his phone to his ear. "Alice, get your adorable self down here and bring food. Mei Zhen's having her baby."

There was a loud squeal on the other end of the line before it abruptly cut off.

Alexander laughed. "She ought to be here soon, but for now, let me start the introductions. He glanced around. "The Council isn't here?"

"They went out to buy baby gifts," Charlie said, making his way through the busy living room toward them. He held his arms open and Alexander smiled, letting himself be enveloped in a hug.

"Hey, Grandpa Charlie. It's great to see you."

"You too, kid." He released him and fished in the pocket of his white dinner jacket, drawing out a little gold-wrapped candy.

Alexander snickered and took it, tucking it into the pocket of his vest. "You've done your familial duty. Here, come meet our president-elect."

Charlie greeted Castillo and Nivens, and shook hands with the people he'd met before.

Castillo cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable. "You'll tell me if I'm being rude? But I have to ask . . ."

"Shoot," Charlie said, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets.

"Everyone I've met so far—all of the . . . the vampires, anyway—they look so young. But you . . . well, I can tell by your eyes that you're a vampire, right?"

"Aren't all vampires young?" Charlie asked with a soft laugh. "Nah. I mean, you have a point. A *lot* of these folks look like they'd have to have a fake ID to get into a bar."

"Why do you look—uh, different?"

"I was older when I got bitten. They offered before, but I wasn't going to do any of this nonsense. I was happy living my life and then letting it go."

"What changed?"

"I retired." He grimaced. "It took me about a week to decide that sitting around waiting to die wasn't going to work out for me."

"But normally people get bitten when they're young?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I mean, there are plenty of exceptions. Over there, that's Mike. He wasn't going to change any time soon either, but then he went out rock climbing when he was, what, forty-something?"

Alexander nodded.

"He took a bad fall, and it was either lose his legs or change. So he went for it."

"I think Carlisle has a soft spot for the younger ones," Bella said, moving up beside her father and giving him a squeeze. "He feels bad for them if they haven't had a chance to live their lives. That's probably why most of our family looks so young."

"You'll see more of a mix when the Council gets back," Alexander promised.

There was a tap on his shoulder, and before he could even look back, Kyra's scent hit him. He spun around and grabbed her, crushing her to his chest in a hard hug.

"Kyra!" he cried, giving her a hard shake from side to side before dropping her back onto her high-heeled shoes. "Aw, you look so stylish. Did you finally learn to dress yourself?"

She slugged him in the shoulder. "Shut up."

He wrapped an arm around her and pulled her against his side, swinging her around to meet Castillo and Nivens.

"This is Kyra," he said, grinning down at her. "Biologically, she's my niece. If you follow adoptive lines, she's my cousin. But we grew up together, so she's really more like my sister."

Kyra exchanged greetings with them before Alexander claimed her attention again.

"You're looking more pale and sickly than usual. Don't your handlers ever let you go outside?"

She rolled her eyes. "You're just jealous because I actually use my brain when I work."

"Jealous? I get to talk about myself all the time. How is that not better than *any* other job?"

"Hey," Edward interrupted, leaning toward Kyra. "What's going on?"

"Nothing!" She clapped her hands over her eyes as though that could somehow protect her from him. "Leave me alone! Nothing's happening! Hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, boron, carbon —"

"Okay, okay, stop reciting elements. I won't ask what it is you're trying so hard to keep secret."

"Nothing!" she yelped again and darted away from him.

Edward quirked an eyebrow at Bella, and she shrugged.

"Come on, let's go see if we can find something else to wear. We're underdressed."

Alexander made a few more introductions before a catering truck pulled up outside and Alice breezed into the house holding trays of hors d'oevres. She placed them around the room, then went back to the truck and emerged again with a carafe of Irish coffee that she began dispensing into crystal mugs for all the non-vampires.

Food and drink always helped humans relax, and both Castillo and Nivens seemed grateful to have something to do with their hands. They nibbled food and sipped coffee while they got to know some of the world's most influential vampires and shape-shifters.

