



AB Negative

a Twilight fan fiction by ooza

Since making their species known, vampires have been met with varying degrees of acceptance. Bella just wants to meet one. When Edward opens up to her, their relationship takes a turn neither expected. But there are unknown dangers in a world where humans and vampires struggle to coexist, and it isn't always clear who the enemy is.

Edward/Bella, Alternate Universe, Rated M

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<http://www.gardenofsin.net/>

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Prologue

EDWARD STORMED FROM HIS HOUSE, phone to ear. He seethed with each ring that went unanswered. When the call dropped to voicemail, he hung up and dialed again.

“Officer Swan,” the familiar voice finally answered.

“How could you?” Edward spat.

“Excuse me?”

The defensiveness in Charlie’s voice set Edward even more on edge. He tightened the grip on his phone, causing the case to crack.

“Is a future with me so terrible that you’d rather eradicate my family?”

“Edward?”

“She’s your daughter for Christ’s sake!”

There was a long pause, followed by Charlie’s anxious voice. “What about my daughter? Edward—”

“You got what you wanted, Charlie. I hope you’re happy.”

DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT VAMPIRES

Stock in wood products has gone through the roof. Grocery stores can't keep garlic on their shelves. But before you run out and spend a fortune on an overpriced homemade vampire slaying kit, there are a few things you should know.

By Vanessa Wolfe, *Seattle Independent Journal*

Posted June 20

Since the existence of vampires was confirmed earlier this year, the world has been in an uproar. Many people are stockpiling supplies for what they believe will be the next world war. There are currently thousands of vampire slaying kits on eBay and Craigslist, priced anywhere from \$100 to \$10,000. But don't start draining your retirement account just yet. There is no proof these items work. More importantly, should people consider using them?

The conventional methods of killing vampires are based on myths. Published reports on how to kill vampires have surfaced as of late, but so far none have been validated. The people selling vampire weapons and how-to guides are profiting from scare tactics. Even some churches are jumping on the bandwagon, selling holy water by the gallon. It may save your life if you find yourself in the middle of a drought, but don't rely on it to ward off vampires. If you want proof, look no further than Riley Biers, the first vampire in the region to go public with his true nature.

"I have been attending mass at St. Joseph Parish every Sunday for the past fifteen years," Biers said. "I've kept to myself because I like the area and the church, and I wanted to stay here as long as I could without anyone getting suspicious. Now that people know about our kind, I'd like to get more active in the community." He also adds, "I don't believe God has damned me. At least it doesn't feel that way."

Biers has been involved in one church or another throughout his entire existence. He has been a youth minister, a pastor, a volunteer, and even sung in various choirs. Biers celebrates his 435th birthday later this month.

If a churchgoing vampire isn't enough to persuade you to rethink your attitude toward the newly discovered species, perhaps it will at least open your eyes to the common misconception of what we believe to be the truth. If Biers can enter a church without bursting into flames, who knows what else will be proven false in the coming

months. We already know vampires can walk outside during the day. In fact, one of the most disconcerting things about vampires is how well they blend in among human society.

“You’d be surprised by how many of us there are in the world,” a local vampire who wishes to remain anonymous—we’ll call him Luke—said in an exclusive interview with *Seattle Independent Journal*. “Chances are you’ve already seen a vampire at some point of your life. You’ve probably even had a conversation with one of us. We were all humans once, and we’re not as different as you may believe.”

The simple truth of the matter is that we are different. There are surefire ways to distinguish a vampire from a human, but according to Luke, we’ll have to discover those on our own.

Go ahead and carry around a wooden stake if it makes you feel comfortable, but it probably won’t do you any good. Perhaps instead of starting wars with the immortals, we should be focusing on ways to live in peace.

Chapter One

WELCOME TO WASHINGTON. THE EVERGREEN STATE.

I SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED when the sun didn't greet me as I crossed the Washington state border. Ever since I left Phoenix yesterday morning, its intensity diminished with each mile traveled. The dreary sky loomed above me, matching my gloomy mood.

It wasn't that I didn't want to move here, to start a new school for my senior year and live with my dad, Charlie, whom I hadn't seen since I was 11 years old. Quite the opposite, actually. But it would take an adjustment period.

The temperature steadily dropped throughout the duration of my journey. It was currently 72 degrees. The rational part of me knew it was by no means cold, but it was over 100 degrees back home.

I had to remind myself this was home now.

Five hours later, I pulled into Charlie's driveway. I killed the engine, climbed out of my white Dodge Stratus, and stretched my stiff muscles. It'd been a long drive. Despite my mom's insistence to accompany me here, I decided to make

the trip alone. Charlie wasn't pleased about it either, but he let it go. When I'd talked to him a few months ago, I got the distinct impression he, under no circumstances, wanted to see my mom. If Charlie had it his way, I'd have flown in. From the looks of the ancient, decrepit "spare truck" parked on the side of the garage, driving my own vehicle had been a wise choice.

The two-bedroom house was the same one he'd purchased with my mom back when they were still married. I remembered what it looked like from my visits when I was younger, but I couldn't remember a time when it was ever my home.

"Bella!"

"Hey, Dad."

Charlie stepped out of the house as I struggled to get my suitcase out of the trunk. It was bursting at the seams with books and winter clothes—which would now be my summer clothes. He picked up the bag like it weighed nothing, probably a side effect of years spent in the police force.

"Good lord, Bella. What on earth is in this thing?"

"Oh, the usual. Drugs, alcohol, dead bodies . . ."

The look on Charlie's face said he clearly wasn't amused.

"I'm glad you made it in one piece."

I followed him into the house. It was strange, not having seen him in seven years. He looked exactly the same as I remembered. My mom always told me I was the female version of him, and I could see it now. I inherited his fair skin, brown eyes, and dark hair. There wasn't a streak of gray to be seen even though he was pushing 50. Unless he was sporting some Just for Men, he had some kick ass aging genes. I hoped he passed them along to me.

"The room's all ready for you," he said as we climbed the stairs to the second floor. "I . . . cleaned."

I looked around the small room, the same one I slept in when I used to visit for two weeks at a time during summer. It looked pretty much how I remembered it—worn wooden floor, light blue walls, lace curtains that had turned from white to yellow over the years. The twin bed and nightstand were the same, as was the rocking chair in the corner. The only new addition was a desk by the window—a perfect spot for my laptop.

“Thanks. It looks . . . clean.”

“Well . . .” Charlie shoved his hands in his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “You probably want to unwind after that drive. Will you be okay on your own for a few hours? I’m not working tonight, and I told my buddy Billy I’d stop by for a couple of beers.”

“Did you remember to install the cabinet locks so I don’t get into the chemicals under the sink?” When he didn’t seem to get the joke, I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. I’m pretty tired, actually.”

“You can come with me if you’d like,” he offered.

I had no interest in hanging out with a bunch of old men and being Charlie’s sober cab. I was kind of glad he was leaving. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to spend time with him, but we were practically strangers. Maybe things would be less awkward once we got to know each other better. If not, it was going to be a long summer.

“I’m good,” I assured him. “Can I get money for pizza or something?”

His thick mustache twitched as he pulled out his wallet and parted with a twenty. I wondered if he already regretted his decision to let me move in or if it would take a few months.

There were still a few small items I needed to collect from my car, so I followed Charlie back down the stairs and out the front door. I was halfway to my car when a loud bark echoed through the neighborhood. I turned around in

time to see a giant brown dog emerging from the woods and approaching at full speed.

“Wolf!” Charlie yelled from beside me.

A scream built in my chest as the canine barreled toward us, but before I could let it rip, Charlie sank to one knee and held out his arms. The dog skidded to a halt in front of him, wagging his entire back end with the enthusiasm of an overexcited puppy.

“Good boy, Wolfy! Good boy!” He praised him over and over again in the annoying tone reserved for dog owners.

I released a shaky breath. I had never been fond of dogs, especially large ones. “Dad? When did you get a dog?”

Charlie stopped petting the mutt and stood. He cleared his throat and brushed the fur from his hands. “Wolf’s not mine.” His gaze was pensive as he scanned the neighborhood. “Not sure who owns him. I called animal control once. He was back within the week. Someone takes good care of him. He’s not underfed, that’s for sure.”

“How do you know his name’s Wolf?”

“I don’t. But he looks like a wolf, and he always seems to answer to it. Don’t you boy?”

Wolf barked once in response.

“Well, I’m going to go, Bella. If you need anything—”

“Yeah, yeah. Call your cell. I got it.”

He looked like he was going to say something else. Perhaps a fatherly pep talk? Don’t get into trouble and all that business. Instead he nodded and headed to his police car. Wolf watched him get in and then turned his giant head toward me. I retrieved my purse and laptop from the car and returned to the house, closing the door behind me before Wolf got any crazy ideas to barge inside.

Charlie already had the comfort of knowing I was a good kid. My mom assured him of that when they agreed he would take me. For the most part I stayed out of trouble. I'd only gotten detention a few times. I might not be a stranger to alcohol, but I didn't partake in it frequently. With my dad being a cop, I had a feeling my days of illegal activities were over.

It didn't take me long to unpack. I hung all my clothes, completely took over the small bathroom with various haircare and makeup products, and ordered a pizza. By the time I finished eating, I was dead on my feet. Charlie still hadn't returned home. I changed into my pajamas, grabbed a book, and crawled into bed.

"I'll never understand how teenagers can sleep for twelve hours and still be crabby."

The accusation caused me to bristle even though Charlie was partially right. I was crabby, but he had no way of knowing. I hadn't even said anything yet. My mood had more to do with lack of sleep than an overabundance of it. The unfamiliar sounds of the house kept me up all night, and the bed was much smaller than I was used to. More than once I woke up because one of my limbs had fallen over the edge. Then the irrational fear of the monster under the bed had kept me awake for another ten minutes.

Besides, how would he know how long I slept? It wasn't like he was here when I went to bed.

Instead of saying what my sleep-muddled mind was thinking, I grunted and rummaged through the kitchen for breakfast. There were unopened gallons of milk and orange juice in the fridge, a full carton of eggs, ketchup and mustard,

lunch meat, and beer. I eyed Charlie over the refrigerator door. He might be single, but he was still a man. This was not the inventory of food I expected to find. Where were the hot dogs? The steaks? The month-old Tupperware containing a moldy mystery? It seemed the few things he did have were brand new.

Charlie held up the newspaper as if he were reading it, but I caught him watching me out of the corner of his eye. “I don’t know what kids eat these days.” He shrugged. “There’s cereal in the cupboard.”

“What do *you* eat?” I asked.

“I usually go out for a bite. It’s easier. My schedule is hectic, working overnights and all. When I buy food it always goes bad.”

Fair enough. I opted to skip breakfast for today. I’d make Charlie take me grocery shopping this afternoon. I poured a glass of orange juice and sat down next to him at the kitchen table. The newspaper was spread across the surface in various piles. I assumed there was some sort of rhyme or reason to the madness, but I didn’t care enough to ask.

“How was beer at Billy’s?”

Charlie pursed his lips. “Unfulfilling. How was . . . whatever it was you did all night?”

I shrugged. “Fine.”

An awkward silence set in. I was about to retreat to my room when a headline in the national section of the paper caught my eye.

DON’T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU’VE HEARD ABOUT VAMPIRES

I slid the paper in front of me and began reading the article. When I was finished, I looked up to see my dad’s watchful eyes. He looked away.

“What?” I asked.

“So . . . vampires.”

Apparently our first real conversation was going to revolve around current events.

“Crazy, huh? Who’d have thought?”

“Never thought I’d see anything like it in my time.”

“I saw one.”

Charlie froze, his eyes becoming large as they met mine once again. He sat so still. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he stopped breathing. I would expect a similar reaction if I told him there was a vampire sitting at the kitchen table.

“Did you now?”

“Mhmm.” He didn’t ask for additional details, but I gave them anyway. “In Phoenix, a couple weeks ago. It was the coolest thing ever. I was at the mall, and this guy in front of me looked completely normal—just like everyone else. Then he walked outside, and I swear to God his skin sparkled!”

Charlie raised his eyebrows in a dubious manner. “Sparkled?”

“Yeah! I know it sounds like the most ridiculous thing ever, but it was so cool!”

“Sparkled.”

“Yeah.”

“Bella, try to stay out of trouble while you’re here. I don’t want you hanging around any vampires.”

“Do you know any?” I must have sounded a little too excited, because Charlie narrowed his eyes, giving me a look of warning. “To stay away from, I mean.”

Charlie turned his attention to the next section of the paper. “No,” he said. “None that I’m aware of.”

I shouldn't have been disappointed, but part of me really wanted him to say, "Why, yes! There's a vampire just down the road. Lovely fellow. You'd really like him."

I didn't like to think of myself as one of those crazy people obsessed with vampires. I'd never read *Dracula*. The few vampire movies I'd seen were never my choice to watch. Vampire lore didn't draw me in like it did to so many others. Yet ever since their existence was discovered, more than anything I wanted to meet one.

Vampires—real vampires—fascinated me.

I couldn't deny my jealousy of the newspaper reporter, Vanessa Wolfe, who actually got to interview them. I had a mile long list of things I'd ask if I had the chance.

There were multiple websites that tracked vampire sightings. The northern states and Canada had a significantly higher population than the southern states. I wasn't sure why, but I hoped it meant my chances of having a vampire BFF greatly improved here.

Only time would tell.

Chapter Two

ADJUSTING TO LIFE WITH CHARLIE was difficult at first. I was so used to taking care of the house and the bills it was hard to sit back and relax, which was the exact reason I moved. It took a few weeks before I didn't feel guilty about wearing my pajamas all day or binge watching TV shows one season at a time.

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end.

If I thought for one minute that going to a high school across the country would be any different, I was wrong.

The same cliques existed. Every person I despised back in Phoenix had an equal at Forks High School. If a kid couldn't fit in at a big city school, they were going to be hard pressed to find a group to accept them here.

I nodded as I pretended to listen to the girl across the lunch table from me. She was droning on about homecoming and who had asked her today and how she blew him off and whom she wanted to ask her. It was hard for me to follow

because I didn't know anyone she mentioned. Also, I kept getting distracted by the blue glitter FH painted on her cheek. Or what was once an FH. She must have rubbed it since the last time she was within viewing range of a mirror. And what was her name again? I thought it was Jessica. Or was Jessica the girl sitting next to me?

"So, Bella," the Jessica-next-to-me said to get my attention, "what class do you have after lunch?"

"Advanced Photography." I had my schedule memorized. It was bad enough to have the new kid vibe going. I didn't need to be studying my schedule *and* looking at a map. So far three people had asked me if I was a freshman. I answered them all with my middle finger.

"Darn, I have gym, and I haven't been able to find anyone who's in . . . my . . ." Jessica's eyes glazed over as she focused on something across the cafeteria. I followed her gaze to a table where two people were sitting—one was a girl with long, bleach blond hair; the other was a boy with a chaotic disarray of hair an odd shade of bronze. They were both pale, but that's about all I could tell from across the room.

"Who are they?"

Jessica sighed. "That's Edward Cullen."

I waited, but Jessica didn't elaborate on who was with him. "Is that his girlfriend?"

"No," she snorted—quite unladylike if I may add. "That's his sister."

"Oh. He's cute."

"Don't even bother. He doesn't date." It sounded more like she was threatening me than looking out for my well-being. Whatever. High school boys were dumb anyway, or at least that's how I justified never having a boyfriend.

The bell rang, signaling the end of our lunch period. I watched as Edward and his sister—Jessica still hadn't offered her name—stood and made their way to opposite ends of the cafeteria without a word to each other.

"Are they twins?" I asked. They looked close enough to the same age.

"They're adopted," she whispered.

"Oh." I mouthed the word as if the subject were taboo. I wasn't sure why. Apparently the bitchiness of small town high school was already wearing off on me.

I found it odd that the Cullen not-really-siblings sat alone and didn't seem to communicate with anyone else, but I'd save that interrogation for another day. I was sure Jessica fell into one of two categories: either getting answers from her would be like squeezing blood from a turnip or she would turn into the biggest school gossip and never shut up. Right now I didn't have time for either. I wanted to secure a spot in photography in case this was one of those low budget schools where I'd have to share a camera with the person sitting next to me.

The photography class was located down a long hallway on the very end of the school. From the looks of it, it also doubled as a graphics classroom. The rows comprised of high top tables that sat two. Fortunately the room was mostly empty when I got there, and I got a table to myself. I crossed my fingers that no one would want to sit by the new girl. Maybe I could play up the assumption I was a freshman and everyone would avoid me.

Thirty seconds before the bell rang, I sighed in relief. All the other students seemed to have known at least one other person in the class, leaving me to a table all by myself. With a school this size, I didn't know how they *couldn't* know someone. As the bell rang, none other than Edward Cullen—who doesn't date—breezed through the door. He skidded to a halt and scanned the room, a

panicked look on his face. When his eyes met mine, he scowled. I thought it was a little early for him to judge me. Or maybe he would have frowned at anyone sitting at the table with the last available spot.

He covered the distance between us with long, graceful strides. When he reached the table, he slid onto the stool next to me. I smiled, waiting for him to look at me so I could introduce myself, but his eyes stayed glued to the front of the room, and the rigid set of his body screamed “leave me alone.”

The teacher, Mr. Varner, called the class to order. He explained the curriculum, but I was trying so hard not to focus on Edward that I had trouble paying attention.

Edward shifted, the stool making a creaking noise under his weight. I ignored him as I made a note on the syllabus. He sniffed a couple times. I wrote it off as the remnants of a summer cold. When he inhaled inches from my face, I jumped, yelping in surprise. He was leaning across the space between us, his elbows propped on the table, and he was *right there*. His deep green eyes entranced me. I couldn’t look away, even as self-consciousness colored my cheeks. My heart pounded, as if telling me to run, but I couldn’t move.

“Is there a problem, Mr. Cullen?” Mr. Varner asked.

Edward pushed away from me. The stool clanked as the legs came in contact with the floor. The sound made me flinch, and just like that the spell broke. I snapped my head to the front of the room as I caught my breath.

“No, sir.” Edward’s voice was smooth as velvet, not a trace of any illness.

Mr. Varner continued to address the class.

Had Edward been smelling me? I wasn’t wearing perfume, and I was positive I remembered deodorant this morning. Putting my head down, I sniffed my armpit as discreetly as possible. It smelled like nothing, certainly not anything offensive.

As luck would have it, Edward and I would share a camera and work on a joint portfolio due at the end of the semester. I peeked at him through the corner of my eye. He was staring at me. My face turned beet red and I looked away, but he kept staring despite my obvious discomfort.

Near the end of class, Mr. Varner handed out a questionnaire so we could get to know our partners. It had ten of the most generic questions to ask a fellow peer. I was sure the majority of people in this room could already answer these questions for half the student body.

I put on my brave face and looked at Edward. He was still staring. I had to admit he was attractive. He had the most perfect face I'd ever seen. His skin was smooth and accented by sharp angles. I wondered if he had nice teeth.

The corner of his lips hinted at a smile. Just as I thought my speculation would be answered, our eyes met. It wasn't the intensity of his stare that sent a surge of adrenaline through me. His eyes, which were once the most hypnotic shade of green, were now jet black.

I shrank back, focusing my attention on the sheet in front of me. I tried to find a question to ask him, but my eyes wouldn't focus on the words.

“Um . . .”

The minute I spoke, Edward straightened his spine and angled his body toward the front of the room, giving the same closed off vibe as during the start of class. Now it was my turn to stare. What was wrong with him? What was his problem with me? Was he on drugs? I couldn't think of a better explanation for his odd behavior.

Without warning, Edward was on his feet, his chair falling to the floor with the sudden movement. I watched in shock as he stormed out of the room without a word. The bell sounded as he disappeared from view.

“How was the first day of school?” Charlie asked once I got home.

“It was okay.” The day was uneventful overall, but I couldn’t shake the strange image of Edward from my head. “Lots of interesting people, that’s for sure.”

“Did any boys ask you out? Should I be polishing my shotgun?”

“No, Dad.” I laughed. “Unless you want to get it ready for someone who’s being a jerk.”

All humor faded from Charlie’s face. “Did someone harass you?”

“No, nothing like that. Don’t worry about it. I’m sure it’s nothing.”

Charlie didn’t look convinced.

“Do you know the Cullens?” I asked, hoping Charlie assumed I changed the subject.

His expression became wary. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

“No reason. I heard someone talking about them today.”

“They mostly keep to themselves.”

“I have a class with Edward,” I offered.

“Edward,” Charlie repeated. He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. “Look, Bella, I don’t want to say this in fear you’ll do the exact opposite, but please, *please* stay away from Edward Cullen. He’s not safe to be around.”

“Why?” Maybe my drug assumption wasn’t that far off.

Charlie seemed to choose his next words carefully. “It’s not my place to elaborate on the nature of the kid’s problems. If I could have him removed from the school, I would, but I can’t.”

I didn't want to start a precedent by following the first of Charlie's requests, but I couldn't ignore the warning in his voice. He wasn't playing a power card by being a father or a cop—he was legitimately concerned for my safety.

“Don't worry, Dad. I'll stay away from him.”

Chapter Three

THE SECOND DAY AT FORKS HIGH SCHOOL began as uneventfully as the first. I got through my morning classes with no drama of my own. I listened to people talk about which teachers they hated and which classes shouldn't be required. Four years of gym? Really? It was the most ridiculous thing ever. They discussed who started dating over the summer and who broke up. Which boys became cute and which girls got hot. Secretly I waited for someone to mention Edward or his sister, whose name I still didn't know, but no one brought them up.

At lunch I learned the girl who sat next to me the day before was, in fact, Jessica, and the girl who sat across from me was Lauren. It was much easier to pay attention to her now that blue makeup wasn't smudged all over her cheek, but I still didn't find her very interesting.

Toward the end of the hour, I realized the table occupied by the Cullen siblings the day before was empty. It must have been the reason Jessica kept

craning her neck to look around the cafeteria. I told myself they were probably outside. It was a nice enough day. Maybe they were sitting at one of the picnic tables. Then I realized I shouldn't care where they were, especially after my dad's warning the day before.

I waited for Edward to show up to photography, but he never did. Fifteen minutes into class, I stopped watching the door and started paying attention to Mr. Varner. Once half an hour passed, any expectation of Edward showing up was gone. His absence disappointed me, even though I knew it shouldn't. Things would only be awkward if he were here.

Besides, Edward's absence meant I got the camera to myself today. I didn't mind working alone, but if he thought he could skip school and I'd pick up his slack, he was wrong.

It wasn't until after the last bell, when the buses left and cars dispersed from the lot, that the first of the rumors started circulating.

"Did you guys hear?" Lauren shouted as she ran to where Jessica and I stood in front of the school. "The Cullens are vampires!"

A small group of us walked to the diner to further analyze the news about the newest local celebrities. I'd never been one for gossip, and I took everything with a grain of salt, but this was what I'd been waiting for.

"I can't believe it," Jessica said as we squeezed around a small table. "I always knew there was something weird about him." Again, no mention of the nameless sister, and she said it like she hadn't been pining over the guy for who knew how long.

“They’re so weird. I always thought they were on drugs,” said a boy named Mike. I was inclined to agree. Mike skipped practice to be here. I didn’t know what “practice” meant. I assumed it was football; for all I knew it was drama club. “This makes way more sense. Freaks.”

“I don’t know, you guys,” came a voice of reason. “I sat next to Rosalie in trig last year. She’s nice. I can’t believe she’s a vampire.”

Rosalie. She must have been the unnamed sister.

“Oh my god, Angela, are you serious? That’s what neighbors of serial killers say. ‘I had no idea they were turning people into lampshades,’” Jessica mocked. “Now I’m glad I never gave Edward a chance.”

Lauren made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat. “Whatever. I bet Edward doesn’t even know who you are.”

Jessica gave her a dirty look but didn’t argue.

Many emotions surrounded the table—shock, disbelief, disgust, fear. It must have been strange to discover their classmates were vampires. I wondered if the reaction would be the same back in Phoenix or if it was amplified here because Forks was a small town. It was the most exciting news I’d received since moving here. Unfortunately, after yesterday it didn’t seem like Edward and I were on speaking terms.

But were the Cullens vampires? It didn’t make sense. First of all, Lauren was the source of the information. I didn’t know how reliable she was, but judging by her riveting conversations about lip gloss and homecoming dresses, I hardly assumed she was a reputable source.

Second, how had they not figured it out already? It seemed odd that everyone missed the lack of aging. Even if they overlooked it, how did they miss the sparkling? The unusual reaction of vampire skin to the sun had been reported over the summer. I’d seen it with my own eyes in Phoenix, and it

wasn't something that could go unnoticed or be mistaken for anything else. Maybe not all vampires sparkled, or maybe the Cullens somehow managed to never be seen outdoors.

“No offense, but how did you guys not know? How long have they gone to school with you?”

“They moved here from Alaska when we were freshman.” Jessica’s enthusiastic answer had everyone at the table staring. She shrank back in her chair and muttered, “I think.”

“Three years and you’ve never seen them sparkle?” My question was met with a combination of confusion and blank stares.

“Is that even true?” asked Ben, a quiet boy who was in my history class. I was surprised he chimed in. Granted this was only the second day I’d gone to school here, but it was still the first time I’d heard him speak. “It’s been reported, but there haven’t been any photos.”

Facts about vampires were still sketchy. So many conflicting reports existed it was hard to decipher what was true. “It is,” I insisted. “I’ve seen it. Back in Phoenix.”

From the skeptical looks on Mike’s and Tyler’s faces, I assumed they were reluctant to believe me. It was fine. I had no way to prove it, and there would be evidence soon enough.

“I wonder what’s going to happen now.” Jessica dropped all pretenses of disgust. She pouted and kept her eyes downcast. “Do you think they’ll come back to school?”

“I hope not.” A violent shudder emphasized Mike’s sharp words. “I don’t want to end up as lunch.”

“I wonder what will happen to Dr. Cullen,” Angela said.

It took everything I had to hide my surprise. “Doctor?”

“Yeah, he works at the hospital here in Forks. I met him once. He cast my arm when I broke it last summer.”

Vampires had a way of blending in to society, but I didn't expect one would have a career with exposure to blood. It seemed too unsafe, too risky.

Too far-fetched to be true. I fought back a wave of disappointment.

“How many of them are there?” I asked.

“Just three,” Angela said. “Edward and Rosalie are adopted. Or at least that was the story.”

A vampire doctor? Adopted children? I needed to know more. If Edward was a vampire and not on drugs like I'd assumed, then what was with his weird behavior? I didn't do anything to deserve his ire. The more I thought about it, the angrier I became.

I decided to confront him and find out the truth, but I had no idea how to do it.

That night as I tried to fall asleep, my thoughts kept wandering back to Edward. Each time they did, excitement bubbled in my stomach. Charlie's warning was still fresh in my mind, but what if Edward really was a vampire?

I had to find out.

Chapter Four

N EWS ABOUT THE CULLENS BEING VAMPIRES spread like wildfire overnight. It was the only thing anyone talked about the next day. Even the teachers didn't mind deviating from their curriculums. Normally I would have loved not doing school work, but by the time lunch rolled around, I couldn't take the gossip any longer. I didn't have enough knowledge of the vampires—if they even *were* vampires—to form a personal opinion, and I was tired of the judgments being passed against them. Everyone had an opinion about the antisocial siblings, and the great majority of them were negative.

Instead of meeting Jessica in the cafeteria like I promised, I grabbed a book from my locker and retreated to a table in the back of the library. It was peaceful, but instead of reading, my mind once again wandered to Edward.

Vampire or not, what was his problem with me? It wasn't like *I* chose to sit next to *him*. I wasn't forcing us to be partners. It pissed me off that I cared at all.

I'd probably never even see him again. According to the rumor mill, both he and Rosalie were no-shows today.

I closed my book and shoved it into my backpack. Anger caused me to fumble with the zipper, and I cursed under my breath when my skin got caught in the metal teeth. The librarian gave me a dirty look as I grabbed my backpack and breezed out of the library. Obviously she didn't care enough to shush the table of students stage whispering about vampires a mere five feet away from her. My mumbled expletive probably interrupted her eavesdropping.

Not wanting to return to the cafeteria and explain why I missed half of lunch, I headed to photography. The table felt empty, even though Edward and I only shared it once.

After class, Mr Varner held me back.

"Bella, I'm not sure whether Edward will return to school. I'd understand if you don't want to work alone. You're more than welcome to join another group."

"I don't mind."

"Are you sure? The portfolio is over half of your grade. It's a lot of work to do on your own."

I assured him I could handle the project on my own. By the time I finally convinced him, it was almost time for my next class.

The hallway was empty when I emerged from the photography classroom. I thought I was alone, so I was surprised when the sound of a locker slamming resonated throughout the corridor. More surprising still was the tall, slender figure of Rosalie Cullen walking away from it. Without a second thought, I hurried in her direction.

“Hey,” I called out. Rosalie cocked her head to the side and quickened her pace without further acknowledgment. “Wait!” I broke into a run. When I finally caught up to her, she whipped around and fixed me with an icy glare.

“What?” she snapped.

Her demeanor caught me by surprise, and my mouth hung open as I struggled for something to say. “What are you doing?”

“Cleaning out my locker.” Rosalie held a leather knapsack aloft and gave it a sharp shake. “Didn’t you hear? We’re vampires.” She sounded bitter. Regardless of whether the Cullens were vampires, she didn’t seem very happy about the accusation. I didn’t blame her. People could be assholes.

“Where’s Edward?” I asked.

Rosalie narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

I didn’t have a good answer. What could I even say? Because I want to ask him why he was so creepy? “He’s my photography partner,” I blurted.

“Not anymore.”

The bell rang at that moment, punctuating the finality in her tone. Without another word, Rosalie turned on her heel and stormed out of the building.

I wasted no time driving home after school. Wolf greeted me by the door. I’d gotten used to his presence throughout the summer. At least he stopped sniffing my crotch. I gave him a pat on the head, internally groaning at the dog smell that would surely cling to my hand.

“Go home,” I told him.

He stared up at me with uncomprehending, dark eyes. A bowl of dog food sat on the steps. Charlie was such a big softy. Wolf had it made here. No wonder he never left.

Pushing past the over-sized dog, I entered the house. After kicking off my shoes and dropping my backpack on the floor, I bolted up the stairs to my room. My laptop lit up when I tapped the space bar, and I opened the search engine.

It wasn't hard to find the Cullens' home address. They were in the white pages, just like normal people. It only fueled my doubts that they were vampires. I copied the directions onto a scrap of paper and shoved it inside my back pocket.

Charlie was in the living room, reading the newspaper.

"I'm going to the library, Dad." I didn't like lying to Charlie, but I sure as hell wasn't telling him the truth. He already had a poor opinion of Edward without hearing the rumors. Even if I did tell him where I was going, I didn't have a good explanation as to *why*. I had no plan beyond showing up on his doorstep.

Charlie glanced at me over the top of the sports section. "Okay. Drive safely."

It was a good thing I'd looked at the satellite map or I would have driven right past the Cullens' driveway. It was barely visible from the street. The dense, overgrown foliage acted as camouflage, disguising the narrow drive and everything behind it.

It was downright creepy.

The house was enormous—three stories with a distinct Victorian appearance. A porch wrapped around the two visible sides with large pillars spaced every few feet. I parked off to the side of the driveway and got out of my car. There was a stillness in the air, any breeze blocked by the surrounding

forest. It was eerily silent. No birds or rustling of leaves. The only sound was the crunching of gravel beneath my feet.

The implication of what I was doing sank in as I approached the front door. Here I was, unannounced, possibly at the home of a family of vampires. I still wasn't sure if I believed the rumors. I wanted to, and I hoped they were true, but the logical part of my brain wouldn't let me get my hopes up. Edward was probably just a troubled kid who'd had a bad first day of school, and if things between us weren't awkward enough already, they were going to get worse.

I took a deep breath and knocked. Rosalie answered. She crossed her arms and gave me an expressionless stare that sent a chill down my spine.

"Great. You," she said. "What do you want?"

"I'm here to see Edward."

"He doesn't want to see you."

A pang struck at my chest, but my irritation drove it away. "How do you know?"

"He told me."

I squared my shoulders and held her gaze. Even though she was a good six inches taller than me, I wasn't intimidated. "If he doesn't want me here, he can tell me himself."

"Fine." Rosalie's voice was strangely calm. Plastering a fake smile on her face, she stepped to the side and held open the door. My heart rate increased as I entered the house. "Second level, to the left," she said, pointing toward the stairs.

"Thanks," I mumbled.

"It's your life," she said from behind me, so quietly that I wasn't sure I'd heard her correctly. When I turned around, she was gone.

The stairs creaked with each step I took. If Edward hadn't heard me pulling in the driveway, he definitely heard me coming now. My time to form a plan was running out. I didn't even know how to explain my visit. I couldn't just come out and ask him if he was a vampire, and I didn't want to sound pathetic and needy by asking him why he didn't like me. Maybe I should have taken Rosalie's advice and left.

There was only one door to the left on the second floor. It was closed. I lifted my fist and knocked. The wood gave off a deep, rich sound, putting a false confidence behind the action.

The handle turned downward, and I held my breath as the door swung open. Edward stood on the other side. He was much taller than I originally thought, at least six feet. I couldn't help but notice the way his T-shirt hugged his torso. He was thin yet well-defined. The muscles in his forearm flexed as he gripped the door frame. My eyes scanned up his arm, over his shoulder, until they rested on his face. He didn't seem surprised or upset to see me—merely curious.

“Hi.” My voice cracked. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Hi.”

Edward's chest expanded as he inhaled. It took everything I had to keep my focus trained on his face. His eyes were once again a brilliant shade of green. Had they really been black the other day? I started to doubt what I'd actually seen.

“I thought . . . maybe . . . we could talk.”

Edward ducked his head and pushed away from the door. I followed without hesitation as he backed into the room. It was dark inside. There was just enough light from the hallway to watch him cross the floor and turn on a lamp. I wondered why he'd been sitting in the dark. Maybe he was sleeping.

But vampires didn't sleep.

Did they?

I glanced around the room. There was a desk, a black leather couch, a tall shelf filled with books and music, and a bed, where Edward took a seat. He followed me with his eyes as I approached the bookshelf and ran my fingertips along the spines. I was going through the motions, reading the titles but retaining nothing. I hoped he didn't notice how my hand shook.

"Do you mind?" I pointed to a particularly ancient looking book.

When Edward made a sweeping gesture with his hand, I plucked the book from the shelf. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him still watching me. I flipped through the pages, concentrating on him so hard that it took me a moment to realize none of the words looked familiar.

I studied the characters. Most looked normal, but some were foreign. I turned to ask Edward what language it was in and jumped when I discovered him standing right next to me. The book slipped from my hands, landing on the floor with a muted thump. Edward bent to pick it up. He smoothed the pages before gently returning it to the shelf.

"I'm sorry." Heat filled my face. I couldn't bring myself to look into his eyes. "I didn't come here to pilfer through your belongings."

"Why are you here?" He didn't sound mad. If anything he sounded resigned, as though dreading my answer.

I wanted to be straight forward, but the words were stuck in my throat. I settled for stating the obvious.

"You haven't been in school."

Edward frowned. "I don't think anyone wants me there."

"I do." The words were out before I could stop them. Closing my eyes, I covered my face with my hands. I hadn't even been here five minutes and I was already making a fool of myself.

“You’re probably the only one.” A low chuckle came from him. I peeked through my fingers in time to see the amused smile on his face. He composed himself, his expression becoming serious. “It’s probably for the best.”

“Why is that?”

Edward pursed his lips and shifted his focus to the bookshelf. I allowed myself a moment to study him. He definitely *looked* human. Not that I knew how to tell if he weren’t.

“You were in school today, right?” he asked, breaking the tense silence.

“Yes.”

“So you must have heard people talking.” The irritation in his voice was clear. He probably thought the worst of the situation, and he was right.

The Cullens were the *only* thing anyone talked about today. I’d heard more than my fair share, and I was beginning to feel guilty about the gossip I’d participated in two days ago. My silence was answer enough.

“How are we supposed to show our faces after something like this? It was bad enough before. Rosalie can’t—” Edward stopped mid-sentence and pinched the bridge of his nose. When he spoke again, his voice was once again calm and under control. “We won’t be subjected to that.”

“I understand,” I whispered. Although I’d suspected he wouldn’t return to Forks High School, having it confirmed left a hollowness in my chest. A small voice in the back of my head told me this was a good thing, that I should run away from this strange boy while I still had the chance. But in my heart I knew I wouldn’t.

Edward slid a book from the shelf. The hardcover was old and well worn. He traced the title with long, pale fingers, his brow furrowing as he concentrated on the cover. After a few moments he flipped it open, and I watched his eyes scan the page. It felt like I was intruding on a private moment. I wondered if he

forgot I was still standing next to him. Perhaps he was ignoring me in hopes that I would leave. As much as I didn't want to go, I was here uninvited. His sister's words about not wanting to see me replayed in my head.

"I should go."

"You should," Edward agreed, much to my dismay. I decided to accept his rejection and move on. At the very least I would hold my head high until I reached the safety of my car. I was almost to his bedroom door when he spoke again. "Do you like old books, Bella?"

I stopped in my tracks. He had his back to me, his focus still intent on the book in his hands. I wasn't sure how he defined old books. The classics were great, but something told me he wasn't referring to literature.

"Yeah. Sure, I guess."

Edward sauntered across the room, stopping a safe distance away from me. After taking a deep breath, he held out the book. I took it gingerly, afraid it would fall apart in my hands. It was heavier than I expected, making it feel a lot sturdier than it appeared.

"This book was a gift. It's very special to me," he said. "If for some reason you can't return it, please take good care of it."

His words left me speechless. I couldn't understand why he'd give me any book, let alone one that was important to him. I nodded, silently telling him I understood.

"Goodbye, Bella."

The house was empty when I got home, which I expected. With Charlie working nights, I was typically left to my own devices. The privacy was appreciated tonight as I reflected on my time spent at Edward's.

I'd left his house feeling even more confused than when I got there. The vampire rumors were addressed in a roundabout way, but he neither confirmed nor denied their validity. His attitude toward me today wasn't at all like it'd been during class, which was surprising, considering what his sister said when I arrived. There was no sign of her on my way out, and for that I was thankful.

I whipped up a quick dinner and packaged half of it for Charlie. He probably ate at the diner before his shift started, which he always did, but I needed an excuse to get out of the house.

The officer behind the front desk smiled when I arrived at the station. "Bella! My, how you've grown." His face looked vaguely familiar. I glanced at his badge and tried to play it cool.

"Hello, Officer Forge. Is my dad here?"

He waved off my formality. "Call me Waylon. Only the kids in the holding cells call me Officer."

Waylon. Now I remembered. He was one of my dad's friends. I'd met him on my visits here as a child. I wasn't sure whether he was being serious about the holding cell thing, so I forced out a laugh.

"It's a slow night. Your dad got bored, so he went out on patrol. He's probably writing parking tickets."

"Oh, okay." I held up the container of food. "I brought him dinner. Will you see that he gets it?"

"Sure thing. I'll stick it in the fridge until he gets back."

I said my goodbyes to Waylon and headed home. He creeped me out, though I couldn't quite put my finger on why. It was probably his strange old-man vibe.

By the time I got home, I was mentally exhausted. Grabbing Edward's book, I climbed into bed and buried myself beneath a layer of blankets. I traced the title with my fingertips, just like Edward had done.

It was a copy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. I'd read the book, but for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how it was significant. Edward had been staring intently at something. I started from the beginning, prepared to study every page.

Luck was on my side. Inside the front cover was an inscription. Time had faded the ink and yellowed the paper, but the words were clearly visible. The moment I read them, I knew exactly why he chose that particular book to give me.

Happy 17th birthday, Edward. May you live to see many more.

Love, Mom

June 20, 1918

My breath caught in my throat. I tried to swallow away the sudden dryness, but my body wouldn't obey. I wasn't sure if my heart had stopped or sped up, but my head spun. It felt like the room was shrinking. I dropped the book next to me and lay back on the bed.

It was true. The rumors were true.

The Cullens were vampires.

Chapter Five

CHARLIE WAS IN A FOUL MOOD in the morning. When I asked him about it, he grunted and mumbled something about the town going to hell. News of the Cullens must have reached the station last night. I decided not to inquire further. Charlie already had a bad opinion of Edward. I didn't want to listen to whatever he'd have to say, especially knowing I had already gone against my word to stay away from him.

"I don't know if you have plans after school again," he grumbled as I was walking out the door, "but I want you home by five."

School was much the same as the day before, though the teachers tried to stick to their scheduled lesson plans. There were an unusual number of kids absent. I wondered if their parents pulled them out of class. I was distracted and agitated all day. By lunchtime, I was more than ready for the weekend.

"I heard they sneak into people's rooms at night and prey on them while they're sleeping."

“Well, I heard they can only feed while having sex, and then they erase their victim’s memories.”

“It’s so creepy to think Edward could have done that to me.” Jessica made a face of disgust. She couldn’t have looked more fake if she tried.

“I bet they eat homeless people. It would be perfect because no one would notice if they were missing.”

I stood and walked away, leaving my tray on the table. I didn’t care if my new friends thought I was rude. Their trash talking made me angry, and I wasn’t going to sit there and listen to it any longer.

It seemed like days instead of hours when the last bell finally rang. All I wanted was for school to be over so I could return to Edward’s house. His book had been tucked away in the safety of my backpack all day. I understood now why it was so important to him. He’d had it for a long time. It could very well be the only remnant from his . . . *human* life. Why he entrusted it to my care, I had no idea, but I was anxious to get it back to him in one piece.

“Bella!”

I was almost to my car when someone called my name. I considered ignoring the male voice until I heard it again, closer this time.

“Bella!”

Turning around, I forced a smile on my face when I spotted Mike running across the parking lot.

“Hey,” I said, giving a last fleeting look at my car. “What’s up?”

“I just . . . wanted to know . . . if you have plans . . . next Friday,” he huffed between breaths.

His question took me off-guard. Thoughts of Edward distracted me. I wondered if a budding friendship was in the works or if I was reading too far into his gesture with the book. It was too early to say for sure.

“I don’t think so. Why?”

Mike’s eyes lit up. “Will you go to the homecoming dance with me?”

“Oh, I—” Oh, shit. “I don’t know, Mike. I mean . . .” I shrugged, not quite knowing how to blow him off without hurting his feelings. Dancing wasn’t something my body was designed to do. The last time I did anything of the sort was in junior high, and I ended up spraining my ankle.

“Unless you were waiting for someone else to ask.” The change in his demeanor was immediate. I felt bad for him. He seemed like a nice guy despite his disdain for the Cullens, and if I wrote off everyone who wasn’t as accepting as me, I probably wouldn’t have any friends.

“Yeah, okay,” I agreed.

“Awesome!” Mike’s smile widened. “Here, let me give you my number.”

I hid my impatience as Mike dropped his backpack to the ground and rummaged for a piece of paper. Good grief, he took forever. I sighed in relief when he finally found a pen and scribbled down his phone number. He handed it to me and then looked at me expectantly.

“Thanks?”

Once again, his face fell. “Aren’t you going to give me yours?”

“Oh, right. Of course.” Crap. I didn’t want to, but the damage had already been done. I rattled off Charlie’s home number while backing toward my car. “I really have to go, Mike. See you Monday.”

“Talk to you soon!” he said, waving the piece of paper containing my number.

I’d never been so happy *not* to be going home.

The drive to Edward's house couldn't go fast enough. I should have been afraid, knowing the truth about him, but instead I was excited. There were a million questions swimming in my head. I just hoped he was willing to let me into his life.

Once again I knocked on the door, praying that Rosalie wouldn't be the one to answer. I was relieved when Edward appeared on the other side.

"You came back." Edward's lips curved into a shy smile. Stepping to the side, he gestured for me to enter. I followed him up the stairs and to his room. He kept throwing cautious glances over his shoulder, as though checking to make sure I hadn't bolted.

Until that moment, it hadn't occurred to me that maybe I should.

Once inside his bedroom, I produced his book from my backpack. He seemed surprised to see it.

"I read it. The inscription," I clarified. I held it up, desperately trying to quell the trembling of my hands. "So it's true?"

"If I say yes, are you going to leave?"

"Do you want me to leave?"

Edward shook his head, a somber expression on his face. "No."

A weight lifted from my shoulders. Keeping my eyes trained on him, I approached with caution, watching for any sign that he would turn on me.

"Then I won't." I held out the book. Edward accepted it, careful not to get too close. Whether he was keeping the distance for himself or me, I didn't know. He returned the book to its spot on the shelf and took a seat on the bed. I sat on the couch across the room.

"You're okay with what I am?" He sounded nonchalant, but the way he broke eye contact and looked at the floor told a different story.

"Yeah, I think so."

“Then I’ll try not to scare you away.”

I couldn’t tell whether he was joking, but it didn’t matter. I wasn’t going anywhere.

There was a sharp knock on the door, and then it opened. I froze, expecting to see Rosalie. Instead a tall, blond man stood in the doorway. He appeared older than Edward, but not by much. Late twenties, I guessed.

“Edward, I—” He stopped mid-sentence, his mouth falling open when he saw me. It only took him a moment to compose himself. “I apologize. I didn’t know you had company.”

“This is Bella Swan. Bella, this is Carlisle.”

Recognition filled Carlisle’s face. I supposed, being the daughter of a small town cop, my reputation preceded me. I hadn’t even realized Edward knew my full name. It surprised me that he didn’t introduce Carlisle as his father or adoptive father or whatever. Apparently he was dropping the pretenses now that I knew their secret.

Carlisle acknowledged me with a nod and turned his attention to Edward. “We’ll catch up later.”

“No, please,” Edward said. “Whatever it is, Bella can hear.”

“All right.” Carlisle looked at me apprehensively as he stepped inside the room.

“How were things at the hospital?” Edward asked.

“I did my best to dispel the rumors. The hospital administrator doesn’t want to see me go. He’s trying to keep the peace, but some of the staff is threatening to quit if I’m not dismissed. I won’t let it come to that.”

“Would it help if Rosalie and I returned to school?”

“No.” Carlisle shook his head. “You two should lie low for a while. I’ll call the school tomorrow and tell the principal I’m concerned for your safety.”

“Whatever you think is best.”

I felt strange, like I was intruding on a private moment. And I guessed I was. Apparently not everyone in Forks was as accepting as me.

Carlisle seemed lost in thought, and I got the feeling he was choosing his next words carefully. “I can’t help but wonder how people would react if we were more established members of this community.” He gave me a pointed look and smiled. “It’s very nice to meet you, Bella. Thank you for being so understanding.”

After he excused himself, I turned my full attention to Edward.

“So Carlisle’s, like, not your dad, obviously.”

Edward snickered and shook his head. “No.”

“And Rosalie isn’t really your sister?”