At regular intervals, Embry appeared at the top of the stairs to keep them apprised of Mei Zhen's progress. Alice took one look at the flimsy cloth gown and rubber gloves that had been thrown on over his Italian suit and groaned. No one else was at all concerned about his clothes, however, and her complaint went unacknowledged.

About a half an hour after Alexander had arrived, a parade of motorcycles sped up to the house and parked in orderly rows. A large SUV followed, and some of the leather-clad riders headed toward it, while others made a beeline for the house. The door burst open and Tia whipped off her helmet, striding across the room to where Alexander and their newest guests chatted with Garrett and Irina.

"Sweetie, I'm *so* sorry," she said. "We meant to be back before you got here, but there was weather and traffic . . ." She gave a dismissive wave of her hand and pulled him close, planting a kiss on his cheek. "Introduce me to our new friends so I can apologize properly."

"With pleasure. Tia, Benjamin," he nodded to the man who hurried up behind Tia, "this is our President-Elect, Nestor, and his national security director, Marla."

"It's an honor to meet you," she said, "though I'm not acting like it, am I? Forgive my tardiness and my clothes. We're just so excited about this baby—did Alexander explain why?—and we couldn't let the occasion pass without gifts."

Behind her, other council members were carting in brightly-wrapped packages and pretty gift bags, stacking them all on the dining room table. Two of them began hanging a string of letters, the last word clearly cobbled together from multiple strands, that now spelled out: "IT'S A RAT!"

"Not to worry," Castillo said. "I'm happy to be flexible for something like this."

"You're a darling." She gave his cheek an affectionate pat. "If you'll excuse us for two shakes of a werewolf's tail, we'll all run up and change into something that will make Alice stop scowling at us. And then you and I really have to chat about the sustainability of your energy policies. Be right back." She breezed up the stairs with the rest of the Council in her wake, and Alexander grinned after them.

"Brace yourself. She's not going to go easy on you."

"That's Tanya," President Beckett told Castillo, pointing to the woman trailing behind the others, moving at a deliberately human pace.

At the mention of her name, she turned and waved, but continued up the stairs.

Castillo gaped at her. "Wow."

"Yep. You should see how thorough and succinct her briefs are. She's got a knack for zeroing in on the key points and explaining them as economically as possible."

"I'll consider her," he said, trying to sound steady, but Alexander could tell that he, like many before him, had been caught off-guard by Tanya's intensely attractive presence.

Tia was back again in less than a minute, dressed in Givenchy and leading an aging Chinese woman, a stocky, sharp-featured man who looked middle-aged, and a dark-haired woman who seemed a few years older than the man.

"Thanks for your patience," she said to Castillo and Nivens. "This is Minh, the senior shape-shifter delegate."

They shook hands and exchanged greetings.

"And this is Prokopios and his wife Celena, our werewolf representatives."

They said their hellos, and then Tia jumped without preamble into an argument against heavy reliance on fossil fuels. Castillo challenged a few of her points, but to his credit he really seemed to be listening to her ideas. And he was quick to acknowledge that she had a vested interest in the health of the planet.

Nivens, for her part, struck up a conversation with Jasper and Celena about intelligence-gathering. They passed another hour before Carlisle's quiet instructions to Mei Zhen brought conversation to a halt.

"She's ready," Alexander explained to those without enhanced hearing. "The baby should be coming soon."

While the vampires followed the progress of the events upstairs, the humans drifted together in the living room. Castillo gave his impressions so far and listened as Oscar described his previous encounters with the Coalition. Alexander lingered near them in case he was needed, but gave them enough space that they felt like they had a measure of privacy.

It wasn't long before a full-throated squawk rang out from upstairs, and the whole room erupted into cheers. The baby cried harder, and Embry's voice drifted down from above.

"Hey, you guys wanna cool it down there? You're scaring my daughter."

Laughter followed, but the volume was restrained.

There was a flurry of activity upstairs, and several minutes later, Embry appeared at the top of the stairs again, flanked by Carlisle and Esme and cradling a little blanketed bundle in his arms. Two tall, broad-shouldered men and one adolescent loped up the stairs to crowd around them, peering down at the baby.

"Those are her brothers," Alexander explained to his guests.

"Her face is all scrunched!" the youngest boy called out. "She looks a little like a rat already."

One of his brothers shoved him.

"You boys get out of the way," Embry laughed, pushing past them and descending halfway down the stairs. He propped the baby up against his shoulder so everyone could see her, looking as proud as a papa ever had.

"Everyone, meet my daughter Xi You."

A round of applause broke out, and the baby let out a wail of protest.

"Jeez, you guys, are you trying to traumatize her?" Embry chided in mock severity. He tucked her against his chest and bounced her lightly, murmuring soothing words.

Carlisle chuckled and he and Esme moved down the stairs. "Why don't you all go spend some time with Mei Zhen? You can meet us out at the lodge when she's ready to rest. Alice, sweetheart, go ahead and dismiss the caterers."

They all moved to follow his directions, and Carlisle and Esme descended the stairs to where the human guests waited. Oddly, Alexander noticed, they were both wearing brown contact lenses. They'd never done that for a political visit before, and he wasn't quite sure why they would do it now. They must have known Alexander would have briefed their visitors on their history and feeding habits.

Carlisle greeted President Beckett with enthusiastic kisses to each cheek, then dispensed hugs and pats on the back to Logan and Oscar. Once his old friends had been welcomed, he turned to Castillo and greeted him without waiting for Alexander to make the introductions.

"We've thoroughly botched things so far, but I think we can still save the afternoon. It's an honor to meet you. I'm Carlisle, and this is my wife Esme. How was your flight?"

"Enlightening," Castillo said, and Nivens added, "Disturbingly so."

"It's horrible, isn't it?" he asked her with a grimace. "Dumping all of that information on you at once. Alexander presents it well, but I'm not sure any amount of finesse can really make it easier to take."

She seemed surprised by his sympathy, and tried to shrug it off. "It can't be any harder than finding out that vampires exist because you've suddenly become one."

Esme laughed. "A hard pill to swallow, for sure. Have you had something to eat?" When they nodded, she continued, "Good. We've got a meal prepared up at the lodge, but we have to wait until the caterers clear out."

"Should be just a few minutes," Carlisle added. He continued to make small talk in that charming, engaging way of his, and by the time they heard the catering trucks roll past the house, Castillo and Nivens were as enamored of him as everyone else.

He offered his arm to Nivens and jerked his head toward the door. "May I take you up to the banquet?"

When she agreed, Esme took Castillo's arm, already maneuvering him after them. "As my husband is clearly already spoken for, perhaps you'd let me claim you as my escort?"

Alexander and Xiaodan looked after Beckett and her staff, and with minimal shuffling they were all loading into cars and SUVs and taking their places in a caravan headed across the river. Alexander found himself seated next to Fred, and he elbowed him gently in the ribs.

"Didn't notice you, there."

Fred smirked and nodded a greeting to the dignitaries, but said nothing—which was about what Alexander expected from him. Fred was interesting and personable one-on-one, but he was as extreme an introvert as Alexander had ever met. Socializing wasn't exactly his specialty.

The SUV skidded a little, and Oscar clutched the shoulder strap of his seatbelt. "Is this thing going to make it up the hill?"

"If not, we'll hop out and ride Xiaodan up," Alexander said with a cheerful grin.

Oscar shuddered. "I suppose there are benefits to having a dragon around."

They rounded a bend and the enormous stone-and-timber lodge came into view. It was three stories tall, with steeply gabled roofs and a rounded banquet hall sporting the large glass windows that Esme favored. Outside the atrium, several ice sculptures had been placed where they could be viewed through the windows, and inside the tables were laid with white silk. Profuse arrangements of red flowers added color to the room, and elaborate place settings glittered beneath elegant crystal chandeliers.