“No. We aren’t related, but we are family, in a way. We’re very protective of each other, but . . .”

“But?” I asked when he didn’t continue.

“But sometimes I want to kill them.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to decipher just how serious he was. “You must get annoyed by someone after spending—” I had no idea how long Edward’s vampire family had been together or if it was appropriate to ask. “—so much time together.”

“Yes.”

He didn’t take the bait. I glanced toward the bookshelf, focusing on his copy of *Frankenstein*.

“You turned seventeen in 1918,” I stated. “You don’t look much older than that.”

I heard Edward take a long, slow breath. I couldn't bring myself to look at him, afraid to see his annoyance at my questioning. His voice was soft and filled with sadness when he spoke.

"I'm still seventeen. I will forever be seventeen."

"Is that such a bad thing?" I asked. "I mean, it's got to be better than being eighty, right?"

"I don't know," he said. "A geriatric versus a perpetual high school student? It's a toss-up."

"Why even bother? What's the point of repeating high school over and over again?" I hoped my questions weren't crossing a line. I honestly didn't understand. High school was bad enough once. Why would anyone choose to repeat it?

"To blend in. To keep up the pretense of being human so we don't have to spend our existence in hiding." Edward pursed his lips and frowned. "But I suppose we don't have to worry about that anymore."

I recalled Carlisle's comment about dispelling the rumors. "But you still don't want people to know, right?"

"No. The world isn't ready yet, especially not here. I don't know why Carlisle's trying to deny it. Our name has already been smeared. This will always hang over our heads. Even if we convince people otherwise, there will always be doubts."

"How do you think the rumor started?"

"How do any rumors start?" he asked. "Vampires have been a topic of conversation for a while. Now that people know we exist, they're looking for us. Finding things that wouldn't have made them look twice before. I have no doubt someone tossed out our name in casual conversation and it snowballed from there. As gossip travels it has a way of being told as the truth."

“If you want to keep it a secret, why did you tell me?”

“I’m tired of lying.” Edward met my eyes briefly before dropping his gaze again. “And you deserve to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

As if on cue, my stomach growled.

“Hungry?” Edward asked.

“Not really.” My stomach twisted in protest. I was hungry, having abandoned my lunch at the table, but I didn’t want to admit it.

A chilling thought entered my mind.

“Are you hungry?” I asked.

Edward gave me a tight smile. “It’s nothing I can’t manage.”

The fact that he didn’t answer my question led me to believe he was hungry. Even though I didn’t know him very well, I wanted to trust he’d tell me if my presence became too much of a temptation.

“What happens if you can’t manage? Are you going to warn me or . . .” I stopped and took a deep breath. I didn’t want to think about the Cullens’ eating habits. “Will I be the meal?”

“You don’t have to worry about being near me,” he said. “I would never bite you.”

I wanted to believe him, because I didn’t intend on running away from him any time soon. And if he did bite me, there were probably worse ways to go.

Giving a cursory glance at the clock on the wall, I noticed it was getting late. I still needed to stop for groceries on the way home. Yesterday I hadn’t realized how far the Cullens’ house was from town. If I didn’t leave soon, I was going to be late.

“I should probably go,” I told Edward. The corners of his lips turned down into a pout, and he nodded. I realized too late how it must have sounded to him.

“My dad wants me home by five. You know, vampires running wild and all.”

Edward managed to crack a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. "You'd better get going then. Wouldn't want you running into any of those."

"Definitely not."

"Let me walk you out."

Edward followed me out of his room and down the stairs. I thought I felt his hand ghost across my lower back, but I wasn't positive. It seemed unlikely, seeing as he'd otherwise kept a reasonable distance between us. The house seemed to be empty. If Carlisle and Rosalie were there, they weren't in any of the main rooms.

"You probably thought hanging out with a vampire would be a lot more interesting," Edward said as we neared the front door.

"It was interesting."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Interesting enough to come back?" Edward's tone was light, a stark contrast to the guarded expression on his face. I wondered if this was new territory for him, getting to know a human. Or maybe having a girl over. I hoped for the latter. The thought of being the first girl in his life was appealing, but he was over 100 years old. The chances of him having been alone the entire time seemed slim. Besides, I didn't want to make assumptions about where our relationship was headed.

I couldn't figure out why he was interested in my company, but there wasn't a doubt in my mind as to how I would answer.

"Of course."

Chapter Six

THE PHONE RANG for the umpteenth time on Saturday morning. I pulled the covers over my head, trying to block out the shrill noise and soak up a few more minutes of sleep. The floorboards downstairs creaked as Charlie crossed the living room to answer it. His voice filtered through the vent next to my bed, but I couldn't make out what he was saying.

A few moments later, his heavy footsteps ascended the stairs.

"Bella?"

I didn't answer. If he thought I was sleeping, maybe he'd go away.

Charlie banged on my door when I didn't respond. "Bella?"

"What?" I whined through my pillow.

"Mike Newton's on the phone."

"Tell him I'm sleeping."

"I've already told him you're sleeping. Ten times. Pick up the phone so I don't have to listen to the damn thing ring again."

I groaned and rolled out of bed. An old push button phone from the eighties sat on the desk. It was purple. Clearing the sleep from my throat, I picked it up and answered. “Hello?”

“Bella, hey, what’s up?”

“Not me, obviously.” I managed to keep most of the irritation from my voice. If Mike noticed, he didn’t take the hint.

“Why are you still in bed? Did you have a late night? Was there a party or something you didn’t tell me about?”

I couldn’t tell if he was being funny or if he was actually put out that I might have had plans without him. Last I checked, I agreed to go to a school dance, not be his girlfriend.

“No, Mike. I’m just not a morning person.”

“Okay, cool.”

A long, uncomfortable silence followed. I looked at the clock. It wasn’t even eleven yet.

“Did you need something?” I asked.

“No, I just called to say hi.”

“Okay. Hi.” Being on the phone with him was making me antsy. I didn’t want to set the precedent that he could call to say hi whenever he didn’t have anything better to do. “Well, I’ll see you at school on Monday.”

“Oh.”

“Bye, Mike.” I hung up without giving him a chance to respond so he wouldn’t draw out the conversation.

I spent most of the day reading, doing homework, and devising a plan to visit Edward without Charlie becoming suspicious. There were only so many times I could lie about going to the library, and I didn’t know any of my new friends well enough to give Charlie details if he asked, like where they lived or

who their parents were. In a town this size, it was probably best not to fabricate plans. Word would get around eventually that I wasn't where I said I was going to be, and I didn't want him upset with me.

It was probably too soon to visit Edward again, anyway. He had alluded to my coming back, but not coming back today. The last thing I wanted was to become clingy, especially after my annoying phone call with Mike this morning.

Charlie had the weekend off work. I couldn't be certain, but he seemed pleased that I was staying in and spending time with him.

"I thought for sure you'd be out with that Newton kid tonight, Bells."

"Mike and I are just friends," I said in defense.

"Friends hang out."

"Dad!" I didn't want to have this conversation with him. "Are we gonna talk boys?"

Charlie threw his hands in the air. "Nope. I'm just saying. The kid called all morning. I think he likes you. That's all."

"Dinner's probably ready," I said, changing the subject and fleeing to the kitchen.

Sunday dragged by as well. Every time the phone rang, I cringed, hoping it wasn't Mike checking in on me, or worse yet, wanting to hang out. It was never him, though. Billy called once, making dinner plans for Wednesday night. Apparently he'd be bringing his son, who was a couple years younger than me. Charlie expected me to stay home and entertain him. I didn't really mind, but

all I could think about was that it was one less evening I'd get to spend with Edward.

I wondered what he was doing today, cursing myself for not having any way to contact him. I didn't even know if vampires owned phones. If they were posing as humans, I supposed a phone would be necessary. I checked online for their number, seeing as that was how I found their address, but it was unlisted.

I considered calling the hospital to see if Carlisle was working, but contacting him at work to ask for his home number seemed stalkerish. The last thing I wanted to do was give Edward any reason to pull away from me.

It was after midnight when I finally crawled into bed. I was almost asleep when a single rap on my window caused me to start. It was probably just a bird that flew into the glass. My sleepy mind was beginning to process the odds of that happening at this hour when I heard the sound a second time.

Bolting upright in bed, I reached for the lamp but then stopped. If someone was outside, I didn't want to turn on the light, allowing them to see me while blinding myself to the outside world. I crept across the small room and peeked out from the side of the drapes. A shadowy figure paced on the lawn below. It stopped and bent down. When it stood again, I saw its arm stretch over its head, and then a rock hit the window inches from my face.

I scrambled to get the window open. If it was Mike, I was going to kill him.

"What are you doing?" I hissed into the darkness.

"Bella?" The voice that greeted me wasn't Mike's.

"Edward?"

"Did you expect someone else to throw rocks at your window in the middle of the night?"

I shook my head, but it was unlikely he could see the motion in the dark. "What are you doing here?" I whispered. "Charlie's home."

“I know. Why do you think I’m not using the front door?”

I glanced around the neighborhood, making sure no one was witnessing our exchange. All the surrounding houses were dark. The street was empty as well. Not a single car was parked on the side of the road.

“How did you get here?”

“I walked,” he said as if it were obvious. I hoped the darkness hid my surprise. It took at least a half hour to make the drive between our houses. “Look, I just want to make sure everything’s okay.”

I frowned, unsure if something happened over the weekend that I wasn’t aware of. “What do you mean?”

“I haven’t heard from you since Friday, and…” Edward ran his hand through his hair. Without being able to see his face, I wasn’t sure what kind of mood he was in. “I thought maybe I scared you away.”

My heart swelled, warming my chest. This morning I wouldn’t have dared to hope that I was on his mind, but if he came here to see me in the middle of the night, on foot, then maybe he was thinking about me as much as I was thinking about him. I was grateful for the brief encounter, even if the circumstances weren’t ideal. I wanted him closer, to be able to see his expression and talk without the fear of Charlie overhearing.

“You didn’t,” I insisted. “I’ve just been busy.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I would understand. If you told me to stay away—”

“No!” I cringed, listening over my shoulder to see if Charlie was moving around downstairs. He was always awake at night due to his work schedule. I dropped my voice to a whisper again. “I was going to come over tomorrow.”

“You were?” The smile was evident through his voice.

“Yeah, if it’s okay.”

“It’s always okay.” Edward’s head snapped to the side. “I have to go,” he said in a rush. “See you tomorrow.”

He vanished into the night like a shadow. I sat by my window for a while, listening, wondering if he was still out there somewhere. I wasn’t sure how long I stood there, lost in thought, but eventually I climbed back into bed and let sleep take me.

“You going to school today, kid?” Charlie asked through the door.

I shot out of bed when I looked at the clock. I must have turned off the alarm without even noticing.

“Yeah, Dad. Thanks.”

I grabbed my clothes and retreated to the bathroom across the hall, scrambling to get ready. I showered but didn’t have time to wash my hair. I used my fingers to comb it into a ponytail and secured it with a binder. There wasn’t enough time to put on makeup, not that I wore much. Once I got dressed, I stepped back from the mirror to check out my appearance.

I looked terrible.

It wasn’t a big deal. There was no one at school I wanted to impress.

Then I remembered I was going to Edward’s today.

“Don’t speed!” Charlie called out as I tore down the stairs. “We don’t need you getting in an accident.”

I tripped over a sleeping Wolf as I exited the house. The wooden handrail caught my fall. Wolf yelped and sprang to his feet with a loud growl.

“Damn it, Wolf!” I fought the urge to kick the stupid dog as I shook out my sore hand. “Find somewhere else to sleep.”

Wolf merely stretched and trotted away. If Charlie weren't so attached to him, I'd call animal control myself.

My palm was littered with scratches—nothing too serious, but some were deep enough to allow blood dots to seep to the surface. I wiped my hand on my jeans and took a deep breath, hoping to suppress the nausea that typically accompanied broken skin.

I made it to my first class about thirty seconds after the bell rang. The teacher gave me a dirty look but didn't reprimand me. Two girls in the row in front of me exchanged a glance and snickered. I told myself they weren't laughing at me. Surely they didn't always have perfect hair days.

By the time lunch rolled around, I was starving. I made a mental note to store a few granola bars in my backpack for the next time this situation arose. I plucked the apple from my tray as I made my way to the table, wasting no time taking a giant bite. When I sat down, the conversations happening around me ceased. Jessica gave me a snobby once-over before turning her attention to Lauren. With her dismissal, everyone went from looking at me to avoiding eye contact at all costs.

I was struck with a sudden self-consciousness. I didn't look that bad, did I? Lots of people wore their hair in messy ponytails and skipped makeup at some point. It wasn't like I was wearing sweatpants or anything. I'd showered and brushed my teeth, so I knew I wasn't emitting an offensive odor.

There was no way they could've known I'd been hanging out with Edward, though I suspected it would earn me a similar response. Brushing off their reaction, I turned to Jessica.

“Did you finish the history assign—”

“So, Lauren,” Jessica said, completely blowing me off. “Tell me about your homecoming gown.”

Lauren launched into a detailed description of her dress, shoes, and accessories. In her mind, she'd already been crowned queen. Some of the other girls at the table contributed to the conversation, but I stayed out of it. Once I finished eating, I stood and left the table. A few people glanced in my direction, but the only one who acknowledged me was Angela. She gave me a small wave, which I returned in kind.

Photography class once again reminded me of how much I missed Edward over the weekend. I'd known of his existence for less than a week, yet I was drawn to him like we'd been friends my entire life.

When school was finally finished for the day, I practically ran to my car. My breath caught in my throat when I saw the lone masculine figure leaning against it, but my excitement came to an abrupt end when I got close enough to make out the blond hair.

Mike scanned the parking lot until his gaze fell on me. He waved and called out my name.

"Hi, Mike," I said when we were closer. He tried to pull me into a hug. I kept my grip tight on the straps of my backpack, turning his advance into an awkward sideways embrace.

"How you doin', girl?"

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing at him. "I'm fine, Mike," I said, and stepped around him to get to my car.

"I looked for you before school this morning. I thought maybe you were sick or something."

If this was how he acted on a normal day, I'd hate to think how much he'd hover if he thought I needed to be taken care of.

"Nope, just overslept. That's why I look like this." I pointed at my disheveled hair for emphasis.

“Well, I think you look hot,” he said.

I felt myself blushing under his scrutiny. It was nice to hear him say that, especially after everyone treated me like a pariah all day. “Thanks.” I slipped into my car, avoiding what looked like a second attempt at a hug.

“I’ll call you tonight!”

I tried not to grimace until I was out of his line of vision.

VAMPIRE BLOOD MARKETS COULD SAVE LIVES

Supporters believe we can live in harmony with vampires, but their diet may pose problems. Are blood markets the answer?

By Vanessa Wolfe, *Seattle Independent Journal*

Posted September 13

One of the biggest fears when it comes to vampires living among us is their diet, and rightfully so. Ask anyone young or old what vampires eat, and they'll tell you the same thing: Blood.

Many people are of the mindset that vampires feeding from humans is a new concept, but it's not. We forget that vampires have been drinking human blood for centuries. The only difference now is we're aware of it. Could the answer to our concerns be as easy as blood donations?

In the past, secrecy was their utmost vampire law. A current change in their government structure has eliminated the need to hide their existence. According to Luke, *Seattle Independent Journal's* very own vampire insider, feeding options were very limited.

"We basically had two choices: kill the humans and remain compliant with our law, or get blood from the black market."

These markets operated much the same as the speakeasies of the prohibition movement, with humans being willing (and sometimes not-so-willing) blood donors. But these blood markets weren't a perfect solution for those who preferred not to kill their meal.

"It posed a danger for vampires and humans alike," claims Luke. While discovery was punishable by death for all involved, there was also a high rate of human death by blood loss. "It was hard to know when and where the markets would pop up. Vampires who abstained in the interim would often lose control while feeding, draining the human or inflicting a fatal injury."

Due to their high risk factor, the venues never stayed in one place for very long. Advertising was risky, and many vampires didn't go to the effort to seek them out. Humans who volunteered their services didn't always understand what they were getting into either. "Once a human became a donor, death was the only way out."

Now that the existence of vampires is known, Luke hopes it will open the door for more volunteers. You may be asking why anyone in their right mind would sign up for something so dangerous. Perhaps you should instead ask why they should.

“Vampires need fresh human blood to survive. The majority of us don’t want to harm people, but our survival instincts will kick in if we don’t feed. The more blood donors we have, the more often we can feed. Donating no longer has to be a lifelong commitment. It can even be a one-time circumstance. Hopefully with a steady supply of blood, the rate of human casualties will diminish.”

As we are quickly finding out, there are a lot of vampires in the world. With the rate anti-vampire leagues are forming, vampires like Luke will be hard-pressed to find enough volunteers to keep them sated. Will the altruism of the minority be enough to keep us all safe? Only time will tell.

If you are interested in anonymous blood donation, please contact [...].

Chapter Seven

ALL THE TENSION seeped from my muscles as I turned into the Cullens' driveway. The once ominous looking house and yard were becoming familiar, a place of comfort. Edward smiled from his spot on the front porch. He'd been waiting for me. It thrilled me to know he was eager to see me.

With a last-ditch effort to tame my hair, I made my way to where he stood. He crossed his arms over his chest and puckered his lips to disguise his smile.

"Late night?" he asked.

"No," I lied, and fought the urge to fidget with my hair once again. "Why?"

"You overslept."

I opened my mouth to deny it but stopped short when I saw a knowing smirk form on his lips. Edward wasn't making an assumption.

He knew.

I composed myself, hoping the shock I felt hadn't registered on my face. "Maybe if *someone* wasn't throwing rocks at my window in the middle of the night . . ."

"So it's my fault?"

"I'll have you know that someone called me hot today."

Edward's smile didn't falter, but his eyes blazed. His reaction pleased me. I wouldn't have taken him for the jealous type, although I couldn't fathom why he'd be jealous over me.

"Come inside."

I could tell the current conversation was over. I followed Edward into the house. He stopped to close the front door behind us. I was halfway to the stairs when he said my name.

"Bella?" There was an odd strain in his voice. I turned to him in time to see the final remnants of his smile fade. His nostrils flared as he stalked toward me. His eyes were jet black, just like the first day we'd met.

I backed away.

"You're hurt."

"What?"

His words made little sense at first, but then I remembered my fall this morning. My hand, the deck—it was only a small scrape. The dull ache had stopped hours ago. I pulled my shirt sleeve over my hand, as if the thin cotton would somehow serve as protection.

Edward reached for me. I gasped when he captured my wrist in his hand. His skin was cool and firm to the touch, a blatant reminder of what he was. For the first time, I felt afraid.

Wrenching my arm out of his grip, I took another step back. "I'm sorry," I stammered. "I didn't realize—"

“It’s fine.” Edward raised his hands, palms toward me. “Everything’s okay.”

“I can leave.” I didn’t like the way my voice shook or how my breaths came in jagged pants.

Edward crooked his finger, beckoning me. I went to him without a second thought. He took my hand in his and gently twisted my arm until the scratches from my run in with Wolf were visible. He brought my hand to his face and inhaled. The tip of his nose was cool as it brushed the sensitive skin on my wrist. His eyes fluttered closed, and he exhaled, sending goose bumps across my arm. His grip was firm as he held me in place, not that I dared to move.

Not that I wanted to move.

“That first day, in class,” I began, trying to keep my voice steady, “were you . . . smelling me?”

Edward ignored my question. “Are you afraid?”

“No.”

Edward opened his eyes. He smiled at me, like he was in on a secret I wasn’t privy to.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not afraid,” I insisted.

He hummed and returned his attention to my injured hand. “Your heartbeat tells me otherwise.”

“Maybe because I’ve never had a vampire this close to my radial artery before.” The words came out sharper than I intended. I didn’t want to admit he was right. Edward’s expression darkened. He dropped my hand and rested his arms at his sides. Losing contact made it feel like he were miles away instead of

a mere foot. I wanted to reach for him, to feel his cool touch and his breath on my skin again.

“My apologies. That was out of line.”

“It’s okay.”

Edward gave me a skeptical look.

“Really, I didn’t mind.”

Taking my uninjured hand, Edward led me to the living room. I sat on the loveseat, expecting him to occupy the couch across the room. Instead he sat next to me.

“How long can you stay?” he asked.

“Not long. I’m not a good liar, and I don’t know what to tell Charlie.”

“He doesn’t know you’re with me?”

I shook my head. I hoped Edward wouldn’t be offended. Charlie had made his opinion clear before the vampire rumors started circulating.

“That’s probably a good idea.” Edward’s response took me by surprise. I thought for sure he’d insist on my standing up for myself and telling Charlie the truth. Looked like vampires were sneaky characters after all.

Edward’s gaze dropped to my hand once again. He reached out and ran his thumb over the deepest scratch before jerking his arm away.

“I’m sorry.” He appeared flustered as he slid to the opposite end of the couch. “I missed my last opportunity to feed. It’s very distracting.”

“Oh.” I hated to think I was causing him discomfort, and I didn’t want to tempt fate. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go?”

“I want you here.”

“Okay, but if you make me your next meal, I’m going to be mad.” I fixed him with a stare I thought was threatening. A smile hinted at his lips. He had nice

lips. If I were ever going to have a vampire latched on to my neck, I wouldn't mind it being him.

"Duly noted." Edward scooted toward me, stopping closer than he was before. "Do I frighten you?"

Once again, my heart kick started in my chest. "I thought you already knew the answer."

"Maybe I misread the signs. Maybe I want to hear it from your own lips."

"A little, but I don't think you'll hurt me."

"Why? Because you know a lot of vampires and they're all of reputable character?"

"No. I . . ." I wasn't sure why I felt the way I did. "I trust you."

"You trust me?" he asked. I nodded. "Should I trust you?"

His question brought me up short. What threat could I be? I couldn't kill him. I didn't even think I could hurt him.

"Why did you come here, Bella?"

The flutter in my chest from his proximity turned into a stabbing pain. He asked me to come back. He showed up at my window last night. I poured over our brief conversation, trying to figure out if I'd misinterpreted something.

"I thought you wanted me here."

"I do," he insisted. "But I want to know why you want to be here. Most people who associate with vampires have ulterior motives. They crave the danger, the seduction, the promise of an immortal life. Why are *you* here?"

I didn't know how to answer his question. I wasn't looking for danger, and becoming a vampire had never even crossed my mind. How could I explain the pull I felt toward him when I didn't even know what caused it? I froze as I stared into the depths of his eyes. This close to him, I realized they hadn't

changed to black. They were dilated, so much so that only a sliver of green was visible around the edges.

“You fascinate me,” I admitted.

“Why?”

“You’re a vampire.”

“Rosalie is a vampire. Why’d you pick me?”

“I like you.” I shook my head, pulling myself out of his trance-like stare.

Edward grabbed a lock of hair from my ponytail and gave a gentle tug. “Who said you were hot?”

I hesitated. If Edward were the jealous type, I didn’t want Mike’s blood on my hands. “Why do you want to know?”

“Curious minds.”

“Mike Newton.”

Edward pursed his lips. “Oh.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Depends. Do you like boys who fawn over you?”

I grimaced. “Not particularly.”

“Then what kind of boys do you like?”

His question surprised me. Maybe he was only curious, but I hoped he was asking for more personal reasons.

“I don’t know.”

Edward leaned toward me. His breath was sweet—intoxicating—yet I wanted more. I wondered if he might kiss me. When I leaned closer, he sprang to his feet.

“AB negative,” he said, his voice tight. He began pacing the length of the room. “My favorite.”