"I *need* the name of your event planner," Beckett murmured.

Alexander smiled. "That's all Alice. And you can't have her; she's spoken for."

The parking lot had been cleared and salted, and they made their way into the building without difficulty. Alexander led his party to the long head table, where place cards directed their seating. Carlisle and Esme were in the center, with Castillo, Nivens, Xiaodan, and Alexander on one side, and Beckett, Logan, and Oscar on the other. A place had been laid for Oscar's wife, but the setting had been removed and replaced with a small white gift box tied with red ribbon. He eyed it curiously and glanced at Alexander.

"I'm sure Alice wanted to acknowledge her, even though she couldn't make it," Alexander said.

"Did you phone ahead and tell her Vivian wasn't coming?"

"I did," Xiaodan lied.

The explanation satisfied him, and they all took their seats. It was another couple of minutes before everyone had found their places at the round tables laid out for everyone else, but once the crowd was settled, Rosalie, Emmett, Kyra, and Jasper started delivering plates of food to those who would be eating.

Bella stood to help them, but Carlisle murmured her name and gave her a little shake of his head.

"They've got this," he said quietly.

She looked confused, but sat down again.

"Carlisle, what's going on?" Edward asked.

He only smiled.

"Are you ever going to tell me?"

"Patience, Edward. You'll find out when everyone else does."

He huffed.

Alice brought the food to the head table, hurriedly laying plates out in front of each person.

"Hey, Alice," Alexander said, catching her arm as she started to move away. "Did you make those goat cheese pine nut things?"

She gave him a perplexed look. "The ones we had when President Beckett first came?"

"Yeah."

The furrows in her brow deepened. "Alexander, do you have any idea how many foods there are in the world? And how many different ways there are to prepare them? Why would I *ever* make anything twice?" She extracted her arm from his grasp and headed back to the kitchen.

"Because it's delicious?" he called after her. He shook his head, turning back to his tablemates. "That woman does not understand food."

He expected the makeshift wait staff to take their seats once the food had been delivered. To his surprise, though, they disappeared into the kitchen and didn't come out again.

"Are they coming back?" he asked Carlisle, reluctant to begin eating without everyone settled.

"Soon. Please, enjoy your meal. I think they'll need just a few minutes."

Alexander couldn't imagine what they could possibly need a few minutes for, but he cut himself a tender piece of the dressed duck on the table in front of him and explored the dish that Alice and the caterers had put together.

"She understands food well enough for me," Castillo said, having tasted the duck.

Alexander turned his attention to dinner and conversation, but after a couple of minutes the kitchen doors opened again. Several vampires had already jumped to their feet before the scent of blood reached Alexander, but it drove him out of his chair as well. Beside him, Xioadan spun out of her seat, and with a burst of heat and the sound of tearing fabric, she phased. She let out a warning snarl, hovering over the humans at the table, as Alice and her wait staff calmly strolled out of the kitchen with trays of wine glasses filled with blood.

Alexander's head whipped around to stare at Carlisle, who was watching the proceedings calmly.

"Right your chairs, please, my friends," he said. "Take your seats."

Exposing vampires to blood in the presence of humans was inexcusably reckless, and Alexander rounded on Carlisle. "*What are you doing?*"

"Sit, please," he said. "As they're doing."

Alexander looked around at the vampires who were, incomprehensibly, actually sitting back down. No one lunged for the glasses of blood. No one went after the fresher sources. They all looked wary, but they sat where they were, eyeing the glasses of—it *had* to be blood—that Alexander's aunts and uncles were passing around.

It took them multiple trips. They placed three glasses in front of each blood drinker, including the half-vampires, and a few people were bold enough to lean forward and sniff the contents. Alexander did the same. They each smelled a little different, but the distinct commonality couldn't be denied. He couldn't understand why the delicious scents from the glasses weren't sending half the room into a frenzy.

Once the glasses were delivered and everyone was seated, Carlisle asked calmly, "Alexander, what do you smell?"

"Blood."