I cradled my injured hand to my stomach. “You know my blood type?”

“It’s rare.” Edward came to a stop before me. “I’ve only had it a few times. That’s why I was so captivated by you in class. I could smell you the minute I walked into the room.”

“How often do you—” I swallowed, trying to erase my nausea. “—drink blood?”

“Usually every few weeks, but it’s been a while.”

“You said you missed your last opportunity. Why?”

Edward backed up until his legs hit the other couch. He sat and dropped his head into his hands. “You’ve read about the blood markets?”

When I didn’t answer, he looked at me. I nodded.

“There was one about a month ago, maybe more, just outside of Seattle. We went, but . . .” Edward shook his head. “The donors were of a masculine nature. Rosalie was ecstatic. Carlisle didn’t mind, but I couldn’t do it.”

“You don’t feed from men?” I asked. “Ever?”

“No.”

I couldn’t explain the jealousy that clawed at the pit of my stomach as I thought about the sheer number of women Edward must have drunk from in his lifetime. My mind wandered to a place I didn’t want it to be. “Is it a sexual thing?”

“It’s not,” Edward said. “At least not for me. But it is an intimate experience, nonetheless.”

His words didn’t do much to put me at ease.

“What happens if you don’t eat?”

Edward shrugged. “Pain, fatigue. It’s similar to human starvation without the relief of death.”

“When does it start?” I asked.

“It already has.”

My heart went out to him. I wished I could ease his suffering. “Do you need to drink human blood? What about animals?”

Edward’s eyes lit up as he laughed, the tension leaving his body. “Of course we need to drink human blood,” he said.

“Have you tried animal blood?” Even as I asked it, I felt silly. If animals could sustain vampires, I’m sure one of them would have figured it out by now.

“No, but Carlisle has tried. He said it was awful, so I took his word for it. Unlike with solid food.”

“Why? What happens with solid food?”

“Our bodies can metabolize liquids, but not solids. They need to be expelled. It’s not a pleasant experience.”

“Oh,” I said. “Do you ever drink other liquids?”

“I don’t. Some do. It’s an acquired taste. Even when it’s tolerable, it does nothing to sustain us. Carlisle drank tea for the longest time. Sometimes he’ll have coffee at work to blend in.”

“It doesn’t sound like he’ll be doing that much longer.”

“No. It doesn’t.”

I wanted to stay and talk to Edward all night, but one look at the clock told me I’d better get going to make it home in time.

“I should go,” I said.

Edward stood and held out his hand. I placed my injured hand in his.

“You’ll come back?”

“First chance I get.” I told him. He smiled and took one last whiff of my broken skin.

Chapter Eight

EVERYONE GAVE ME THE COLD SHOULDER at lunch again on Tuesday, so I was surprised when Angela sought me out after school ended.

“Hi, Bella,” she said, winded from running across the parking lot.

“Angela, hey. What’s up?”

“Do you have a dress for the dance on Friday? I’m going shopping in Port Angeles. I thought, if you didn’t have anything to wear, maybe you’d want to come with me?”

It took everything I had not to groan. When I told Mike I’d be his date, I hadn’t even thought about it being a semi-formal, and nothing in my closet was homecoming appropriate.

I didn’t want to go shopping. I wanted to see Edward again, but I had to stay home tomorrow, and I didn’t want to wait until the night before the dance to start looking.

“I do need a dress, actually. But I need to stop home and ask my dad first. He gave me a ridiculous curfew. The whole vampire thing.”

Angela’s face lit up. “I’ll follow you to your house. We can leave from there.”

Charlie sat on his usual chair in the living room, the remote in one hand and a beer in the other. He stood when Angela and I entered the room.

“Hey, Dad. This is Angela Webber.”

Angela gave Charlie a wave. He gave her a bright smile, his face radiating approval. Maybe extending my curfew would be easier than I anticipated.

“She asked me to go dress shopping with her. In Port Angeles. Tonight.”

Charlie’s eyes narrowed. “Dress shopping?”

“The homecoming dance is this Friday, Chief Swan. The stores here don’t have a very good selection,” Angela explained.

“Homecoming?” Charlie returned his attention to me. “Do you have a date?”

“Um . . . yeah. I’m going with Mike,” I mumbled.

Charlie’s mustache twitched. He may have hidden his smile, but the smugness was clear as day on his face. “I suppose that would be all right. But I want you to come straight home when you’re done, you understand?”

“Yes, Dad,” I sighed.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep her out of trouble,” Angela said. Charlie smiled again.

“I think my dad trusts you more than he trusts me,” I told her as we climbed in her truck.

She shrugged. “What can I say? Parents like me.”

I stared at the racks of dresses, completely overwhelmed with no idea where to start. Angela disappeared into the bright sea of satin and chiffon. For the first half hour, I tagged along behind her, offering my opinion as she posed and twirled in front of the mirrors.

“I really like the lavender.” Angela smoothed down the fabric of the skirt.

“It’s a pretty color.”

“But the cut of the seafoam is unique.”

“It looked good on you.”

“But it’s twice as much. My dad would kill me.”

“At least your dad doesn’t carry a gun.”

Angela turned to me, wincing. “I’m sorry. You’re not really into this, are you? You haven’t tried on a single dress.”

“No,” I groaned. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I need something to wear.”

Angela retreated to the dressing room. She emerged in her street clothes, the lavender dress slung over her arm. “Come on. I’ll help.”

“I don’t even know what size I am.”

She took me by the arm and dragged me through the rows of dresses, ignoring my childish protests.

“Hold this.” Angela thrust her dress into my hands. Then she started pulling dresses from the racks and holding them up to me. Her lips pursed in concentration as she scrutinized them. Some she kept, some she put back. By the time we’d made our way through the section, she held a pile of dresses in her arms.

“You want me to try on all of them?” I asked in disbelief.

“I suppose we can eliminate some. Short or long?”

“Short.”

Angela weeded through the dresses, discarding the long ones. “Here,” she said, offering me the ones that remained.

I eyed them skeptically. “That’s still a lot of dresses.”

“There’s less than ten!” Angela argued. “Fine. We’ll go through them first.” She held up the first dress.

“Too pink,” I said.

She tossed it on the pile of long dresses and held up the next. It was red with a sweetheart neckline and sheer material in areas I’d prefer to keep covered.

“Too romantic.”

Rolling her eyes, she held up the next. It was perfect, except for the color.

“Too school spirty.”

“Okay. How about I just pick one and you try it on?”

“Fine,” I huffed. Angela handed me a pastel green dress. The rhinestones and frilly skirt made my skin crawl, but once I put it on, I was surprised to discover I really liked it. It wasn’t as gaudy as I expected, and the color reminded me of Edward’s eyes.

“This works,” I called through the dressing room door.

“Really?” Angela asked in surprise. “Great! Let’s find accessories and get out of here.”

“Hey, Angela,” I said as she handed me a pair of shoes to try on. All evening I’d been trying to come up with a non-pathetic way to ask why everyone had been

acting so cold, but I kept coming up short. She seemed like a genuine person. I hoped she'd tell me the truth. "I can't shake the feeling that everyone's upset with me."

Angela was suddenly very focused on the straps of her shoes. Her cheeks tinged pink. I waited for her to tell me that everyone knew I'd been to see Edward. I couldn't think of another reason for being shunned.

"It'll blow over," she said. "Give it another week."

"What did I do?"

"Jessica's jealous that Mike asked you out."

My mouth fell open. "I didn't even know she liked Mike."

"She doesn't," Angela said. "But he always asks her to school functions, and this time he chose you. You've seen how she is. She'll forget all about it after this weekend, and everything will be back to normal."

If Jessica could dismiss her friends so easily over a boy she didn't even like, I wasn't sure I wanted it back to normal. I wondered what she'd do if she knew I'd been spending time with Edward. The thought made me smile.

"You and Mike can hang out with me and Ben on Friday. I'm not afraid of Jessica's wrath."

"Thanks, Ang."

"No problem."

Charlie was leaving for the station when I arrived home. It was much later than he'd been going in to work lately, and I got the distinct feeling he'd been waiting for me. Any thoughts I had of visiting Edward flew out the window. It was an hour round trip, and I didn't want to risk Charlie calling the house or

driving by and seeing my car gone. A curfew sucked, but the last thing I needed was to be grounded.

I didn't sleep well that night. Each noise from outside had me listening harder. Once I even ran to the window, thinking I heard Edward throwing stones.

It was only the wind rustling the trees.

School continued as it had the day before. I sat next to Angela at lunch, and she gave me her undivided attention. If she saw the nasty glares Jessica threw her way, she didn't seem to care.

Mr. Varner allowed me to check out a camera so I could work on my project outside of school. Unfortunately I couldn't pick it up until after last period, which meant Mike had plenty of time to track down my car in the parking lot.

"You didn't oversleep today," Mike said.

"Nope."

"I called you last night. Your dad said you weren't home."

"No. Angela and I went dress shopping for Friday."

"Did you get one? Tell me about it?"

"Um . . . it's green."

"Sounds nice. Hey, do you like pie? Wednesdays are buy one get one at the diner. Lots of people go after school."

"Pie?"

"Yeah! Or you can get whatever. I thought it would be nice to get to know each other better." Mike shifted his weight, wringing his hands as he waited for an answer.

The last thing I wanted to do was get to know Mike over pie, but I felt bad blowing him off when he'd worked up the courage to ask. Maybe if I spent time

with him, it would make Friday less awkward. Besides, if I went now, I had a reason to escape.

“That sounds nice, Mike,” I said. “But I can’t be out long. My dad’s having guests over tonight, and I’m making dinner.”

Mike didn’t seem to mind being squeezed into my schedule, and before I knew it, we were entering the diner. Quite a few kids from school were there. Someone at a large round table waved as we walked by, gesturing for us to join them, but Mike selected a table for two in the back.

A waitress approached us—a plump middle-aged woman with a friendly smile. “What can I get you kids today?”

“Berry cobbler and a Coke. Have you ever eaten here?” Mike asked me. “They have the best pie.”

“No, but my dad comes here all the time.”

“Who’s your dad, sweetie?” the waitress asked.

“Chief Swan.”

The woman’s eyes widened. I swore her cheeks tinted pink. “Yes, of course. Chief Swan: our best customer. What can I get for you?” she asked without meeting my eyes.

“I’ll have the same thing, I guess.”

“Thanks, Cora!” Mike said as she walked away.

I assumed Mike’s assessment of the pie was skewed due to lack of variety in a small town, but it actually was the best pie I’d ever eaten. Mike was a nice boy, even if he did come across as a bit desperate and needy. He told me about his sisters and his job at the family hardware store. I tried to pay attention, but my mind kept wandering back to Edward. I wondered what he did when he was alone, how his family acted when no one was watching. Did he think about me? Was he worried that I hadn’t returned?

I checked the time. I'd have to leave soon in order to swing by the grocery store and have dinner ready by six.

"Sorry, Mike. I really should be going."

"That's okay." He pulled out his wallet and tossed some cash on the table. It wasn't much, but it still felt too date-like for my comfort.

"Let me pay half."

"No way! It's buy one get one, and I was coming anyway." Mike shrugged. "See you at school tomorrow?"

"Sure," I said. "Thanks."

Mike joined his friends at another table as I exited the diner. I was fairly certain I heard hoots and whistles as the door swung shut behind me.

Chapter Nine

BILLY AND HIS SON were already at the house when I arrived. I struggled to carry my backpack, the camera, and the grocery bags to the house. The door opened just as I managed to shift everything to one arm.

A boy stood on the other side, wearing a wide smile. He had tanned skin and spiky black hair. “Hey, Bella!” he said, reaching for me.

I opened my mouth to tell him I had it under control, but he yanked the bags from my arms. I scrambled to catch the camera before it hit the floor. He didn’t seem to notice as he carried the groceries into the kitchen and began emptying the bags.

“How was your day?” he asked.

I stared as he arranged the ingredients on the kitchen table. “Do I know you?”

He straightened and turned to face me, his face falling. “Oh, sorry. I’m Jake. Billy’s son.”

“Have we met? Do you go to my school?” There was something familiar about him, but I couldn’t quite place from where.

“We played together when we were kids.”

“We did?”

Jake folded the bags and stepped away from the table, shifting uncomfortably. “Yeah. You made me eat mud pies. You probably don’t remember. It was a long time ago.”

I didn’t remember, though I understood why he did. “Oh, yeah,” I lied. “Sorry about that.”

He waved it off.

“Where are our dads?”

“They’re out back looking at Charlie’s new hunting rifle.”

“Ah,” I said. “They’ll probably be out there until dinner’s ready. I’m making lasagna. Want to help?”

“Billy tells me you got your license,” Charlie said to Jake as we gathered around the tiny dining room table.

“Yep,” Jake said proudly. “Now I can pick up chicks.”

“What chicks?” Billy asked.

I stifled my giggle as I served the lasagna.

“I know lots of chicks,” Jake insisted.

“Sure you do.”

“Kids these days,” Charlie said. “Bella’s going to the homecoming dance with her boyfriend. She wasn’t even going to tell me.”

Across the table, Jake’s eyes widened. “Who?”

“He’s not my boyfriend. I’ve only known him a week.” I slid a plate in front of Charlie and turned my attention to Jake. “His name’s Mike. We’re just friends.”

Jake seemed to relax.

“Mhmm,” Charlie said, mimicking Billy’s skepticism. I bit my tongue to stay silent. The more I argued, the more he would doubt me. Besides, I’d probably say something stupid, like blurting out that I had a crush on a vampire.

“This lasagna is delicious, Bella,” Billy said. Jake agreed through a full mouth.

I tried not to gloat.

“Thanks. My dad prefers diner food.”

For the briefest second, Charlie froze with his fork halfway to his mouth. “I like the diner. It’s quick and easy. I drive right by it every night.” He shrugged and took a bite.

I watched him, but he wouldn’t make eye contact with me. I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was something more behind Charlie’s love of the diner.

Having Billy and Jake over was a refreshing change from the norm. I’d forgotten how nice it was to actually have company for dinner, as opposed to eating by myself. But the way Jake’s stare lingered made me uncomfortable. I wrote it off as my paranoia that everyone knew I’d been to see Edward.

It was almost midnight when the Blacks finally left. I was dead tired, but I couldn’t sleep. There was too much on my mind. Going out with Mike had been a mistake. I worried it had given him the wrong idea about us. Lots of people had seen us there as well. I didn’t care if Jessica was upset with me, but I felt bad for Angela, being caught in the middle. There were probably all sorts of

rumors circulating about Mike and me. For once, I was happy Edward wasn't in school.

Edward.

Tomorrow couldn't come fast enough. This was the longest three days of my entire life. I wondered what he was doing and if he thought about me.

I hopped out of bed and stood before the window. Shadows danced across the lawn as the trees moved in the moonlight. On the surface, it looked no different than it had all summer. But it was different now, because Edward was a part of my life. I slid open the pane and stuck my head into the cool night air.

"Edward," I whispered into the darkness.

There was no response. I wondered what that meant. If he were concerned about me or whether I'd return, would he be here now? Or hadn't he been thinking of me at all?

My heart sank as I closed the window and crawled back into bed.

As I pulled into the Cullens' drive the next afternoon, my nerves started to get the best of me. I'd been looking forward to seeing Edward since I left his house on Monday night, but now that I was here, I started to doubt whether the feeling was mutual. As much as I didn't want Mike pursuing me, at least it was obvious he liked me. For all I knew, I was projecting my own feelings on Edward. I reminded myself that he did come to my house, even if it happened days ago.

My knock went unanswered. Carlisle was probably at work, but where would Edward and Rosalie go if they were trying to keep a low profile?

I tiptoed along the porch until I reached the window. The curtains were closed, but I managed to peek inside through a gap in the center. Nothing seemed amiss. I knocked again, louder this time.

Once again no one came. My heart fell, but before I turned to leave, I grabbed the door handle. I didn't expect it to move, but it turned easily, the door creaking as it opened. I froze in the threshold, looking around, listening for any sounds.

"Hello?" I said as I stepped inside. It probably wasn't the best idea to sneak into a vampire's house, but I wasn't going to leave now when I'd gotten this far. "Edward?"

When no one greeted me, I took two tentative steps and then bolted up the stairs. I felt like a child again, racing to my bed before the monster dwelling beneath caught me.

Only this time, the monsters were real.

I stopped outside of Edward's room and knocked on his door. "Edward?"

"Bella?" he asked, barely audible. Something about his voice was off. I didn't wait for him to come to the door, opting to let myself in instead.

Edward lay on the bed. He pushed himself into a seated position when he saw me and scooted back to the headboard.

"You came," he said.

I approached him slowly and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Of course I did."

"I thought..." Edward shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I'm glad you're here."

I took in my surroundings then. The shades were drawn, casting the room in a gray light. Edward's clothing was wrinkled, his hair in disarray.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

Edward gave me a lopsided smile. "I am now." He reached for my hand, the one that had been injured, and carefully inspected the skin. "It healed nicely."

"It was barely a scratch."

"I know." He sighed. "I'm glad it's healed. It's easier for me this way. But I'd be lying if I said I wasn't a little disappointed." Leaning down, Edward grazed his nose across my palm.

"Don't worry. I'm sure I'll injure myself again soon enough."

I gulped as Edward's lips opened and his cool breath fanned across my hand. His eyes shot to mine, and he lowered our hands. As unnerving as it was to have his teeth so close to me, I didn't want him to stop. I left my hand in his, and he traced his thumb over the marks that were barely visible.

"Where is everyone?" I asked.

"Carlisle's at the hospital."

"And Rosalie?"

Edward frowned. "She didn't let you in?"

"No one answered the door. I let myself in."

"Ah," Edward said, frowning. "Maybe she didn't hear you." Something about his tone wasn't convincing. I wondered if it would be more accurate to say she didn't want to let me in.

"So no vampire super hearing?"

"What was that?" he asked.

I repeated myself, a little louder. Edward grinned and laughed under his breath.

"Oh, I see. You've got jokes."

"Is this the part where you ask me to share all my secrets, Bella?"

At first I thought he was joking, but there was something serious behind his eyes. "Do you want to tell me your secrets?"

Edward's smile faded. "No vampire super hearing," he said, "though we do hear quite well. Speed, strength, vision—everything is enhanced after the change, but we're still limited by our bodies."

"But you're a vampire," I argued.

Edward pursed his lips. "We're still human."

I let those words sink in.

"Can you turn into a bat?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

"No. Are you disappointed?"

"A little." I smiled to let him know I was kidding.

"Is there anything else you're dying to know?"

There were a million questions in my head. I didn't want to come across as nosy or rude. But Edward had asked, and so far he seemed fairly open to talking about it.

"What about the sun?"

"The sun." Edward glanced toward the closed window, pensive. For a moment, I worried my question had crossed a line. "You know how, in movies and TV, when a vampire goes outside their skin burns and they eventually combust?"

I nodded, forming a mental cue of follow up questions.

"Well, it's not exactly like that. We will burn, but it's directly related to the strength of the sun. An overcast day in Washington doesn't pose much of a risk. Being outside is unpleasant, but tolerable. There aren't enough daylight hours to cause much harm. A sunny day in Arizona, however . . ."

I thought about the vampire I'd seen in Phoenix, recalling his skin as he'd stepped into the hot southern sunshine.

"That's when vampires sparkle."

"Unconfirmed."

I opened my mouth to argue—about vampires, of all things. Edward gave me a sly smile.

“Jokes,” I said.

“Jokes.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Very much so. We avoid direct sunlight at all costs. Once our body—” Edward pressed his lips together. In that moment, he looked so vulnerable. My heart raced.

“Go on,” I encouraged.

“Once our body begins to break down—sparkle, if you will—we are as mortal as one can get. Killing a vampire is almost as easy as killing a human.”

I swallowed, my heart in my throat. Edward had just told me one of the biggest kept vampire secrets. A heaviness hung in the room that wasn't there before. I tried to come up with a way to lighten the mood.

“So . . . no combustion?”

“Combustion happens after the sparkling stage. Big ol' ball of flames.”

Edward smiled again, and for the life of me I couldn't tell if he was kidding. I decided to change the subject.

“How did you become a vampire?”

“Are you interested in the process or me personally?”

“Both,” I said.

“Carlisle changed me after my parents died. He wanted a companion, and he didn't think anyone would miss me. He said I reminded him of the son he had in another life.”

“Were you okay with that?”

“I was, and then I wasn’t. After a few decades it got boring. That’s when the gem downstairs entered the picture. Carlisle can do many amazing things in the field of medicine, but a matchmaker he is not.”

“He changed Rosalie for you?”

“More or less. It backfired from the beginning. You see, I wasn’t interested, and she already had someone.”

“How awful! Did she ever see him again?”

“Yes. Let’s just say it didn’t end well, being a newborn vampire and all.”

“How sad.”

Edward shrugged. “We staged a bear attack to alleviate suspicion.”

“Oh.” I wasn’t sure how to feel about that. “And Carlisle, he didn’t want someone for himself?”

“Carlisle’s wife and son have long departed this world. He doesn’t talk about his past; I know very little about his human life. What I do know is that leaving his family was the hardest thing he’s ever done. He stayed as long as he could, but eventually his lack of aging raised suspicions. He had to keep his secret safe, so he left to protect them. He hasn’t been interested in another romantic relationship since.”

“Okay, that’s even sadder.”

Edward smiled and tapped my chin with his finger. “Run of the mill vampire stuff. Nothing to be sad about. It happens more often than you might think.”

“Still. To leave the people you love. It must be awful.”

“That’s why I don’t want to be close to anyone. An eternity is too long to be heartbroken.”

There was a knock on the door, and then Carlisle poked his head inside.

“Did you get it?” Edward asked, urgency filling his voice.

Carlisle shook his head. Edward slumped against the headboard, squeezing his eyes closed as his hands came to cover his face.

“I’m sorry, Edward. It’s too risky. They’re keeping a close watch on everything I do. If I get caught stealing blood—”

“I understand,” Edward said.

“I’m sorry,” Carlisle said again before closing the door.

“Stealing blood?” I questioned.

“Carlisle takes from the blood bank sometimes, when we can’t find a food source.” Edward dropped his hands, his face composed once again.

“Are you okay?” I asked him again.

“I’m immortal, remember? I’ll live.”

“But you’re in pain.” I said, remembering his comment from three days ago. “Am I making it worse? Are you sure you don’t want me to leave?”

“No.” Edward leaned forward and reached for me again, taking both my hands in his. “Your company is a much welcome distraction. You don’t know how nice it is to talk to someone new. I’ll be okay. Tell me something to take my mind off it. How was your day?”

The last thing I wanted to do was relive my day, but if it made Edward feel better, I would suffer through it again.

“It was fine,” I offered. He waited for me to elaborate. “School was . . . school, I guess. Oh, I hit someone in the head with a volleyball during gym.”

Edward snickered, and I smiled, glad to make him laugh.

“My friend Angela was out sick today, so I spent my lunch hour in the library so I wouldn’t be shunned by everyone.”

Edward narrowed his eyes. His lips formed a tight line. Mentioning lunch probably wasn’t the best idea considering the circumstances. I began to apologize when Edward interrupted.

“Why are you being shunned?”

“Oh, it’s just one person, really. Jessica. And her friends, I guess,” I stammered. “Angela said it’s not a big deal. She’s just jealous that I’m going to the dance with Mike. Anyway, I really hope she feels better —”

“What dance?” Edward dropped my hands and sat straighter.

“Homecoming.”

“You’re going to homecoming with Mike Newton?” Edward scoffed. His mouth hardened. A fire blazed behind his eyes. I felt him pulling away from me, both physically and emotionally. “You should leave.”

“What?” I stammered. He’d spoken so quietly I wasn’t sure I heard him correctly.

“Leave,” he snarled, louder this time.

I jumped to my feet, shocked. I had no idea how to respond. I didn’t even know what I’d done to make him angry. Surely he couldn’t be mad that I was going to homecoming. It was just a silly dance. I barely even knew Mike. I wanted to defend myself, tell him it wasn’t like that, but the anger on his face stopped me short.

“Edward—”

“Go.”

Without knowing what else to do, I retreated from his room. I looked back at him at the last minute, just in time to see him drop his head into his hands.

Chapter Ten

CHARLIE TRIED TO START A CONVERSATION when I arrived home from Edward's, but it was hard to talk with the lump in my throat. If he noticed my distress, he didn't draw attention to it.

I made chicken for dinner, frying enough for Charlie. It was a manly, unhealthy meal. Comfort food. Something they'd serve at the diner. I hoped he liked it.

When he left for work before it finished cooking, I broke down.

Once I got the tears out of my system, anger took their place. Charlie was so ungrateful. I only wanted to do something nice for him. And who did Edward think he was? He had no right to be upset with me for having a date to homecoming. He wasn't my boyfriend. He had no say in whom I spent my time with. It wasn't like he asked me. Edward wasn't even a student anymore.

In a fit of rage, I tossed Charlie's portion of chicken into the trash. Clearly he had no interest in eating anything I made. That was fine. I was done trying to

please him. He could go back to eating all his meals at the diner. For all I knew, he and Cora had something going on. Maybe that was why he stopped there before his shifts.

I had half a mind to call him at work and yell. Instead I grabbed a book, retrieved the chicken from the trash, and headed to the front porch. Wolf was there, as I expected, his coat turning from brown to gray in the dusky twilight. I dropped the chicken onto the porch next to his untouched kibble.

“Here. This is probably better than that shit Charlie feeds you.”

A rickety old two-person swing sat in the corner. I brushed the dirt and leaves off the cushions and sat. I barely read a paragraph of my book before Wolf jumped on the swing next to me, causing the hinges to groan. It took so much effort not to fall off that I didn’t realize he had the chicken in his mouth until it was too late. The bone crunched as he bit down, smearing grease and dog drool on my lap.

“Oh, gross.”

I didn’t have the heart to push him off, so I let him sit next to me. Once he was done eating, he placed his head on my lap and sighed in the dramatic, whistling way dogs do. I tried to focus on the book in my hands, but each noise from the woods had me listening harder. Each rustle of wind through the trees reminded me of Edward. I didn’t want to think about his reaction tonight or what it meant for our friendship. How could I go back to my normal life knowing he existed? What was my normal life?

The most exciting thing that had happened since I moved here was meeting Edward. As lame as it sounded, he was my life. I didn’t want to be alone while Charlie worked nights, and there was no one else I wanted to spend time with.

As much as I wanted to return to him, I decided to wait it out. Let Edward come to me. I refused to believe there wasn't something more between us. He had to come back.

That night I left my window open, just in case he arrived.

I woke up in the morning, still alone.

On Friday, my worst fears were confirmed when Ben told me Angela was too sick to go to the homecoming dance.

"Are you sure I can't pick you up?" Mike asked as we left school.

"I'm sure. Charlie has a gun. Trust me; it's better this way."

"I'm not afraid of Chief Swan. Besides, if he arrests me, I have connections."

"Who are your connections?" I laughed.

"Officer Forge is my uncle."

"Wait," I said. "Waylon is your uncle?"

"Yep. He's got me out of trouble a couple times," Mike said proudly. "Stick with me and you'll be invincible."

"I'm not so sure about that. Charlie isn't exactly the kind of cop, or dad, to look the other way."

Mike shrugged. "You'll call me if you change your mind, right?"

"I'll see you at the dance," I told him.

I went straight home after school. Originally I intended to go to Edward's, but that was before he kicked me out the day before. By the time I finished my homework, it was time for dinner. I made enough food for myself. Charlie didn't comment as I ate and cleaned the kitchen without offering him anything.

“Bella, I’m okay with you going out tonight, but you come straight home once you leave the school. Understand?”

I suppressed an eye roll. “Don’t worry, dad. I’ll come straight home where the vampires will never find me.”

“I’m serious, Bella. I know how kids are. I know what happens on Friday nights in a town with nothing to do. If you’re at home, it means you’re not out with your friends looking for trouble.”

“What am I going to do, get drunk and go vampire hunting? I’ll be fine.”

“Straight home,” he repeated. “I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“Fine.”

As Charlie put on his jacket and pulled his car keys from his pocket, my maternal instincts got the best of me.

“Are you eating at the diner?” I asked.

“Of course,” Charlie answered. “Wouldn’t miss Fish and Chips Friday.”

“Do you know Cora?”

Charlie froze with his fingers wrapped around the doorknob. “Cora?” His voice was an octave too high. He cleared his throat. “Yeah, sure. Why do you ask?”

“No reason.”

“Cora’s a nice woman.” He said it like he was trying to convince me. “Straight home,” he added once again before closing the door behind himself.

It was hard for me to imagine Charlie dating anyone, but his reaction confirmed my suspicions. Something was going on. I tried not to let it bother me that he was hiding it.

I spent the rest of the night getting ready for the dance. I showered and curled my hair. Then I put on a little mascara and lip gloss and squirted myself with perfume—something I rarely wore. When it was time to leave, I grabbed

the camera and headed downstairs. If I had to suffer through this night, at least I could take some photos for my project.

Wolf was sleeping on the porch as I stepped outside. I focused the camera on him and took a picture. The sound of the shutter surprised him. He jumped up, yelping as he took off down the stairs.

“Scaredy-dog,” I muttered.

Mike was waiting for me outside the school. He wrapped his arm around me as I joined him, and I tried not to cringe as he pulled me into a hug. I managed to evade his kiss at the last minute; his lips grazed my cheek instead.

“Mike!” Tyler called as he approached us. “Guess what I got.” He patted the front of his jacket.

“Nice work.” Mike turned to me. “Let’s take a little stroll in the woods before we go inside.”

I followed Mike and Tyler to the back of the school where the forest butted up to the football field. We must not have been very stealthy, because Jessica and Lauren spotted us and ran to catch up. Tyler lit a cigarette and then pulled a flask from his jacket pocket. Mike was the first to take a swig. He handed it to me.

“What is it?” I sniffed the bottle. I was fairly confident the vapors burned off my nose hairs.

“Moonshine,” Tyler said.

“Come on, Bella,” Jessica said. “It’s awful, but tonight will be funner if you drink some! Just take a sip.”

Jessica didn’t seem insincere. Quite the opposite, actually. Could she really be over Mike asking me out already? It seemed like she was overcompensating for ignoring me all week. Maybe she didn’t want Mike to witness her being a bitch.

Mike still held the flask out to me, a dumb smile on his face. Tyler took a drag off his cigarette, and Lauren, like usual, acted like she was too cool to be here. I took the flask and threw back a shot, coughing and sputtering as the liquor burned my throat.

“That a girl,” Mike said. Jessica removed the bottle from my hand and did the same. It made its way around our circle. The second time it came to me, I passed it on. Burning a hole through my esophagus once in my lifetime was enough, though I had to admit the concept of homecoming was a little less dreadful as we entered the school.

“Let’s dance,” Mike said, pulling me toward the flashing lights in the gym.

“Oh, no,” I said, already swaying. “I’m not so good on my feet sober.”

“I won’t let you fall.”

I shook my head and backed away from him.

“I’ll dance with you,” Jessica said, all too eager.

“Um,” Mike hesitated, looking toward me with pleading eyes. If he thought I was going to save him, he was wrong. “Yeah, okay. One dance.” Jessica grabbed his arm and led him into the crowd.

I made my way to the bleachers and sat, taking in the surrounding view. Balloons and streamers hung from the ceiling. I remembered too late that my camera was still in my car and cursed under my breath.

One dance turned into two, and then three. Fifteen minutes later, Mike appeared from the dance floor. He sat next to me and brushed the sweaty hair from his forehead.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“It’s okay. She likes you.”

Mike laughed. “No she doesn’t. She dumped me in eighth grade. She just doesn’t want me to be with anyone else.”

Mike and I chatted for a while. He kept his hands and his mouth to himself, for which I was thankful. It didn't take long for the moonshine buzz to wear off. Once it did, I was more than ready to leave.

I was trying to think of a gentle way to tell Mike I was ready to go home when a couple of guys joined us on the bleachers.

"Hey, Mike," one of them said. "We were at Newton's today. Your mom said they were out of kits. Can you hook us up?"

"How many do you need?"

"How much," the other boy asked.

"Two fifty."

"We'll take two."

"I've got some in my car," Mike said. "Want to come with?" he asked me.

Out of curiosity I followed the boys into the parking lot. Mike stopped by his car and opened the trunk. Inside were a half dozen brown leather briefcases.

I watched as each boy discreetly passed Mike a wad of cash and picked out a case.

"Thanks man," one said. Then they disappeared.

"What are those?" I asked.

A sly smile spread across Mike's face. He pulled one out and opened it. I gasped when I saw the contents.

"Vampire slaying kit," Mike said. He pointed to the items as he listed off the inventory. "Wooden stakes, garlic, garlic powder, garlic extract, holy water, rosaries, crucifix, bible, silver bracelets, silver bullets, UV lights—"

"You're selling vampire slaying kits for two hundred fifty dollars?"

Mike confirmed with a nod. "Cash."

"Why?"

"People have a right to protect themselves."

“You’re ripping people off! You don’t honestly think this stuff works, do you?”

“Of course I do. Why? Did you learn how to kill vampires in Phoenix too? Any secrets you’d like to share?”

Secrets.

My mind went to Edward. He’d shared his secrets with me when I asked. He’d shared the ultimate secret. And here I was, on a date with someone who was selling weapons against vampires.

I felt sick.

“Every bit of information helps,” Mike continued. “We’re going to need it when we go after those Cullen monsters.”

I froze, the blood draining from my face. “The Cullens? When?”

“Soon. My dad is making one more set of kits. Then it’s on.”

My stomach dropped. I’d always written off the traditional slaying methods as fiction, just like traditional vampires. But Mike spoke with such confidence. Was he right? Maybe Edward didn’t tell me the whole truth. Could he and his family survive an angry mob storming them with these archaic devices?

Fear and anger bubbled inside me, and all the words I wanted to say got lost on the tip of my tongue.

“Fuck you, Mike!” I didn’t wait around to see his reaction, but the sound of his footsteps followed me.

“Bella, wait!” His hand came down on my shoulder. I shook him off and spun around. Tears filled my eyes.

“The Cullens are people, just like you and me, and if you’re going to start attacking them, I’m going to buy one of your stupid kits and stake you through the heart!”

I shoved Mike in the chest with all the strength I had. He stumbled backward before losing his fight with gravity and falling to the ground. I raced to my car before he could pull himself together and catch up to me.

ANTI-VAMPIRE MOVEMENT GROWS VIOLENT

Reports of human injuries and property damage increase as protest groups grow.

By Vanessa Wolfe, *Seattle Independent Journal*

Posted September 19

In the previous weeks, anti-vampire protest groups have grown in popularity. These groups have picketed at courthouses, state capitols, and even in front of vampire residences and places of employment.

Not all assemblies remain peaceful. In Chicago, IL, fire was set to a museum when administration refused to terminate vampire staff, causing serious injuries to employees and patrons and hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage.

For now vampires are lying low, and it seems the only action protest groups can take is to turn on human supporters. A nurse working at a vampire blood donation clinic in Buffalo, NY, was attacked in the parking lot after her shift. She suffered multiple fractures and a concussion. Police in Columbus, OH, stood by as a fight broke out between protesters and a group of passersby. Members from both parties received critical injuries.

The desired results of these protests are unclear. Driving vampires from their homes and businesses won't rid the world of them. Removing vampires from the workforce may even be detrimental to our economy.

In a poll conducted last week, over 85 percent of Seattle residents who considered themselves vampire supporters were afraid to comment publicly about their stance. Some of the most common reasons cited included fear of losing their jobs and fear of bodily harm.

Have you publicly supported vampires? Whether the outcome was good or bad, we want to hear your story. Please contact [...].

Chapter Eleven

THE THIRTY-MINUTE DRIVE to Edward's gave me time to cool down. I needed to explain that I never meant to betray him. I would do everything I could to make things right between us, even if it meant Charlie grounding me for life.

My anger turned to heartache the more I thought about Charlie. He worked closely with Mike's uncle Waylon. If the Newtons were making slaying kits, did that mean law enforcement was involved? Was Charlie's warning to me because he knew what was in store?

I didn't know what to think, but I refused to believe my dad could hate anyone so blindly. His words the day I asked about Edward came back to me. He'd said Edward wasn't safe. He wanted him removed from the school. Had he known what the Cullens were?

I knew one thing: if Charlie was in any way involved, I wanted nothing to do with him. He could ground me all he wanted, but he'd have to tie me down to keep me from running away.

When I arrived at the house, I didn't bother knocking. I opened the door and came face-to-face with Carlisle.

"Bella," he said, looking surprised to see me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think—" I shook my head. "Sorry."

Carlisle held up his hands. "It's all right. I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You came back." I turned to see Edward leaning against the doorway. Even with his slouched form and the dark circles under his eyes, he was beautiful.

"I know you don't want me here. Just hear me out," I said, trying to collect my thoughts and focus on the reason I returned. "Mike—he has these vampire slaying kits. And I don't know if they'd even work, but he's selling them. I don't know how many, but they're making more, and they're planning on . . . I'm not even sure. Attacking you?" I stopped rambling and sucked in a deep breath. I couldn't look at him. "Edward, I'm so, so sorry. If I'd known what he was doing I never would have—"

I jumped as Edward's hands came to my shoulders. I opened my eyes to see him standing at arm's length, looking me up and down.

"You look beautiful," he said.

"Edward, they want to kill you!" I turned around, hoping for a more urgent response from Carlisle, but he was gone. I couldn't understand why Edward didn't react to what I'd told him, but then his words sank in. "I do?"

He took me by the waist and drew me closer. "Dance with me."

"What?"

"I've never been to a homecoming. Dance with me."

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as he pulled our bodies together. Edward swayed and turned us in a slow circle. We danced in silence. As his hand skimmed along my back, I wondered if I was dreaming. When he exhaled, I knew I wasn't. His breath against my cheek felt too real to be imaginary. I laid my head on his shoulder and tightened my hold.

Edward stopped our slow rhythm. He whimpered as he backed away, extracting himself from my arms.

"What's wrong?" I asked. He shook his head. "Tell me."

"I'm so thirsty, Bella."

"Carlisle couldn't get any blood yet?"

"No, and Rosalie hasn't found a market. They're taking me to Port Angeles tonight after the bars close. No one will recognize us there. It should be easy to find someone too drunk to care. Or notice. I don't like feeding without consent, but at this point I don't have much of a choice."

At first I was relieved to hear this news. I didn't want Edward to suffer, even if it meant preying on an unassuming human. I pictured him outside a bar, waiting for someone to leave and stumble down a dark alley on his own. Then I remembered Edward didn't feed from men. The image in my head changed. I imagined him leaning against the building, smiling at a beautiful woman, seducing her into leaving with him. I hated the thought of him being close to someone else. Of his lips being on her skin.

"That doesn't seem right."

"I'm a vampire, Bella! I need blood. Finding a willing victim isn't always easy."

"Then drink from me."

Edward frowned. In confusion or disgust, I wasn't sure.

"You want me to feed from you?"

Hearing the words out loud made my stomach roil. I pushed thoughts of blood and broken skin from my mind.

“I don’t like seeing you like this.”

“You would do that for me?”

I nodded and swallowed back my nerves. A smile hinted at Edward’s lips. He took my hand and led me to the stairs. My feet felt heavy, like they were encased in concrete boots. My pulse whooshed in my ears. By the time we reached his room, my legs were shaking so badly I had to sit on the bed.

Edward retrieved a small leather case from his closet. He unzipped it and laid it on the bed. Among the contents were a set of scalpels, bandages, and something that resembled a sewing kit.

“Am I going to need stitches?”

“I hope not.”

Edward selected a blade and inspected it.

“You’re going to cut me? I thought you were going to bite.”

Every instinct in my body screamed to run. He was going to cut me open. I didn’t know what to expect, but it sure as hell wasn’t this.

Edward placed the scalpel back in the case. “I don’t have fangs, Bella. I really don’t think you want me to rip open your skin with my teeth, lest you want to give a second thought to those stitches.” He took a small packet from the case and tore it open. “Lie down?”

I lay back on the bed. Edward took my arm and stretched it out to the side.

“Not the neck?” I asked.

I flinched as he swept the antiseptic wipe over the inside of my wrist. His focus remained on my arm as he shook his head.

“Too intimate.”

“Do you do this for every girl you feed from?” I tried to play it cool, but my quivering voice gave away my nerves.

“Sterility is important.” He wiped off the blade and then his lips. I took a shaky breath. “It’ll hurt, but only for a moment.”

“Okay.”

“And before you ask, this gesture is solely for you.”

He bowed his head. I tensed as his lips came to my wrist. He inhaled and then kissed me. I closed my eyes, basking in the sensation of his skin on mine. It lasted only a moment before the blade pierced my skin.

Before I could cry out, his lips were on me again. The pain faded to a dull ache. I would have been all right had I not caught sight of the scalpel resting on the bed. My vision narrowed and blurred. I tried to call out to him, but my mouth was dry and no sound came out. Turning my head to the ceiling, I concentrated on breathing. I would not pass out.

Slowly, the nausea dissipated. The burning in my wrist flared with each mouthful of blood he pulled from my body. The moonshine from earlier in the evening had nothing on the fuzziness that clouded my head. My eyes drifted closed on their own accord.

I wasn’t sure how long Edward drank from me, but his cool touch on my cheek brought me back to reality.

“Come back to me please.”

I opened my eyes. Edward smiled down at me.

“There you are. How are you feeling?”

Edward helped me when I struggled to sit up. I pressed my palm against my pounding forehead and groaned.

“It’ll pass,” he told me.

I was afraid to look at the wound he'd inflicted. When I glanced down, I was relieved to see white gauze shielding the cut from view.

"No stitches needed. Keep it on for a day."

"Thank you," I told him.

Edward laughed under his breath. "Thank you."

"Did you get enough?"

"I feel like a new man."

"What time is it? I should go." I swung my feet over the edge of the bed and swayed when I tried to stand. Edward steadied me.

"I'd prefer it if you stayed."

"Can't. Charlie."

"Then at least let me drive you home."

Edward helped me to my car. He didn't let go of me until I was safely seated on the passenger side. My camera sat on the dash. I picked it up, turning it over in my hands.

"If I took a picture of you, would you show up in the photo?"

"I don't know. Guess you'll have to take one and find out."

We drove back to my house in silence. I half expected Charlie to have come home from work early, but the driveway was empty when we arrived.

"Are you going to walk home?"

"Eventually."

"You're staying?"

"I think I should." Edward lowered his voice and leaned closer. His eyes sparkled in the glow of the street lights. "There are all sorts of monsters running around out here."

Even though I was steadier on my feet, Edward kept his arm around me as we made our way inside. I was excited to spend more time with him, but I was

also nervous about being alone with him all night. I tried to remember if I'd left dirty underwear on the floor, or anything else equally embarrassing.

I entered my room first and kicked the clothes I'd worn to school earlier today under the bed. Edward hovered in the doorway, watching as I found something appropriate to change into. I was more than ready for this dress to come off.

"Excuse me for a moment," I said as I pushed past him and into the bathroom. When I finished getting ready for bed, I returned to my room to find Edward sprawled on the bed.

"I'm not sure where you're going to sleep," he said.

"Jokes."

Edward rolled onto his side and lifted the covers, tucking them around me after I crawled into bed.

"You'll leave before Charlie gets home, right?" I hated the thought of him leaving, but the thought of Charlie finding him here was even worse.

"Of course."

It was late. I didn't realize how tired I was until getting in bed. It seemed like a waste of precious time with Edward to sleep while he was here, but my eyes felt heavy, and I struggled to keep them open. Sleep was about to overtake me when his voice pulled me back to consciousness.

"Do you think Charlie would disapprove of me because I'm a vampire? Or because he would disapprove of any boy after your attentions?"

"Because you're a vampire. But he'd probably shoot any boy he found in my bed, vampire or not."

"Hmm." Edward stayed silent for a long moment. "I don't think he would mind."

“Doubtful,” I mumbled. “He’s been telling me to stay away from you since the first day of school. This might sound crazy, but I think he knew what you were.”

“Is that so?” Edward sounded irritated. Immediately I regretted bringing it up. “I never took Charlie to be closed-minded.”

Neither had I, but after what I witnessed tonight, I wasn’t so sure.

“Edward, aren’t you worried about the Newtons? They’re sending a lynch mob after you. Law enforcement might even be heading it up.”

Next to me, Edward went rigid.

“No. They can’t hurt us with their homemade weapons.”

“Not even with a UV light?”

“Not even with a UV light. Thank you for telling me, but you have absolutely nothing to worry about.”

I got the distinct feeling Edward didn’t want to discuss it further. Despite his words, I worried about him. I knew I wasn’t responsible for what the Newtons were planning, but I still felt I’d betrayed him tonight.

Between the events of the evening and Edward lying beside me, I didn’t think I’d be able to sleep. It seemed like I’d just closed my eyes, and the next thing I knew it was light outside, and Edward was gone.

STUDENT EXPELLED FOR DONATING BLOOD

A young woman is expelled from the University of Washington after being slandered for willingly providing blood to a vampire.

By Vanessa Wolfe, *Seattle Independent Journal*

Posted September 20

A University of Washington sociology student was expelled Friday as a result of donating blood to a vampire.

Bree Tanner, 21, took action after reading about blood markets in the *Seattle Independent Journal* last weekend.

“I donated blood because I wanted to help,” Tanner told us. “I thought if I could save even one person from an attack, I wanted to do it.”

After word got out of her one-time involvement with vampires, classmates stereotyped the student as, for lack of a better phrase, a vampire groupie.

“They called me a vampwhore, fang lover, blood prostitute, things like that.”

Tanner’s car was vandalized as well, and both she and her parents received threatening phone calls at home. Her peers caused such a disruption that the school finally stepped in, but when she met with the dean, the result was not what she expected.

“They kicked me out.”

According to Tanner, the school expelled her for violating the student code of conduct. College administrators declined to comment.

Although this is the first reported case of an academic dismissal, Tanner’s situation is far from unique. Women (and men) in support of the pro-vampire movement are being slandered. In a recent poll conducted by the *Seattle Independent Journal*, 83% of people believed supporting vampires held a negative connotation despite only 46% classifying themselves as non-supporters. The main reason people are remaining neutral is fear of retaliation. Taking a stand isn’t worth their jobs, education, or family.

Is there any truth behind the terrible names being tossed at those who fraternize with vampires? Our exclusive insider, Luke, weighs in:

“It’s a common misconception that blood and sex go hand-in-hand. In most cases, feedings aren’t of a sexual nature. I’m not saying it never happens. Humans have romanticized the fictional vampire, so it’s only natural that their desires cross into actuality. But for the most part, we just want a meal. Those of us who don’t want to take blood by force are grateful for those who donate.”

Tanner said her donation experience was handled discreetly and professionally. “We talked for a couple minutes, she drank, and then we said goodbye. I don’t know her name, and I haven’t seen her since.”