"What kind?"

He sniffed again. "Human."

"Are you sure?"

He stared at the glasses, and then at all his friends. "No?"

Carlisle smiled. "Tia, what do you think? Does it smell appetizing?"

"God, yes."

"How do you feel?"

She looked at the glasses in front of her, and then back up at Carlisle. "Impatient. What is this?"

"Friends, what you have in front of you is synthetic blood."

Alexander dropped his fork.

"It consists primarily of cloned human blood cells, with supplementary materials from various animals that have been genetically engineered to mimic human cells. And, of course, some chemical preservatives. The thrombocytes have been left out, which takes care of the clotting problem and also seems to account for why the finished product in front of you doesn't make you lose your head."

Edward raised his eyes to Carlisle's. "Thrombocytes are what send us into a feeding frenzy?"

"Apparently."

He gaped at him. "How long have you been working on this?"

"I haven't. Kyra, do you want to tell everyone about your project?"

Kyra stood, shooting a hesitant glance toward Bella, then studiously avoiding her gaze.

"Uh. Well. A few months ago, my, um . . . my grandfather wrote and told me about a project he was working on.

The scraping sound of Bella's chair pushing back seemed ominously loud.

"Your grandfather?"

Kyra licked her lips, still not looking at Bella. "He, um. He was experimenting with the different properties of blood, and he wanted me to come help him set up some blind studies.

"Tell me," Bella growled, "that you're not actually talking about Joham."

Her hands curled into fists and she squeezed her eyes shut. "I'm talking about Joham."

"And . . . you told him to take his experiments and shove them up his ass. Right?"

She shook her head.

"Bella, back off," Emmett said.

"Back off?" She shoved to her feet. "Are you *kidding* me? You sent your daughter off to work with that *fucking piece of shit*?"

"What are we, stupid?" Rosalie snapped. "Of course we didn't send her off. We went with her."

"TO WORK WITH JOHAM?"

"Bella, sit down," Carlisle said quietly.

She rounded on him. "You don't get to tell me to sit down, Carlisle. Not this time. You said he wouldn't be welcome here again—"

"He wasn't. And he won't be. It was Kyra's choice to accept his invitation."

Kyra turned a pleading look on Bella. "I'm not saying he's a good guy. He's—he's really, really creepy, actually. But he was doing compelling work and I didn't think we should ignore it just because he was the one doing it."

"How could you—"

"Bella, you're starting to piss me off," Rosalie said. "She's a scientist. She wanted to do the project. That doesn't have anything to do with you."

"You let her be with *him!* Do you really think that was a healthy experience?"

Rosalie's eyes narrowed. "Question my parenting again and I will rip that pretty hair right out of your head."

"Okay, that's enough." Edward jumped up and pulled Bella back down with him, tugging her onto his lap. "It's done, Bella. She's back, she's fine, and we're moving on."

"We did good work," Kyra said, stiffening her spine. She pointed to the glasses on the table. "We did *that*."

"Which you should all taste before it gets cold," Carlisle said. "If you'd like, of course." He glanced at Bella. "I understand a reluctance to drink, especially given the source."

"How do you know he hasn't put something toxic in there?" Bella demanded.

Carlisle smiled sadly. "Esme and I have been drinking it for four months."

Her jaw dropped. "Are you *crazy*? He hates you!"

"I couldn't have someone else testing it, could I? And Esme refused to let me take the risk unless she did as well."

"We were watching them," Jasper said. "Alice and me. If we'd seen evidence of poisoning, we'd have known the source. You think Joham was willing to give up his life for the sake of revenge?"

"This is why you sent us off to Colorado," Edward said, turning a suspicious look on Carlisle. "Birthday present, my ass. You gave us that cabin to get us out of here."

One corner of his mouth quirked up.

"I'm not touching it," Bella said, crossing her arms over her chest.

"That's all right," Carlisle murmured, his voice soft and soothing. "You probably don't need it. After all, you've always had remarkably good control. But Bella, think about what this could mean for us. How many vampires do you know of that have been willing or able to maintain an animal diet?"