Ms. Tanner also offers these parting words of wisdom: “Vampires were all human once. You never know if it will happen to you.”

If you’d like more information on how to donate blood for vampire consumption, please contact [...].

Chapter Twelve

IN THE MORNING, I wasted no time getting out of bed. I was anxious to see Edward again, and I wanted to leave while it was still too early for Mike to call.

The weather was cool, a perfect excuse to cover my bandaged wrist with long sleeves. I had no doubt Charlie was downstairs reading the morning paper, and I didn't want him asking questions about what happened. I briefly contemplated telling him Mike stabbed me with his homemade vampire stake, but I decided it'd be better to avoid the subject of vampires altogether.

As expected, Charlie was in the living room, paper in hand.

"Where are you off to this early?"

"Um . . ." In my haste to get to Edward's, I hadn't thought of a good reason for leaving before 8 a.m. "Library."

Charlie narrowed his eyes. He dropped the paper onto the end table and made his way toward me. "Isabella?"

“Yes, dad?” I clasped my hands and widened my eyes. I hoped Charlie bought my innocent act.

“Where are you going?”

“I already told you.”

Before I knew what was happening, Charlie grabbed my arm and pulled up my sleeve. The bandage must have been showing. How stupid of me for not making sure it stayed covered.

“What’s this?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Bella!”

I flinched. Charlie pushed my arm away. I wasn’t a good enough liar to talk my way out of this. He’d caught me.

“Edward—”

“I know damn well who did this to you. Goddammit, Bella! Do you know what they say about girls who take up with vampires?”

“It’s not a sexual thing.”

“Maybe not for you.”

“It’s not like that. Edward and I are friends!”

Charlie threw his hands in the air. “Just ten days ago you told me you’d stay away from him.”

“Because you told me he had problems.”

“Yes. He’s a vampire!”

“You knew? Even back then?” My throat tightened as I fought to suppress my tears. Edward had never done anything to deserve Charlie’s disapproval. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d been the one to start the vampire rumors. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was trying to keep you safe. I don’t want that life for you.”

“I’m an adult. I can make my own decisions.”

I expected him to argue. To tell me I was young and dumb, or at the very least ground me for life. He didn’t. Charlie looked at me with sadness, or maybe it was disappointment; I couldn’t tell.

He said nothing as I walked out the door.

The last person I expected to see when I arrived at the Cullens’ house was Rosalie. She opened the door as I approached, blocking my path into the house. Her eyes darted to my wrist. Apparently I’d rolled up my sleeves too soon.

“You’re letting him feed from you now?”

Rosalie’s attitude rubbed me the wrong way. I helped Edward because he was suffering. She had no right to judge me for it.

“It’s none of your business.” Gathering my courage, I pushed past Rosalie and into the house.

“Bella.” The urgency in her captured my attention. I didn’t turn around, but I waited for her to continue. “I ask because I’m concerned.”

“There’s no need. Edward was very gentle. I barely felt a thing.”

“My brother has always been gentle. He’s perfected his technique. What he lacks is sufficient control.”

“Rosalie!” Edward ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time. I smiled, grateful to see him, but the expression on his face was livid. “She said it’s none of your business.” He took my hand. “Come on.”

“It is my business. I’m the one who has to deal with you for the next hundred years if things end badly.”

“End badly?” I asked.

Edward squeezed my hand. “You’re just jealous because you ate your mate.”

Shock crossed Rosalie's face, then she composed herself and fixed him with a glare. She stormed past us, ramming Edward in the shoulder as she passed. We watched her disappear into the living room.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

The Cullens' property was filled with trails that wound through the woods. Once surrounded by lush vegetation, I became completely disoriented. I had no idea how far we were from the house, or even what direction it was in. If Edward left me here, I'd never find my way out.

This deep into the woods, I expected to hear birds and squirrels and critters running through the brush. Aside from the twigs snapping beneath our feet, it was silent.

"It's so quiet," I said.

"The forest is always quiet when a vampire is in it. Animals steer clear."

"But you don't eat animals."

"No, but they can sense when a greater predator is near. It's instinct."

"So you'll never have pets?"

"I'd be hard pressed to find one that wouldn't run away in fear. I suppose it would be quite a novelty if I could. If a stray wandered into my life, I'd let it stick around." Edward stopped and took my hands in his. "How long can you stay? I forgot to ask earlier."

"Oh." I'd forgotten all about my altercation with Charlie. Edward had a way of making the world outside disappear. "As long as you'll let me stick around, I guess."

The corner of his lips quirked into a grin. "Does Charlie know you're here?"

I considered telling him no, but it would inevitably lead to more questions. I didn't want to lie. "He does."

"And he's okay with that?" Edward's smile was genuine now.

“No, but he didn’t try to stop me.”

“I’ll take it.” Edward focused his concentration on my wrist. “May I?” he asked, thumbing the edge of the gauze. When I nodded, he removed the bandage.

I was prepared for a nasty gash; instead there was only a raised red line, like a really bad day-old paper cut.

“It’s healing well. How does it feel?”

“Fine. It barely hurts at all.”

“Good. It’s too soon to feed from you again. Maybe tomorrow if you’re feeling up to it. We can reopen the cut or I can take it from somewhere else.”

I pulled my arm from him without consciously making the decision. Edward looked as surprised as I felt. He wanted to feed from me again. Tomorrow. I hadn’t realized it would be an ongoing thing.

“Or not,” he murmured.

“I didn’t realize . . .”

“It’s fine. I don’t expect you to do that for me again. I just thought . . . it’s fine. I can wait until I find someone else.”

“No,” I said, remembering the reasons I offered in the first place. “You just surprised me, that’s all. I’ll do it again.”

Edward smiled. “Thank you.”

“What did Rosalie mean, about your lack of control?”

“I was wondering when you were going to ask about that.” Edward sighed and rubbed the back of his neck. “My track record is slightly worse than the others.”

“Slightly?”

“Well . . . it’s considerably worse. But I’d like to think I’m still better than average.”

Edward's self-control had never even crossed my mind. I felt unbelievably foolish.

"Should I be concerned?"

"No." There was a tone of finality in Edward's voice. "I wouldn't risk your life. You're safe with me, Bella. Remember that."

More than anything I wanted to believe him. I hoped he was telling the truth, because my mind was already made up. He could have my blood whenever he needed it. I trusted him with my life.

Edward rewrapped my wrist. As he did, a sliver of sunlight peeked through the clouds. Edward hissed. He dropped my arm and backed into the brush. I chased after him, not wanting to be alone, and found him sitting beneath a squatty tree. One side of his face held the faintest hint of shimmer.

"Are you okay?"

"Fine. It caught me by surprise, that's all."

I sat beside him and took his face into my hands. Both sides felt the same: cool and smooth.

"Does it hurt?"

"It's fading."

"Should we go back inside? I don't want you to be uncomfortable."

"A little sun is more tolerable than Rosalie right now. Besides, I ate yesterday. I'm feeling quite strong."

Edward made no move to get up, so I leaned back against the tree and rested my head on his shoulder.

"Any more questions?" he asked.

I shook my head. I'd had all the information I could handle for one day.

"Good. My turn. What brought you back to Forks after all these years?"

"I needed a fresh start."

“Elaborate please.” When I hesitated, he added, “I shared my secrets.”

“Okay, but it’s going to make me sound like an awful person.”

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“My mom is really needy. It’s not like she can’t function on her own. She’s of sound mind. She’s not going to burn down the house or anything. But I’ve been taking care of her for as long as I can remember. I cleaned the house, paid the bills, grocery shopped, cooked.

“I figured, for the next four years I’ll be off at college somewhere, probably working. After that I’ll be an adult and doing all the things I’ve already been doing. I just wanted one year with no responsibilities. My mom would be on her own after I graduated, so why not move out one year early?”

“That sounds reasonable. How’s it been working for you so far?”

“Great, actually. Charlie’s easy. I still clean, but he doesn’t make much of a mess. I cook for him too, but he prefers the diner.” I shrugged, trying to hide how much it bothered me.

We sat in silence, listening to the breeze rustle the otherwise silent forest. I was acutely aware of his body this close to mine. I swore I felt the heat of his body as my knee came to rest against him, though I knew it was all in my head.

Edward bumped his chin against my forehead, and I turned my face toward him. There was a seriousness in his expression I didn’t understand. He leaned toward me, his eyes focused on my lips. He hesitated a mere inch away. I didn’t know what to do or expect. Closing my eyes, I let out a shaky breath.

Edward’s lips met mine. The kiss was soft and gentle, and then it was over. I heard him swallow, and I opened my eyes to see him staring at me with an unnerving intensity.

“You don’t know how long I’ve waited to do that.”

“Took you long enough.” The weakness in my voice offset any confidence I felt.

Edward cracked a smile. “Come closer.”

He guided me onto his lap until I straddled him. With one hand on my back, he pulled me to his chest. His lips and nose pressed against my neck and he inhaled, long and deep. I was fairly confident my entire body blushed.

“Are you smelling me again?” I asked, as if it weren’t obvious.

Edward hummed into my skin. “I can’t wait to taste you again.”

I shuddered; in aversion or anticipation, I wasn’t sure.

“Tomorrow?” he asked.

I nodded.

Edward held me tighter, pressing his face into my neck once again. One hand caressed my back while the other grabbed my hair. For sitting in the shade on a crisp morning, I sure was overheating.

“Your scent is driving me insane.”

His mouth muffled my apology.

This time Edward didn’t hold back. I followed his lead the best I could, but it was hard to focus on anything other than his lips and his body so close to mine. He kissed me, again and again. Then he pulled away and dropped his forehead to my shoulder.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.”

“I didn’t mind.”

Edward looked up to the sky and then stood, placing me on my feet.

“The sun is gone. Maybe we should continue our walk.”

Chapter Thirteen

FOR THE REST OF THE DAY, Edward barraged me with questions about my life before moving to Forks. He asked me about everything from schools I attended to my friends, what I did for fun, even mundane things like where I grocery shopped. He seemed particularly pleased when I admitted to never having a boyfriend. He was also interested about the time I'd spent with Charlie when I was younger. At first it felt strange to talk about myself. I would have thought my answers boring, but he kept asking, so I kept talking.

Whenever the sun broke through the clouds, we'd find cover in the woods. This usually ended with his hands in my hair and his lips on mine.

I didn't mind.

The sun had set by the time we returned to the house. Edward wrapped his arm around me as we approached my car.

"I wish you didn't have to leave," he said.

I thought of the argument I'd had with Charlie. Of the Newton's plans to ambush the Cullens. For crying out loud, Edward was a vampire! He'd lived over 100 years. Suddenly rules and curfews didn't seem to matter. Life wasn't the same anymore. This thing with Edward was bigger than anything.

"I don't."

"What about Charlie?"

"I don't really want to go home tonight." *Or ever*, I added in my head.

Edward furrowed his brow. The corners of his lips turned down ever so slightly. I wavered, unsure whether to tell him the truth. Not knowing what Charlie's next move might be, the truth was probably the best option.

"He knows." I held up my arm.

Edward's face softened. "Well, he hasn't come to hunt me down yet. That's a good sign." He leaned down and kissed my forehead.

"Charlie's not dumb enough to attack a vampire. Me on the other hand . . ."

"I'll keep you safe." Edward winked. Wrapping his arm around my shoulder, he guided me inside the house.

Carlisle intercepted us before we made it to the stairs.

"Bella, I spoke to your father."

"What?" I asked, more in objection than surprise. "Why?" Carlisle was a vampire. There was no need for a conversation between concerned fathers. It was time to drop the charade.

"Charlie called to make sure you were safe."

I gawked at Carlisle, my mouth hanging open. Charlie called vampires, whom he detested, to check on my well-being? I didn't even know he had the Cullens' phone number. *I* didn't even have the Cullens' phone number. Well, it didn't matter. I wasn't going home, and Carlisle couldn't make me. Sure, he

could force me to leave, but no way in hell was I returning to Charlie's. I was about to say as much when Carlisle said the last thing I expected.

“He wants you to stay with us for a couple of days. He knows you're safe here, and he said it would be best if the two of you had some space.”

“What?” I asked again, this time in complete surprise. Charlie had been warning me to stay away from Edward for almost two weeks. Just this morning he'd admitted to lying about Edward to keep me safe. Even his ridiculous curfews were in effect to keep me out of the proximity of vampires. “I don't understand,” I stammered.

Edward wrapped his arm around my side and pulled me against him. “I told you he wouldn't mind.” The smug expression on his face made me crack a smile, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was missing something.

Once shut inside Edward's room, he pulled me against him and buried his nose in my neck. Not for the first time today, I blushed from head to toe. He walked me backward until my knees hit the bed. I fell onto my back; Edward climbed on top of me.

“I thought I was doing well today, controlling myself. Now here you are, in my bed, smelling the way you do.”

I shivered as his teeth grazed my neck. All thoughts of Charlie vanished, and a new unease filled me. Here we were, about to spend the night together. I didn't know what to expect, or what he expected.

I sucked in a sharp breath when he nipped at my neck.

“I can't tell if you want to eat me or . . .” I wasn't sure how to fill in the blank. Have sex? Make love? It didn't matter; the double entendre spoke for itself. A grin stretched across Edward's face, causing my cheeks to burn hotter than they already were. I covered my face with my palms.

“No need to hide.” Edward tapped my gauze covered wrist. “May I take this off?”

I extended my arm. His anticipation practically buzzed as he unwrapped my wrist. Once the cut was exposed, he sighed—a combination of pain and longing.

“You should rewrap it if it’s going to bother you.”

“It’s fine. I’m a glutton for punishment. Besides, maybe your blood will keep my mind off your body.” His eyes dropped to my lips. “Maybe.”

“Which is tempting you more?” I challenged.

“It’s a tie.” Edward pursed his lips. “I’d never understood the appeal of having both at the same time, but I’m beginning to.”

My thoughts wandered to tomorrow, and I wondered if he was thinking about the same thing.

When he’d fed from me yesterday it was methodical, clinical even. I couldn’t imagine it being like that again, especially after the comment he just made. Our relationship was progressing, and fast. I didn’t want to stop it, or even slow it down, but I also didn’t want my first time to be overshadowed by scalpels and blood and broken skin.

“You can have my body.”

Above me, Edward froze. I swore I caught a glimpse of panic behind his eyes before he composed himself.

“We can’t,” he whispered.

I did my best to hide my disappointment. What did he mean by that? Did he not have the plumbing? Did it not work? Maybe it only worked with other vampires. Would it cause me to become a vampire myself? Was that how the change happened? I’d yet to ask.

Or maybe it was me.

The brave face I’d put on was faltering.

“Sure we can,” I said.

“Bella, if we do this, it’s one more thing we can’t take back.”

I frowned. Edward’s mixed signals were driving me crazy. “I don’t want to take anything back,” I protested.

“Maybe not yet. The closer we get, the more of a target you become. Don’t you see? Your being here puts you in danger.”

“I don’t care.” It was the truth. I didn’t care. Being with Edward was worth the risk. “Besides, I’m here. What difference does it make what we do behind closed doors? Unless you don’t want me.”

Edward swallowed. “You have no idea how badly I want you.”

“Then let’s do it.”

He shook his head.

I ran my fingers over his cheek and into his hair, brushing my wrist against his face as I did so. Edward gave the slightest shudder as he closed his eyes. Tempting him like that was a dirty trick, but my natural talents were far more effective than anything else I knew how to do.

“Please?” I brought him closer. His lips touched mine, firm and unyielding. He wouldn’t kiss me.

“Bella,” he spoke against my lips, “are you trying to seduce me?”

“Yes. Is it working?”

“Oh, Bella.” Edward laughed under his breath. He pulled my hand from his hair, tracing the tip of his finger over the cut on my wrist. I wasn’t even sure if he was conscious of doing it. “I think you misunderstand. I am all-too-willing to have sex with you.”

“Then what’s the hold up?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to run away screaming since the moment I first saw you. Despite how I acted in class, you didn’t. Despite my being a vampire,

you didn't. Not when I practically attacked your scratched hand, or told you my favorite blood type, or drank from you. Not even today, when I accosted you during every sunny moment. I'm not sure how much longer until my luck runs out."

"You're not going to scare me away." If I could handle all the other stuff, I could handle doing what normal couples did.

"It's not that."

"What then? What are you afraid of?"

"Disappointing you."

"Haven't you ever . . ."

Edward gave the slightest shake of his head.

For once I was glad his eyes were downcast, because he couldn't see the shock written all over my face. "I'm pretty sure you don't have to worry about that."

Edward rolled to his side, putting space between us. He still held lightly onto my wrist.

"Are you sure you want this with me?" Edward asked.

All I could do was nod.

OBITUARIES

Seattle Independent Journal

Posted September 20

[Photo] Vanessa Ann “Nessie” Wolfe, 34, of Bellevue, Washington, passed away unexpectedly on Friday, September 18. She worked at Seattle Independent Journal for 14 years and was a strong advocate of vampire acceptance. Vanessa had an uncanny ability to reach people in a deep and positive way. She is survived by her loving husband Nahuel; and daughter Lizzie. The funeral and burial will be a private event for immediate family only. In lieu of flowers, memorial donations may be made to Humans for Vampire Rights.

Chapter Fourteen

EDWARD HELD ME WITH ONE ARM. His bare chest was smooth and firm against my cheek. There was no give to his muscles. From where we were lying, a sliver of moonlight illuminated his face. I reached out and traced a finger along his cheek. The moonlight washed out what little color he had on his skin, making him appear more pallid than in the daylight.

“How badly are you hurt?” he asked.

“Hurt?” I couldn’t remember feeling pain. A little discomfort at first maybe, but it was never painful. In fact, being with Edward had felt really great.

“You bled,” he said through clenched teeth. “I could smell it.”

“Did you like that?” I asked.

It seemed like a logical enough question, but Edward’s reaction took me by surprise.

“No!” He pulled away enough to look me in the eyes. There was a look of sheer horror on his face. “I hate knowing I hurt you.”

“You didn’t hurt me!” I argued. “Did you not enjoy yourself at all?”

“Is that what you’re worried about? That I didn’t *enjoy* myself?”

I had to look away.

“Bella, it was the best night of my existence. And I’ve done nothing but feel guilty about it for the past hour.”

“Guilty? Because I bled a little? I’m pretty sure that’s supposed to happen.”

Edward pursed his lips and stared at the ceiling. Wrapping the sheet around myself, I flipped over, putting my back to him. “Now I’m mad.”

“You should be mad,” he said.

“Well I am! I really enjoyed it, and you’re ruining it.”

I fought back tears as I stared at the bedside lamp. Edward sighed. He placed his hand on my shoulder and gently rolled me over.

“I’m sorry.” He kissed me and rested his forehead against mine. The corners of his lips curled into a small smile. “Did you really enjoy it?”

My cheeks heated at his question. “Yes,” I admitted in a small voice.

Edward pressed his lips against mine again.

I wasn’t sure what woke me, but I could tell by the brightness of the room that the sun had been up for a while. As I stretched, tensing and flexing my body, Edward gently squeezed my shoulder. My body was stiff, and maybe a little sore. I wasn’t sure if it was from having sex for the first time or sleeping against a rock all night.

“You must be very hungry,” he said. “Your stomach’s been growling all morning.”

As if on cue, my belly let out a loud rumble. “I guess I kind of forgot to eat yesterday.”

“Hmm.” Edward frowned. “That’s probably my fault.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “You did keep me distracted all day.”

“We might have some dry goods in the kitchen.”

“Dry goods?”

“I don’t know. Cereal? Granola bars? Mac and cheese? Carlisle does the shopping.”

“Shopping?” My brain must not have been working, because I could not process why vampires would shop for dry goods. “Why does Carlisle go shopping?”

“It’s part of the charade. Every now and then we pick up a few random items from the store, then every few months we drop them off at a food shelter or donation center in Port Angeles.”

“Wow.” Who knew vampires were such philanthropists?

“I’m sure I could track down a spare toothbrush around here somewhere.”

“That would be fantastic!”

After freshening up, I dressed in my jeans and one of Edward’s t-shirts. It was soft and smelled like him. A smile stretched across my face. I couldn’t believe how close Edward and I had gotten over the course of a day. I tried to focus on enjoying the moment, not wanting to get my hopes up over dreams of the future, but being with Edward felt right. I didn’t know what Charlie’s deal was, but Edward’s enthusiasm over his acceptance was beginning to wear off on me.

I found Edward waiting for me in the kitchen. Boxes were spread out on the table: granola bars, Hamburger Helper, mac and cheese, instant potatoes, and the like. I tore open a box of granola bars and scarfed down two. “Water?” I mumbled through a full mouth as I opened the third bar.

Edward removed a glass from the cupboard and filled it with tap water. “Is this okay?”

I nodded as I took the glass and chugged down the water. “Wow, I’ve never been so thirsty,” I said through gasping breaths.

“I know the feeling.”

Edward reached for the glass. I relinquished it so he could refill it, and I placed the uneaten granola bar on the table. It seemed wrong to be stuffing my face in front of him when he was probably still hungry.

“What do you want to do today?” he asked. “The sun will be out, so our options are limited. But tonight we can go to Port Angeles if you’d like. I’ll take you to dinner. We can go to a movie. It’s been forever since I’ve been to a theater.”

“Are you asking me on a date?”

Edward smiled. “I guess I am.” He placed the water on the table and slid his arms around my waist. “Will you go on a date with me tonight?”

I shrugged. “We’ll see what the day brings.”

As Edward leaned down to kiss me, the front door opened. Carlisle stepped inside, his face clearly distraught.

“What’s wrong?” Edward asked. He released me and moved around me to meet the older vampire.

“She’s dead.”

Edward looked as confused as I felt. “Who?” he asked.

“Nessie.”

“The reporter?”

“Yes.” Carlisle’s voice broke. “This is my fault. This is all my fault.”

“What reporter?” I directed my question to Edward, not wanting to upset Carlisle more than he already was.

Edward turned to me. “Vanessa Wolfe. She writes for the Seattle Independent Journal. Carlisle was her anonymous source.”

The puzzle pieces started clicking together. I looked at Carlisle in surprise. “You’re Luke?”

“Patron saint of doctors,” Edward whispered under his breath.

Carlisle took a deep breath and stood straight. “I resigned from the hospital this morning.”

“Don’t give up yet!” Edward said. “They have no proof of what we are!”

“It doesn’t matter, Edward. It’s too late. A woman died because of what I am. People in this town are upset. I won’t have anyone else targeted because of me. We can’t stay here any longer.”

“Where are we going to go?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we can find a more accepting community. Or maybe we should stay out of public eye until this whole anti-vampire movement settles down. I have friends in a remote area of Alaska. We’ll stay with them until we figure it out.” Carlisle glanced around, as if taking in house for the first time. “Where’s Rosalie?”

Edward shrugged. “No idea.”

I felt guilty, realizing if Rosalie wasn’t here it was most likely because of me.

“Find her. We need to pack. The sooner we leave the better.”

Edward looked at me then. Pain flashed across his face.

My chest tightened. I could barely breath. Carlisle might as well have punched me in the stomach.

“I want to go with you,” I said.

Edward shook his head. “No.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too dangerous, Bella. You’ll be a target if you stay with us, just like Vanessa. No one knows we’ve been together, right? You should leave before it’s too late. Forget I ever existed and live a normal life.”

“We can still live a normal life,” I argued. “We just have to go somewhere new. Somewhere far away where they don’t know you’re a vampire. You’ve been doing it for years!”

“It’ll never work! People used to be oblivious. They’re not anymore. Everyone’s looking for vampires. Everyone’s suspicious. We aren’t like—” Edward pulled at his hair and began to pace. “We aren’t established members of a community. We’ll draw unwanted attention no matter where we go.”

“Okay...” My mind was turning, frantically trying to come up with a solution. Anything to be able to stay with Edward. “Okay. So change me. Make me like you.”

Edward froze. “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?” I asked again.

“Being with me is not safe for you, Bella. I don’t know what’s in store for our kind. I won’t put you in danger or make you go into hiding. Besides, don’t you want to finish high school? Go to college? What about your family?”

I bit my tongue to keep from crying. “I don’t care about any of those things.”

Edward’s face set in resolve. He faced me full on and squared his shoulders.

“I won’t end your life.”

His words were harsh, cold.

Final.

I was smart enough to read the meaning behind them. He didn't want me.

Tears brimmed in my eyes, but I would not let them fall. Not here where Edward would get the satisfaction of watching. I'd let him drink my blood, and I'd let him have my body. I would have given him anything, but apparently he already got what he wanted.

"Fine." My voice might have only been a whisper, but it didn't waiver. I held my head high as I pushed past Edward and ignored Carlisle, who'd silently witnessed the exchange. Tears streamed down my cheeks the moment my back was to them. I opened the front door with all my strength, causing a loud bang as it crashed into the door stopper.

"Wait, Edward. Give her some space," I heard Carlisle say before the door slammed closed behind me.

I climbed in my car, thankful I'd left the keys in the ignition. Making a dramatic exit seemed so much more satisfying without doing a walk of shame to collect my belongings. I gunned it out of the driveway, spinning my wheels and sending loose gravel spraying behind me.

My ego was bruised.

But my heart was broken.

Chapter Fifteen

AS I DROVE TOWARD CHARLIE'S HOUSE, I mentally berated myself. I was the dumbest, most naive girl on the planet. How could I be so stupid as to believe I had a special connection with a vampire who was over 100 years old? Infatuation had me blinded, and I let him take advantage of me. I was the exact girl I never thought I'd become.

I should have listened to Charlie. I should have stayed away from Edward from the beginning. Would he forgive me for being a brat the day before? Did I want his forgiveness? Perhaps I should pack my bags and drive back to Phoenix. Put this whole awful situation behind me and pretend it never happened.

There was a car in the driveway, so I parked on the opposite side of the street. It appeared Charlie had company. Maybe it was the distraction I needed to sneak upstairs to my room. I needed some time to pull myself together and think about what to do.

I removed the keys from the ignition and took a deep breath before approaching the house. All I had to do was cross the entryway and get to the stairs unnoticed. I opened the door as quietly as possible, but the sight in front of me stopped me short.

On the couch sat Charlie, straddled by a half-naked woman. Her face was turned toward me. Even with her eyes closed, I recognized her. It was Cora—the waitress from the diner. As I stood frozen in shock, my keys slipped from my hand and clattered to the floor.

Cora’s eyes flew open, and she sat up straight. One hand fluttered over her exposed chest. The other flew to her neck, trying to stanch the flow of blood.

“Charlie!” Cora gasped as she jumped to her feet.

“Bella!” Charlie was on his feet as well. There was blood smudged on his chin and white undershirt.

Suddenly, the pieces clicked into place.

Charlie looked the same today as he did in my oldest memory. He worked nights at the station, putting in longer hours as the days shortened. He’d known about the Cullens all along. He’d known about the wound on my wrist, even though I was positive my shirt had been covering it. The only food in the refrigerator was mine. Charlie didn’t hate my cooking, because Charlie didn’t eat food.

His words from the day before rang in my memory.

I was trying to keep you safe. I don’t want that life for you.

“No,” I said, my voice breaking.

“Bella, let me explain.” Charlie took a step toward me.

“No.” I held up my hands defensively as I backed out the door. “Don’t.”

Turning, I ran outside and down the porch steps. I couldn't stay here. I had to get away. When I reached my car, I pulled the door handle, but I'd locked the door, and my keys were still inside the house.

I ran.

My mind swirled with thoughts I couldn't decipher. Confusion and disbelief. Anger, sadness. Betrayal. There were so many simultaneous emotions that I didn't know how to process any of them.

How long had Charlie lied to me? To my mom? Did my mom even know the truth? The thought of both of them lying to me was too much to bear.

Charlie knew about Edward. Had Edward known about Charlie as well? My mind poured over our conversations. Edward didn't think Charlie would mind that he was a vampire. He gloated when Charlie asked Carlisle to let me stay. He knew the entire time. They all knew. They all lied to me.

When I could no longer run, I slowed to a walk. I walked until my tears dried and I couldn't feel my aching feet. One by one, the emotions slipped away until I felt numb. The past three months of my life—was it all a big lie? I felt like the butt of some sick joke that life was playing on me.

The short blast of a siren pulled me from my thoughts. A police car passed me from behind, slowing and parking on the side of the street just ahead of me. The door opened and a uniformed officer stepped out. He smiled pleasantly and raised one hand in greeting.

"Good afternoon, miss. Is everything alright?" the officer asked. He stepped onto the sidewalk, blocking my path.

I froze. "Everything's fine," I answered.

"Are you sure? You look distressed. Why don't you get in?" He opened the back door of the police car and gestured for me to enter.

A chill ran down my spine. This didn't feel right. Not after learning about the Newtons. I shook my head and took a step back. The officer's smile fell.

"Get in the car, Bella."

I spun around to escape, but crashed into the chest of a second officer. He seized my arm as I tried to steady myself, his fingers twisting against my skin. I sucked in a deep breath, preparing to scream with everything I had.

A hot, stabbing pain in my neck caused my scream to fizzle, and the world around me disappeared.

I wasn't sleeping.

I looked around the room, attempting to focus my eyes. It was familiar. I couldn't remember why.

There were voices I couldn't understand.

My arms were heavy. Stuck. But I knew that already.

A thought fluttered at the edge of my mind. Something important. I couldn't grasp it. Then it disappeared.

Had I just said something?

Laughter surrounded me. Someone spoke again. I understood the words, but I couldn't remember what they said.

I looked around the room. It was familiar. I turned around and saw myself. In a chair. Both my wrists were handcuffed to the armrests. This wasn't right. Why wasn't I moving? Why was I just sitting there?

Was I dead?

"Bella . . ."

I was back in my body. I turned my head toward the voice. It was a police officer. I knew him. I'd seen him before. We've been together. How long had it been?

"Where am I?" I heard myself ask. I knew I'd asked this already, but I couldn't remember the answer.

"In my cabin," he answered.

My eyes focused on the window. Bright light streamed in through a gap in the dusty curtains. Outside, green stretched as far as I could see.

I was in the middle of nowhere.

But I already knew that.

I shook my head, trying to clear the fuzziness around the edges. The handcuffs jingled as I moved my arms.

"Why am I here?"

The officer stood from the couch across the room and sauntered toward me.

"You keep asking the same inane questions. Who are you? Where am I? Why am I here?"

"James," the second officer interrupted. "Stop playing with her. She doesn't know what she's saying."

James squatted in front of me. I flinched as he swept my hair away from my face. "Oh, I think she's coming back."

Panic set in. I didn't know where I was, but I was obviously being held captive. Why? I had done nothing wrong. Was it about Edward? Or Charlie? My stomach twisted as the events of the day came back to me. I tugged at the handcuffs again, but it was clear I wasn't going anywhere.

"Don't bother," said James. "And don't even think of screaming. Out here no one will hear you, and you don't want to piss me off. Victor! Hand me my

cell.” The other officer—Victor—placed a cell phone into James’s outstretched hand. “It’s time to call your boyfriend.”

Edward

EDWARD STARED OUT THE FRONT WINDOW, gazing into the trees deep in thought. It had been over two hours since Bella stormed off. He'd known all along it was only a matter of time until she ran. Of course, his words had played a big part in her leaving. As much as he wanted more time with her, the instinct to protect her was so much stronger.

It was for the best.

That didn't mean he wasn't secretly hoping for her return. If by some miracle she came back, he would take her in his arms and never let go. He would keep her by his side for the rest of their lives. But he knew she wouldn't. He had seen the hurt and devastation on her face. For as long as he lived, he would never forgive himself for causing her pain.

It was for the best, he reminded himself once again.

Upstairs, Carlisle packed their belongings. Rosalie was in the garage doing the same. Edward knew he should help, but he needed this moment to mourn. Better to mourn Bella's leaving than mourn her death, he told himself.

At that moment, his phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket. An unknown number flashed on the screen. For a split second, he wondered if it might be Bella. If he didn't know better, he'd have thought his heart beat for the first time in decades. He held the phone to his ear and took a shaky breath.

"Hello?"

"Edward Cullen?" a male voice asked.

"Speaking."

"Edward, this is Officer James Witherdale. I have your little girlfriend here with me."

Edward clenched the phone. His heart, which had seemed to beat only a moment ago, was now lodged in his throat. "What?" he hissed.

James chuckled. "Ah. I have your attention now."

"If you hurt her, I'll kill you!" Edward saw red. He would hunt down James regardless. He would kill James and Charlie and the rest of the police force if he had to.

"Oh, I don't think you will. No. I have different plans for you."

Edward was wound so tightly, pain radiated throughout his entire body. He vibrated with anger. If he knew where to find James, he would go there and kill him right now. "What do you want?" he asked through clenched teeth.

"I'm so glad you asked. We believe there are too many vampires in this town, and we intend to change that. Unfortunately, I admit we lack the knowledge to abolish your kind, but I assume you are familiar with the process?"

Edward didn't respond.

“Bring us the corpses of the other two,” James continued.

Edward hesitated. “You want me to murder my family?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way. Bring them and surrender yourself. Be prepared to share the secret to killing a vampire. Bella will go free once we can prove the accuracy of your information, if you catch my drift.”

Edward swallowed away his nerves. James wanted to know their secrets, which meant Bella hadn’t shared her knowledge. Edward would not let her die because of him.

“Where?” he asked.

“The station in town.”

Bella’s voice was muffled in the background. “No, Edward! Don’t!”

“Bella!” Edward called. “Let me talk to her.”

“No!” James yelled. “I call the shots around here. You do what I say or she dies. Do you understand?”

Edward refrained from explaining in explicit detail all the ways he would torture James once he found him. He didn’t want to say anything to put Bella’s life in jeopardy more than it already was. “Go on.”

“Arrive before sunset. Officer Forge will be waiting for you there. Once I get confirmation that he’s taken care of you, I’ll release Bella. Don’t do anything stupid. One wrong move—if I suspect you’ve deviated from the plan—well, I’m afraid that will be the end of your precious Bella. I mean it. If I so much as hear a twig snap outside my window, she’s dead. I’ve killed before. I have no problem doing it again.”

Edward didn't dare speak. He didn't trust the words that would come out of his mouth.

"The clock is ticking, Edward," James said before disconnecting the call.

Edward stormed out of the house. He dialed Charlie's number and held the phone to his ear, seething with each ring that went unanswered. When the call dropped to voicemail, he hung up and dialed again.

"Officer Swan," the familiar voice finally answered.

"How could you?" Edward spat.

"Excuse me?"

The defensiveness in Charlie's voice set Edward even more on edge. He tightened his grip on the phone, causing the case to crack.

"Is a future with me so terrible that you'd rather eradicate my family?"

"Edward?"

"She's your daughter, for Christ's sake!"

There was a long pause, followed by Charlie's anxious voice. "What about my daughter? Edward—"

"You got what you wanted, Charlie. I hope you're happy."

Edward didn't bother ending the call. He hurled the phone at the side of the house, causing it to shatter. Carlisle stepped outside at that moment, a look of confusion on his face as he looked between Edward and shards of phone sprinkled across the ground.

"What's going on?"

Edward knew he had to do everything he could to save Bella, but he wouldn't sacrifice his family. He needed to come up with a plan, and fast. There wasn't much time, and Bella's life hung in the balance.

"I'm going to kill them. I'm going to kill them all."

"Who?"

“The police force, the Newton’s, Charlie . . .”

“Charlie? Edward, what are you talking about? What happened?”

Edward repeated his conversation with James.

“There’s no way Charlie’s involved,” Carlisle said.

“Of course he is! It sounds like the entire police force is involved. He wanted Bella to stay away from me.”

“That’s impossible,” Carlisle argued. “I spoke to him yesterday. He requested Bella stay with us. He would never put her in danger. Besides, how would Charlie benefit from humans knowing how to kill vampires? If he wanted them to know, he’d tell them himself. No, it doesn’t make sense.”

“No,” Edward agreed, “it doesn’t.” He glanced toward the west. The sun crawled imperceptibly toward the horizon, yet there still wasn’t enough time. “What am I supposed to do? I can’t betray my family or my kind. Even if I could, I’m not naive enough to believe Bella would walk away alive. But I can’t in good conscience make a decision that would end her life. If I go on a killing rampage, or don’t show up, or try to rescue her, they’re going to kill her. Hell, I don’t even know where James is keeping her. Carlisle,” he pleaded, “what am I supposed to do?”

Carlisle laid his hand on Edward’s shoulder. “I think it’s time to call in a favor.”

Chapter Sixteen

JAMES PACED THE SMALL ROOM of the cabin, obsessively checking his watch every few minutes and sighing. He seemed agitated, whereas Victor seemed nervous. He hadn't stepped away from the window since James had ended the call with Edward.

My head pounded, and my stomach kept flipping. I wasn't sure if it was from the drug they used to knock me out, lack of food, or the nightmare I'd been living since leaving the Cullen's this morning. Probably a combination of all three.

In the movies, when someone was being held captive, it always made me angry when they didn't call the police, just because the bad guy said not to. Instead, there was always an elaborate plan, and of course the good guy always won.

But this wasn't a movie, and in real life, those elaborate plans didn't exist. In real life, going to the police was the best option. Assuming the police weren't the bad guys.

Any hope I'd entertained of being rescued vanished as the sun crept closer to the horizon. I'd thought, maybe, since Edward was a vampire, one of those elaborate plans might have existed. I thought he'd swoop in here with a clan of vampires and take out the officers before they knew what was happening.

But Edward didn't know where I was, and every second that passed was a painful reminder of just how much he didn't care about me. Not that I could blame him. I didn't expect him to put his family or himself in danger to save me, nor would I want him to. Even if he did what James asked, I wasn't ignorant. They'd never let me walk free.

What I didn't understand was how they'd known I'd been hanging out with Edward and what made them think he cared about me. If they wanted someone who loved me, wouldn't they have called Charlie?

The only logical reason was that they didn't know about Charlie.

"Your boyfriend is running out of time," James said, interrupting my thoughts.

"I already told you, he's not my boyfriend," I slurred. I shook my head to clear the fog, but it only made my headache worse. "He doesn't care about me."

"You'd better hope he does."

"Why? You're going to kill me anyway."

James didn't reply. I stared without breathing across the room, into his dark eyes, and he looked pleasantly back at me.

I'd never given much thought to how I would die. If I'd never come to Forks, I wouldn't be facing death right now. But I couldn't bring myself to regret the decision. If I'd stayed in Arizona, I'd have never met Edward. And even though

my feelings were one-sided, I would rather be in this position than live my entire life not knowing he ever existed.

I'd rather have died from Edward losing control than here, alone in this cabin, but I guess we don't get to choose our fate.

"Did you hear that?" Victor asked, his eyes never leaving the window.

James drew his gun as he approached me. He pointed it directly at my forehead with a distinctive click. I looked him in the eyes, doing my best to maintain my angry composure, but inside I was a complete mess. My life flashed before my eyes. I saw my mom and my dad, my friends, my family . . .

And Edward.

"Wait, wait," Victor said, waiving his hand toward James.

James kept the gun aimed at me as he watched Victor step outside. He looked suspicious and uneasy as his eyes shifted from side to side. His breath grew louder and ragged. A few moments later, Victor opened the door.

"What the fuck are you doing?" James spat.

"It's just a dog. I think he's injured." A high-pitched whimper came from just outside the door. "Come on, boy. It's okay." Victor stepped to the side, and a large black dog with a rather wolf-like appearance limped inside, favoring his front paw. He turned his enormous head toward me and stared.

I felt my heart stutter.

James holstered his gun and bent down, arm outstretched to the dog. The next series of events happened so fast that it was practically a blur.

The window Victor had been standing before all afternoon exploded, sending shards of wood and glass flying into the room. Instinctively, I screamed. I tried to bring my hands to cover my head, but the handcuffs prevented me from doing so.

A streak of brown fur bolted through the room and collided with James. The black dog turned and sprang on Victor, dragging him out of the door. Snarls and screams filled the room, and I squeezed my eyes shut, too scared to move or yell. I didn't understand what was happening; all I knew was that I was trapped.

When the screams cut off, I opened my eyes. The large brown dog stood over James's limp body, his fangs bared and his snout covered in blood. He stalked toward me.

"Wolf," I whispered, barely able to push the air from my lungs. He stopped inches from my face, teeth still exposed. His body trembled. Once again I closed my eyes and turned my head, waiting for the impact. There was a shift in the air, a barely perceivable pressure that took my breath away.

"Bella?"

I opened my eyes, expecting to see Wolf as he attacked. In his place stood Jake. Blood covered his face and chest. As I continued to take in his appearance, I noticed one more thing.

He was completely naked.

"Oh my god," I said, diverting my eyes once again. He knelt beside me and took my face between his hands.

"Are you okay?"

"No!" I choked out.

"Jake!" someone called out. Another naked boy stood in the doorway. He tossed what sounded like a set of keys to Jake, who snatched them out of the air effortlessly. "Get her out of here."

Jake stood and returned to James's body. He stole his pants and put them on himself before returning to me and releasing my hands from the cuffs. "Can you walk?" he asked.

I nodded, but I couldn't move. My legs felt like lead. Jake waited patiently. When he realized I wasn't going anywhere, he bent down and scooped me into his arms.

"Don't look," he said as he carried me out of the cabin.

It didn't seem right, that someone so young could pick me up like I weighed nothing. His skin burned with heat where it pressed against my cheek. He brought me to the police car parked outside and helped me in the passenger seat. Then he got into the driver's side and started the engine.

"This is so cool," he said, a grin stretching across his bloody face. He took one look at me and his smile fell. "Sorry."

We had only been driving for a few minutes before I found my voice.

"What the fuck is going on?"

Jake laughed uncomfortably.

"You were . . . a dog," I stated.

"Yeah."

"I saw . . . your penis."

"Oh. Yeah. Sorry?" He shrugged as though it wasn't a big deal.

"You . . ." How could I possibly put into words the thoughts swimming in my head? Jake waited patiently for me to continue. "Why?" I said at last.

"Why what, exactly?"

I couldn't take anymore. My body shook and tears brimmed in my eyes. Everything in my life was a lie. Nothing was what I thought it was. To top it all off, I'd almost died.

"Why were you pretending to be a dog?!" I shouted. The tears streamed down my face. "Why did you sleep on my porch and eat dog food and sniff my crotch?"

Jake reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. I shrugged him off.

“First, I wasn’t pretending to be a dog. I’m a shape-shifter—a wolf, actually. Charlie named me appropriately, but people see what they want to see. And for the record, I never ate the dog food.”

“Why?” I asked again, hoping for something—anything—that would make some sense.

Jake took a deep breath. “We’ve been watching Charlie since . . .” He trailed off, hesitating. “Well, I think you know now. Our job is to protect people. We were monitoring him, making sure he didn’t hurt anyone.”

“You knew.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes. My dad and Charlie have been friends for years. He could hide it from the community, but not from any of us. So we’ve been monitoring him. It became my job this summer, and one day I got a little too close and he saw me. I think he was just so excited to have an animal come near him. Animals are much smarter than humans. They can sense the danger and usually stay away.”

“So I’ve heard,” I mumbled.

“Anyway,” Jake continued, “with you moving in, I figured it would be easiest if I could stay close to the house. Charlie’s been pretty good, but we were all nervous about a human living with him.”

“How many of you are there?” I managed to ask.

Jake hesitated.

“I won’t tell anyone.”

He sighed. “There are six of us who can shift, but that’s just in the tribe. In the world? I don’t know.”

This was too much for me to process. Discovering and then meeting vampires had been a whirlwind of emotions. Now there were shape-shifters? What else was out there? I didn’t know what to think anymore.

“How did you find me?”

“We followed your scent.”

I had to let that sink in.

Jake pulled onto the highway and I took a moment to look him over, checking for some sign that he could morph into a giant beast with fur and fangs. Other than being a shirtless teenager covered in blood while driving a cop car, he appeared normal.

“You killed them.”

“They would have killed you. Those aren’t the humans we want in this world.”

We drove while the sun set. Once it was dark, I realized if Jake hadn’t saved me, I’d be dead right now. It was a chilling thought, and I pushed it to the back of my mind. At one point my surroundings seemed familiar, and I realized we’d passed the turn to get to Edward’s. We were about half an hour from Charlie’s house now. Again, I felt sick to my stomach. I didn’t want to go home and face Charlie. I didn’t want to talk about him being a vampire. And I didn’t want to feel the shame I knew would come when I saw him. I didn’t want to admit to myself that he was right about Edward.

As Jake pulled into the driveway, Charlie ran out of the house.

“Bella!” he shouted. “Are you okay?” He looked at Jake. “Is she okay?”

“I think she’s still a bit shaken—”

“I’m fine,” I insisted, even though I knew it wasn’t true. My entire body shook, and I held back sobs.

The three of us stood in a loose circle. I wanted to run inside, pack my bags, and drive back to Phoenix.

“I, uh . . .” Charlie scratched the back of his head. He looked toward Jake, but not at him. “I appreciate everything you’ve done today. I’ll take care of it. See you soon.” He cleared his throat nervously. “Preferably in human form.”

At least I wasn't the only one who'd discovered a shocking truth today.

They shook hands, and then Jake turned to me.

"I'll be around if you need anything, okay?"

All I could do was nod. Jake made his way to the tree line behind the house, where he vanished.

Charlie's voice was rough when he spoke. "There's something I need to do. I think it's best if you come with me."

We got in the police car that Jake left running in the driveway.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I didn't mean to yell at him, but I overwhelmed by emotions and had no more control over my voice.

"I couldn't," he stammered.

"Yes, you could have!"

"Bells," he sighed. "I have spent practically your entire life protecting you from what I am. After my change..." Charlie paused, shaking his head. "Sending you and your mom away was the hardest thing I've ever done."

"What?" I asked. That wasn't the story Renee had told me. All my life I was led to believe she left him.

"I couldn't have lived with a wife and child and kept it a secret, and I was afraid of what would happen to the two of you if I lost control."

My thoughts drifted to Carlisle, and the wife and son he left behind.

"But that was then," I said. "It doesn't have to be a secret anymore."

"Look at what happened today. All because you associated with a vampire."

"Nobody knows you're a vampire," I shot back. "You should have told me! I wouldn't have told anyone."

"Perhaps I should have. Maybe it would have saved you from seeking out Edward."

I wanted to make a rebuttal, but there was nothing to say. I didn't want to think about the mistakes I'd made over the past few days regarding Edward.

As we pulled into the parking lot of the police station, I realized I had no idea what to say about my kidnapping. I very well couldn't explain that shape-shifting wolves saved me. Hopefully Charlie could remain with me through any interviews I'd have to do.

The minute we stepped out of the car, I realized something was wrong. A swarm of officers surrounded us. Every cop in town must have been here. Some hovered their hands over their guns, a couple held shields. Their stiff bodies and worried faces gave away that something was wrong.

"Dad?" I asked.