She pressed her lips together.

"Decades ago, we took a moment to consider what it would be like if vampires didn't have to prey on humans. If we could come forward as friends and neighbors, and not as killers. This could be the key that opens that door."

She shook her head, her lip quivering. "Not this way. Not from him."

"It isn't right," Carlisle agreed. "And frankly, I wouldn't trust him to maintain production of an uncontaminated product. So I bought him out."

Her brow furrowed.

"I paid him enough money that he could build a lab and start work on other things. He was rambling something about marine animals that I hadn't the patience to attend, but he has relinquished all control over this operation to Kyra. She made the product in front of you now."

Bella softened and eyed the glasses in front of her. "It does smell really good."

"*It is* really good," Kyra said, encouraged. "I only have a small set of blood cells to work from, so there's not a lot of variety in those flavors, but I've been tweaking the taste with the kinds of animal blood I'm adding in. I call the one on the left Predator, the middle one is Amazon, and the last is Raptor."

Alexander picked up the Raptor, and everyone's eyes turned to him at the movement. He raised it to his nose, sniffed, and then sipped from the glass. "Damn," he breathed, conscious of the scrutiny he was under. "I haven't tasted anything like that in a *long* time."

Kyra smiled tentatively. "You like it?"

"It's amazing. Mom." He raised expectant eyebrows at her.

"Ugh. Fine." She snatched up a glass and sipped. "Ohhh . . . holy mother . . . I'd almost forgotten what that tasted like."

Bella's approval seemed to give everyone permission, and they started sipping at their glasses and comparing flavors. A buzz of conversation rose up around them, and behind Alexander, Xiaodan settled down onto the floor. She looked more relaxed, but Alexander could tell by the twitch of her tail that she was still keeping a close watch on the proceedings.

Bella stood up and moved to Kyra, who was still standing beside her chair. Rosalie took a deliberate step toward them, but Bella just made a face at her and pulled Kyra into a hug. They embraced for several long seconds, then Bella pushed her back, holding her at arm's length.

"I hate him so much," she said flatly.

Kyra nodded, her eyes welling up. "Me too. He's awful."

"But I love you so much *more*. And I'm sorry if I took my feelings for him out on you."

Kyra threw her arms around her again.

"This is really amazing," Bella murmured, rocking her from side to side. "I can't believe what you've done."

Castillo caught Alexander's eye. "This is big, isn't it?"

"I think so. Carlisle, is this really what I think it is?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Not yet. We're trying to bring down the cost of production, and meanwhile I have no idea how to manage distribution. We're looking at worldwide temperature-controlled transportation and storage of a product that has a shelf life of about six weeks. And do we sell it for legal currency? Would that encourage vampires to participate in their local economies, or would they simply steal what money they wanted? And if we don't sell it, do we give it away? Can we get production costs low enough that I can sustain that kind of expense? There are a lot of logistical questions that are still unanswered, but think of the potential." He smiled, his eyes widening in wonder. "I drink a six-ounce bottle, twice a day. I don't have to plan my residences around access to wildlife anymore. If we went public, I could carry my lunch to work with me, or take meals with my friends. I could go out for a drink after work. This could normalize our lives."

Conversation died down as people listened to his conjectures.

"It's more satisfying than animal blood," Esme said, "Not to mention more pleasant to the palate. And I find I have an easier time being around exposed natural blood since I've been drinking it."

"My focus may have slipped by a small margin," Carlisle admitted. "My reflexes are essentially the same so far."

"Oh," Esme said, "and there is this one interesting little side effect." She glanced around to make sure that she had the attention of the room before reaching up to take the brown contact lense out of her eye. She blinked a couple of times, then opened her eye wide so everyone could see.

Her eye was brown. The lens, in fact, was colorless. What Alexander had taken to be a brown contact lense had simply been a clear lense over the top of her own eyes.

"Holy shit," Edward breathed.

Esme smirked. "Carlisle, if we put out a swear jar we could probably fund the production without straining ourselves."

He chuckled, removing his own lenses.

"Wait," Edward said. "Does the blood give you brown eyes, or does it give you back the eye color you had as a human?"

Carlisle and Esme exchanged glances and shrugged. "We both had brown eyes as humans, so we really don't know. It would help if we had, say, a formerly green-eyed vampire to experiment on."

Edward made a show of draining one of his glasses. "I'm in."

All around them, vampires were sipping their glasses of blood while humans and shape-shifters consumed their food. Alexander split his appetite between the two, having a little of each to round out his meal. Then, when dinner was out of the way and everyone was still chattering about the new breakthrough in their diet, a group of shifters broke away and headed over to the piano and string ensemble set up near the kitchen. They started playing a lively piece, and Carlisle stood, offering his hand to President Beckett.

"My dear friend, would you honor me with a dance?"

Several of Alexander's friends and family followed his lead, asking their visitors to join them on the dance floor.

"Xiaodan," Sam called out to her, "why don't you run back home and get a change of clothes? We'll keep an eye on things here."

She let out a little rumble of acknowledgment and carefully made her way around the tables to the kitchen doors. Alexander watched as she headed toward the service entrance, but his attention was claimed when he heard his mother sigh.

"You never call," she said in a self-pitying tone. "You never write. The least you could do is dance with your mother."

He snorted, heading in her direction. "I write you at least once a week. And I'd call, too, if you were ever in range of a cell tower." He grabbed her hand and tugged her out onto the dance floor, twirling her into position.

"But you never visit," she said with a pout.

"I'm here now, aren't I?"

"And you're leaving again tonight."

"Uh . . . yeah."

"So when are you coming back for a proper visit?"

"Hm. Good question. We've got Bilderberg in Belgium next week, and after that we should really check in on India and Pakistan. But if that's going smoothly, maybe we can come home for a couple of weeks afterward."

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Your visit is dependant on smooth relations between India and Pakistan?"

"Hey, they're making some real progress."

"Right. But, really, don't let your schedule get too busy for your family. I still need you more than anyone else does."

"You're so clingy," he complained, poking her playfully in the stomach.

She giggled and batted his hand away.

"Okay, I promise. If we can't get back after India and Pakistan, we'll definitely stop in for a week before Xiaodan's thing in Cape Town."

"That's what I like to hear!"

He spun her, dipped her, and pulled her back to him again. "What do you think of this synthetic blood thing? Is it everything Carlisle hopes it will be?"

"Oh, I don't know." She was trying to sound breezy, but Alexander could detect a hint of resignation in her voice. "If he can figure out the whole distribution thing—"

"You know he's going to."

"Okay, *when* he figures out distribution, there's still the Council to consider. Maybe they won't want vampires going public. Maybe vampires themselves won't want to. Everyone seems pretty comfortable the way things are."

"Maybe, but it's hard to stop the march of progress. If the possibility is there . . ."

She nodded slowly. "And after all, we've kind of laid the groundwork. The Council is already recognized by most world States. That would be important if we went public."

"Really? You don't think the Council would be dissolved and we'd just be subject to our respective nations' laws?"

"Impossible. Law and order is necessarily different for vampires and humans."

"So Tia gets to keep her job, but maybe I'm out of one."

She shook her head. "You're the intercessor between humans and vampires. We'll need you more than ever."

"Maybe. Assuming, of course that anything actually happens."

She watched Carlisle for a moment, her expression thoughtful. "No, I think you're right about this. I think it's the beginning of something. I'm just not sure whether to be excited or afraid."

Edward danced over to them, abandoning his partner for just a moment so he could wrap his family up in his arms.

"Whatever happens, we're going to see it through together," he said.

Bella smiled as he released them and returned to his partner. She drew in a deep breath and smiled, turning back to Alexander.

"I suddenly feel very optimistic," she told him.

Alexander smiled as Xiaodan re-entered through the kitchen, dressed in an embroidered red qipao. "I mean, what's the worst that could happen? We have dragons on our side."

Bella followed his line of sight and let out a low whistle.

"Your wife looks hot. You'd better go dance with her."

"What, and abandon my poor, longsuffering mother?"

She grinned, dancing them toward Xiaodan and spinning them together. "Your poor, longsuffering mother will be satisfied if you can keep India and Pakistan in line."

"So, no pressure, right?" Xiaodan smiled.

Alexander twirled her away and leaned in to nip lightly at her ear. "Honey, you look good enough to eat."

"Oh, dear. My husband has developed a taste for blood."

He laughed softly, nuzzling her neck where it met the high collar of her dress. "Maybe we should slip away and make use of one of those guest rooms upstairs."

"We might have company if we do." She inclined her head toward Charlie, who was dancing closer to Nivens than was strictly necessary.

He grinned. "You know, it's a lot easier to make allies when they're single. How do you suppose Nestor's making out?"

They both scanned the room until they found him sitting at a table, leaning close to Tanya. It looked like a cozy situation, until Alexander zeroed in on the conversation. It sounded more like a job interview than a social call.

"Oh, no," he said. "Someone get that man a glass of wine, stat."

Xiaodan gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Oh, let him work. He was anxious about having a vampire in the White House. Hopefully Tanya can put him at ease."

"I know some more interesting ways to put an attractive single man at ease."

"They might have to work together after today. One night of ease may not be worth four years of awkwardness."

Tanya's hand slid to Castillo's knee, and he stumbled over the question he was asking.

Alexander snorted. "Or maybe it is."

"That woman ought to give master classes."

"As though you needed help in the art of seduction." He pulled Xiaodan closer, running a hand up the curve of her waist. "This dress is its own master class."

She laid her head against his chest. "Things might be heading in a hectic direction, what with this synthetic blood business."

"Not for a while. We have some time before Carlisle figures out all the details."

"You know what happens when a minority group tries to integrate into a larger society?"

"It could be rocky."

"It could be worse than rocky. Prejudice. Hate. Propaganda from both sides. How do we fight that?"

His eyes sought out his adoptive father, and a reminiscent smile touched his lips. "There's something Edward used to ask me when I came across a difficult question."

"What's that?"

"What would Carlisle do?"

She paused, considering the question. "In this case, I think he'd probably give Job a run for his money in the patience department."

"I think he would, too. He'd take the abuse and try to shake it off as well as he could. Wait for attitudes to change."

"We're not all Carlisle," she pointed out.

"If we want integration, we might have to be. And the good news is, if we can keep governments from bombing everyone, vampires and shifters have the luxury of waiting a long time for attitudes to change."

"I suppose. There are going to be some painful years, though. I'm afraid Joham has given us a rather dubious gift."

"I think you're right. But." he swung her around, dipped her, and then pulled her up hard against him. "That can all wait for tomorrow. Today, I want to eat good food, dance to good music, and feel up my pretty wife."

She laughed and kissed him, and it was hard not to feel like their future would be bright as long as they spent it together.

There's been a lot of talk about the end of this fic lately, so since I'm not super active in responding these days, I figured I'd throw up a note.

Then ending of this fic pisses people off. That's fair. I was pissed off when I wrote it. I was coming off of reading Missoula and watching The Hunting Ground, and I was (am) still in therapy to deal with my own experiences. And right about the time I was writing this fic, an athlete from Stanford raped a girl, there were witnesses, and no one with the power to do anything about it gave a single shit.

It would have been satisfying to write a horrible retribution scene for Joham. I did, in fact. Twice. Neither one made it into the story because the lie felt too big to tell. You want to have a conversation about the number of sexual assault survivors who actually get justice for what happened? It's SO small, and I felt like writing that into the fic ignored the experiences of way too many people. This is what it looks like when a violent crime is committed against you and the perpetrator gets a pass. This is what it looks like for most of us.

I would be happy to rewrite this ending when the alternative is even marginally believable.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!