"Hey, Chief," an older officer called. He stepped forward, cautiously closing the distance between us.

"Mark." Charlie remained serious, yet there was a friendly quality to his voice.

"You've got the boys real nervous, coming in here and doing what you did. We're all just really surprised that one of our own is a . . ."

He left the word unspoken, but I was smart enough to put the pieces together. Charlie had outed himself somehow, and they had called in the entire force for backup.

"I don't want to start anything. I don't want anyone to get hurt," the officer—Mark—continued. "Charlie Swan, you are under arrest for the murder of Officer Waylon Forge."

I gasped. Murder? There must have been some mistake.

Charlie held up his hands. "I'll go willingly, Deputy. Tell the boys to stand down."

"Dad?" I asked again, hoping for some sort of explanation.

Charlie approached Deputy Mark slowly. In a quiet voice, he added, "I'm also responsible for the deaths of Officers Witherdale and Sutherland." He turned and gave me a pointed look, one that clearly meant *keep your mouth shut*.

My jaw dropped. Charlie was taking the fall? I didn't understand.

Deputy Mark nodded. He took Charlie by the arm and directed him toward the building.

"Wait!" I called. I didn't know what would happen to Charlie or when I'd see him again. Mark released Charlie as I threw my arms around him. His body was inhumanly firm, just like Edward's, and I realized I couldn't remember a time when we'd ever hugged.

Charlie patted my back and told me everything would be okay. He made me promise to stay safe until he came home. Then the deputy guided him into the station, and everyone else followed, leaving me forgotten on the sidewalk.

Chapter Seventeen

TEARS STREAMED DOWN MY CHEEKS as I watched my dad and his new entourage disappear into the police station. I took a gasping breath, and then another. A brisk gust of wind sent a wave of goose bumps across my skin. I pulled my sleeves over my hands and wrapped my arms around my body, trying to ward off the chill in the air. I didn't know how I'd make it home. All I wanted to do was curl up in a ball on the sidewalk and let my emotions flow freely.

"Bella?" Edward's voice, smooth as silk, brought me out of my thoughts. I turned around slowly, overly cautious of the pounding in my head. Edward stood outside the open door of a silver sedan. For a moment, I thought my mind was playing tricks on me. Why would he be here now, after it was all over? Where had he been while I stared death in the face?

I was too exhausted to reply.

Edward regarded me expectantly. He pursed his lips, frowning slightly. His chest rose and fell with a deep sigh.

“Let me bring you home.”

I found myself once again being helped into the passenger side of a car. We drove to Charlie’s house in silence. Once we were in the driveway, he killed the engine.

“I think I should stay with you tonight. Make sure you’re safe.”

Part of me wanted to tell him to leave. I was hurt and angry, and my ego was bruised enough already. He shouldn’t feel obligated to stay out of guilt. Selfishly, I wanted a few more moments with him. Not to mention being alone scared me. If he wanted to give me one more night, I would take it, as pathetic as that made me.

As we stepped out of the car, Jake appeared from behind the garage. He had changed into a pair of cutoff denim shorts but was still naked from the waist up. All traces of blood were cleaned away.

“Thank you, Jacob,” Edward said.

Jake’s face remained stoic. “It’s my duty.”

“I am grateful, nonetheless.”

With a curt nod, Jake turned and made his way to the tree line. As I pondered why Edward thanked him, I realized I never had.

“Jake, wait!”

He stopped and turned around. I ran to him, even though I wasn’t certain how I was still standing on such shaky legs. I threw my arms around his waist and pressed my face into his chest, thanking him as I sobbed.

He rested his chin on the top of my head and patted my back while I cried. I wanted to pull myself together, to show both him and Edward how strong I

was, but the sobs wouldn't stop coming. After a few minutes, I felt Edward's hands on my hips.

"I'll take it from here, Jacob," he mumbled, and gently extracted me from Jake's arms.

Edward helped me inside. It was all I could do to remove my shoes before collapsing into bed. He sat next to me and ran his fingers through my hair.

"You can sleep now, Bella. It's over."

I didn't want to sleep, afraid of the dreams that might haunt me. Not to mention my time with Edward was fleeting. I didn't want to waste any of it sleeping. Or wake up and find him gone.

"Don't leave," I whispered.

"I'll stay until you tell me to go."

The last thing I remembered was Edward lying down next to me.

When I woke up, the first thing I noticed was Edward at my side. His arms were folded over his chest, and his body was rigid. He stared up at the ceiling. It was clear he didn't want to be here. I rubbed my swollen eyes and squinted from the light in the room. It felt like I'd been sleeping for ages.

"Good morning," he murmured.

"What time is it?" On second thought, I added, "Is it still Monday?"

"Yes. A little after ten."

"Ten?" I was late for school. Guilt washed over me. It felt so wrong to skip. But then the events of the day before slowly filtered into my groggy mind. "I'm not going to school," I said.

"No. I don't imagine anyone expects you to be there."

Oh, no . . . Charlie. Everyone would know by now. It was the only thing anyone at school would talk about for the foreseeable future.

“I’m never going back,” I groaned.

Edward chuckled. It was dry and humorless. “I know the feeling.”

I excused myself to use the bathroom. While locked away, I washed my face and brushed my teeth. My hair was greasy, so I tossed it in a bun. As delightful as a hot shower sounded, it would have to wait. I wanted a chance to say goodbye to Edward before he left.

I changed out of the clothes I’d been wearing for the past two days and headed downstairs. Edward stood in my kitchen, looking terribly uncomfortable and out of place.

“You should eat,” he said, pointing to a plate on the table. It was piled high with scrambled eggs, sausage, and hash browns. My mouth watered. The last thing I’d eaten were the granola bars at his house yesterday morning.

Was that only yesterday? It felt like years ago.

“Sorry it’s cold. I didn’t think you’d sleep this long.”

The first bite was already in my mouth. I was so hungry; I didn’t care that it wasn’t hot.

“Thank you.” I covered my full mouth as I spoke. “Did you make this?”

Edward shifted his weight between his feet. “No. Jacob brought it.”

I paused, fork halfway to my mouth. “Oh. That was very thoughtful of him.”

Edward frowned. “I asked him to bring you breakfast,” he explained. “I don’t know how to cook, and I wasn’t about to leave you alone.”

“Oh.”

I scarfed down the plate of food. In my entire life, I’d never eaten so fast. I didn’t even feel embarrassed about it, even though Edward sat at the table and watched. It was weird, seeing him in Charlie’s spot. At least I was used to being

the only one eating. When I finished, I gave the fork one last lick and set it on the plate.

“Thanks again for thinking of that. I’ll have to thank Jake too, next time I talk to him.” I shook my head. “I still don’t understand how he knew to save me.”

Across from me, Edward sat straighter. His eyes narrowed, and his mouth formed a tight line.

“I asked for his help.”

My mouth fell open. “What?”

“Bella,” he said, not hiding his frustration. “Do you honestly think I left you to die?”

“Well . . . yeah.” My voice broke. Pain bubbled in my chest, but anger quickly replaced it. “What did you expect me to think? We had sex, and then you told me you were leaving. I found out my dad is a vampire, and then two cops abducted me, who I watched get slaughtered by *wolves*, and then one turned into Jake!” I took a shaky breath as I collected my thoughts. “My dad turned himself in for murder. And you weren’t there.” My anger was short-lived. I bit my lip to keep it from quivering.

Edward stood from his seat and came to my side of the table. He dropped to his knees in front of me.

“Bella, I am so sorry. Yesterday was the worst day of my entire existence. It kills me to know it was even worse for you, and that I was the catalyst. I didn’t know if I could save you. I didn’t know where you were or how to find you, and even if I did, I didn’t know how to rescue you without endangering your life. At least not alone.” Edward took my hands in his and leaned closer. “I asked the pack for help. We met here. They tracked you, and the car that took you. Charlie and I went to the police station and waited. Sam, the one with Jacob, he called

us once you were safe.” Edward squeezed my hands. Pain flashed behind his eyes. “Charlie told me to wait outside. He said he wanted to deal with Waylon.” He shook his head. “I didn’t realize what he intended.”

“He really killed him?” I asked.

Edward nodded.

“But Charlie didn’t kill the other two. He told them he did.”

Edward looked down at our joined hands. “We knew we’d have to cover for the wolves. It wasn’t fair to ask them for help and then expose them. Charlie wasn’t very discreet about killing Waylon, as I’m sure you gathered by the spectacle at the station last night. It wasn’t out of the realm of possibility that he would then kill the other two. He believed it would be the least problematic cover up. So he went to get you and I stayed out of the way. As long as I wasn’t implicated, you wouldn’t be left alone.”

So that was why Charlie brought me to the station with him—to make the lie more believable. I was getting really sick of being the only one left out of the loop. If everyone would stop keeping things from me, my life would be so much less traumatic.

“Bella, please, please forgive me.”

“It wasn’t your fault.” I shuddered as I envisioned the cabin. The screams and the sound of shredding flesh still rang in my ears. I shook my head, willing the memories away. “I’m alive. It’s over. You don’t have to beat yourself up about it.”

Edward pulled back and looked me in the eye. A frown marred his face. “Beat myself up about it?”

“Yeah. You don’t have to take care of me out of guilt. I’m fine, really,” I insisted.

“Guilt?” he spat. “Is that what you think this is?”

“Why else would you be here?” I asked.

Edward let out a sharp breath. He stood and pulled me to my feet, gripping my shoulders and holding me at arm’s length.

“Do I feel guilty for what happened to you? Of course I do. It wouldn’t have happened if it weren’t for me. But that’s not why I’m here now.”

He looked at me expectantly, but I didn’t understand. After what he said yesterday, I couldn’t imagine why he was here—hopefully not for a last meal. I shook my head. Pain flashed across his face.

“Bella, I thought staying with me would put you in danger.” His green eyes blazed as he sucked in a breath. “If I had any idea what would happen to you, I would have never let you leave my side.”

“But . . .” My mind swirled as I tried to recall yesterday’s conversation, but everything about the day felt like a fading nightmare. “I thought you didn’t want me anymore.”

Edward’s face softened. His hands slid down my arms, and he took my hands in his once again.

“I’ve always wanted you. My mistake was believing I could live without you. I thought I could survive in the world just knowing you were out there somewhere—safe.” Edward shook his head. “Bella, I can’t live in a world where you don’t exist by my side.”

“But you’re leaving.”

“Come with me.”

I wanted nothing more than to be by Edward’s side. Yesterday I had been ready to leave everything behind for him, without even a second thought—school, my dad, even my life as a human—but so much had changed in the past 24 hours.

“But Charlie . . . I can’t leave him right now. I don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“Then I’ll stay here with you until you’re ready to go.”

I let myself imagine a life with Edward. A life where we could be together every day, with no school or parents or rules in the way. No hiding. We could travel the world, see everything there was to see. Even if we had to lie low to start, we would still have each other. For the first time since leaving his house yesterday, it felt like I could breathe again. But that didn’t mean I wasn’t without reservations.

“What if something bad happens again? Will you leave to protect me?”

“Bella, after yesterday, I realize you’re far safer with me. Besides, I’m selfish. Even if you weren’t, I don’t have the strength to live without you.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “I understand if you don’t feel the same.”

I wanted to believe him, but I was afraid. How many times could one heart be mangled and still be expected to beat?

“Do you want me enough to make me like you?” I took a deep breath, bracing myself for his rejection.

“The choice is yours to make. I’ll take whatever you’ll give me.”

“That’s not a very good answer,” I challenged.

The corners of his lips hinted at a smile. “You don’t know how long I’ve waited for you,” he whispered. “If it were up to me, I would keep you by my side. Forever.”

“Forever?” I asked, letting the significance of the word sink in.

Edward nodded. He cradled my face in his hands, gently caressing his thumbs over my cheeks. Leaning in, he placed a soft kiss on my lips, then rested his forehead against mine.

“Please tell me what you’re thinking,” he said.

I closed my eyes and smiled.

“Forever.”

Chapter Eighteen

I SPENT MOST OF MONDAY AFTERNOON at the station, answering questions about the events that happened the day before. I'd worried about lying and what version of the story to tell, but the positive thing about being drugged was that I had an excuse to not know any details. My official story of the event was that the officers cornered me while I was out for a walk, and the next thing I knew I was in the car with my dad.

Edward volunteered himself for questioning. He also edited his side of the story. He was truthful about the call from Officer Witherdale and his immediate call to Charlie—as cell phone records would support. As far as law enforcement was concerned, that was the extent of his involvement in my rescue.

The officers who interviewed me insisted I get a full checkup from a doctor, but I declined, stating I felt too violated already and would rather put the whole thing behind me, which was the truth. They didn't press further.

I worried about my dad, who was taking responsibility for murdering two people that he hadn't, and one that he had. How was he being treated now that everyone knew he was a vampire? How was he being treated as a cop in jail for murder?

They wouldn't let me visit him, but Deputy Mark assured me that Charlie was being detained separately from the other offenders and that he was comfortable and doing well. In fact, many on the force had already made it a point to check on his wellbeing. It was comforting to know that the people my dad had supported throughout his career were now there for him.

I scribbled a note, saying how much I loved him and that I would see him soon. Deputy Mark assured me he would deliver it personally.

I still couldn't believe Charlie had murdered someone to save me, especially knowing it was someone he considered a friend. Jake's words replayed in my head:

Those aren't the humans we want in this world.

Edward waited in his car for me outside of the station. He smiled when he saw me and jumped out to open the passenger door.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Fine," I said. "There's not much I could tell them, so hopefully I won't have to come in again. I'm sorry you had to out yourself."

"It doesn't matter. People had their suspicions, and they needed to know."

I nodded and got in the car. We drove back to the house in silence. There were two suitcases in the backseat. While the police had been questioning me, Edward returned to his house one last time to retrieve any items he'd need in the short term. Carlisle and Rosalie would take the rest of his belongings to Alaska.

"Are you going to miss your family?" I asked.

Edward shrugged. "It will be strange without them, but it's a much welcome change."

"What if we're here for a while? Like a year? Or more? I don't know how long the trial will take. Will that be okay?"

"You have to understand time isn't the same for us." Edward reached over and took my hand. "Don't worry about Charlie. He'll be okay."

"But he hasn't lived as long as you. Time is probably still a normal concept for him."

"Bella." Edward brought my hand to his lips and kissed my knuckles. "One day this will be but a blip in the radar for us all. I understand you're worried about him, but Charlie has never struck me as someone who didn't know what he was doing. He is resilient, if not a little stubborn. You know, you really take after him," he added with a smirk.

I hoped Edward was right. I didn't want to think of my dad sitting in jail, regretting his decisions. Although I couldn't imagine the mess we'd be in now had he not claimed responsibility for all three murders. If I were him, I'd have done the same.

When we arrived at the house, Edward was out of the car and at my door before I even unbuckled my seatbelt. I laughed under my breath and shook my head as I fumbled with the latch. He opened the door and stood to the side.

"Die vampire scum!" someone shouted from the street. I paused, one leg out of the car, and looked to my right. Mike Newton stood at the end of the driveway, aiming a gun at us.

The deafening shot reverberated off the trees. Instinctively, my hands flew up to cover my ears. I looked at Edward, whose eyes were wide with shock. I followed his gaze down to the hole torn in his shirt, directly over his chest.

I froze, waiting for him to clutch his chest and collapse. My life once again flashed before my eyes, but this time it was the life I had planned for myself, the one with Edward. It took me a moment to realize I was the one screaming.

Edward stood, unmoving. He stared at his chest, eyes still wide, jaw slack. Then his head snapped up. He bared his teeth, his face filled with murderous rage. He strode in determination toward Mike Newton.

Mike, who'd been wearing a smug smile, took two steps back. His face blanched as Edward barreled toward him. He turned to run, tripping over his own feet and landing facedown on the pavement. The gun skidded across the road.

By now a car had stopped. Two neighbors stood on their front porches, one holding a cell phone to her ear.

“Edward!” I yelled, partially in relief, partially in disbelief that he was still on two feet, but also a plea. I didn't want him taken away from me too.

Edward towered over Mike, who scrambled to get away. He bent down and in one swift movement flipped Mike onto his back. I watched in horror as Edward dug his fingers into his own chest and extracted a shiny silver bullet. Mike whimpered as Edward lifted him off the ground by his shirt collar and stuck the bullet in his face.

“Guess you can remove this one from your slaying kits, huh?” he seethed. The tone of his voice was so cold, so menacing, it sent a shiver down my spine. It was a side of Edward I hadn't seen before.

Edward released Mike, who crumbled into a pile on the pavement, still whimpering. Edward flung the bullet at him and then turned to me. I was still staring at Mike, too shocked to move. Edward turned me around and pushed me toward the door. “Inside,” he muttered under his breath.

Before I stepped in the house, I glimpsed a brown wolf slinking into the trees.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked Edward for the billionth time.

He sat on the couch, shirtless, rubbing the hole in his chest that was slowly mending itself from the inside out. The TV played quietly in the background, but neither of us were paying it any attention.

“I’m fine,” he assured me.

I paced around the house, checking all the windows for any sign of danger. Mike had left, and none of his cronies had come to avenge him. Yet. I half expected the police to show up and take Edward away, but they never did.

I paused by the window that overlooked the backyard.

“Jake’s out there,” I said, recalling seeing him as we rushed into the house.

“He is,” Edward agreed.

“Why?” I asked.

“I imagine he’s monitoring the situation. What happens in our world affects them too.”

“So you knew about them all along?”

“I did,” he answered solemnly. “I told you, there are all sorts of monsters running around out there.”

“And Charlie?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“They weren’t my secrets to tell. You, of all people, should understand.”

I stopped pacing and joined Edward on the couch. I reached out and lightly caressed his chest with my fingertips, careful to steer clear of the hole that he'd made worse by digging out the bullet. It was weird, watching his body heal. It reminded me of a time-lapse video. Even stranger was the lack of blood.

"If the sun was out . . ." I hesitated, unsure how to phrase my question, and not wanting to know the answer. "Would you have died?"

Edward pressed my hand against his chest, directly over where his heart had once beaten. "Most likely not," he said.

"But you told me the sun breaks down your body, and it would be as easy as killing a human."

"I said *almost*. Besides, being in the sun for a few minutes wouldn't be enough. It would have to be much longer. Hours. Maybe days." He shrugged. "It's not something you need to worry about."

"I think it is something I need to worry about," I argued. "It concerns me—or at least it will. No more keeping things from me, or giving me half truths!"

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to being open with anyone. And I admit to having a flare for the dramatic. Forgive me?" Edward took my hand and brought it to his face. He inhaled deeply as he skimmed his nose along my wrist.

"Will you miss my blood?" I asked. It had been on my mind all day. If I didn't smell good to him, if I didn't have the rarest blood type, would he want me as badly?

Edward cracked a smile. "Very much so."

"And you're okay with that? You'll still feel the same about me, even when I don't smell like . . ." I waived my free hand between us, searching for the right descriptive. "Your favorite blood?"

"I have a theory about that," Edward said. "Do you believe in soul mates?"

Of course I did. We were here together now. I nodded.

“I think the reason you have AB negative blood is so that when you came along, I’d pay attention.”

Frowning, I said, “I don’t understand.”

“I’ve watched both Carlisle and Rosalie suffer for years after losing their mates. They were lonely. I was lonely too, but I wasn’t looking for anyone. Quite the opposite, actually. I didn’t want to get close to someone only to lose them. So I kept to myself. And then you came along. Your scent captivated me, and then one day you were at my house despite having suspicions about what I was. So I let you in. I didn’t want to get attached. I didn’t think I was until I thought you were going to die. Then I realized it was too late for me. You were the one. Like I said, you don’t know how long I’ve waited for you.”

“It seems unfair, that you had to wait over one hundred years, and I only had to wait eighteen.”

“I’d wait another hundred if I had to.”

“Well, I’m glad I didn’t have to wait that long.” I scooted closer and snuggled into his side. I liked his theory about soul mates. It was the only thing that could explain the pull I felt toward him.

Later that evening, Edward helped me pack. After the incident with Mike, we decided it was better to go somewhere else and lie low for a while. Though I’d only lived in Forks for three short months, packing up my life again so soon felt daunting.

“Are you bringing this?” Edward asked as he held up the green dress I wore to homecoming.

“No way. That’s not an event I care to remember.”

“I like it,” he said. “You looked so good wearing it on my bed while I drank your blood. I fantasized about taking it off.”

His words caused me to blush. At the time, those thoughts hadn’t crossed my mind. I was too nervous about the pain to think of anything else. But I knew the next time he fed from me would be different, more intimate. My cheeks flamed even hotter. I turned away from him so he wouldn’t see and continued folding clothes.

Edward sighed and dropped the dress onto the donation pile.

“I’m glad I never got around to buying winter clothes. It would be even more to pack. Although I suppose if we’re going to Alaska I’ll need something warmer.”

I jumped when I felt his hands on my hips. I turned to face him, and he slipped his arms around my waist.

“Well, that depends.” He left the thought unfinished, but I knew what he meant. Once he turned me, I wouldn’t need warm clothes.

Edward leaned down and kissed my lips. It was soft at first, but quickly became frenzied and needy. He walked me backward until the backs of my legs hit the bed, then he nudged me onto it.

His hands moved all over my body. I shuddered when his cool fingers slipped beneath my shirt. He pulled it over my head, then leaned down to kiss my exposed skin. His lips moved lower, until they reached the top of my jeans, then he slowly peeled them down my legs.

Edward covered my body with his. His voice was rough as he spoke.

“There’s something I want to try.”

I pulled him closer and kissed him, silently giving him permission. The weight of his body pressed me into the bed, and I felt him hard between my legs.

“Don’t move,” he said.

I sighed as Edward pushed away from me. He went to his suitcase and retrieved a familiar leather case. He zipped it open and, after a moment of deliberation, selected something from inside, hiding it in his hand as he returned to the bed. I took a calming breath. Edward slipped off his clothes and climbed on top of me.

“I’ll be gentle,” he promised.

Edward kissed me. My mouth, my neck, my chest. Everywhere. He trembled when I reached between us and touched him. His moan encouraged me. I enjoyed knowing the effect I had on him. My apprehension slowly faded away. Excitement bubbled as I anticipated the moment he would cut my skin.

He positioned himself between my legs and thrust inside of me. It felt good. So much better than the first time. It didn’t take long for me to reach the edge. All I could focus on was how good he felt.

So gently, he trailed his lips along my neck. The sharp sting that followed his kisses took me by surprise. I gasped as his mouth covered the cut he’d made. He wrapped one arm around my shoulders and held me against him.

Just as before, the burn intensified with each mouthful of blood he drank, but this time was different. Edward moved on top of me, moaning as his rhythm faltered. The pain I’d been so worried about only intensified the pleasure. I let go, allowing euphoric waves to rock my body. Edward squeezed me tighter, forcing the air from my lungs. The fingers of his free hand dug into my hip. I gasped in pleasure and pain. As his thrusts quickened, he sucked long and hard against my skin. Then he collapsed on top of me.

We lay there, panting. Warmth trickled down my neck. Edward cursed under his breath. He reached up and pressed his fingers over the cut.

“I hurt you again,” he said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so rough with you. Are you okay? Don’t lie to spare my feelings.”

Oh, no. We were going down this road again.

Other than the discomfort from the feeding—which I’d expected—nothing about being with him was painful. I wanted to do it again.

“Edward, I enjoyed it.” I felt my face heat as the blood slowly returned to my body. “All of it.”

Edward sighed as he kissed my lips. “If I have an opportunity to experience that again, I’ll try not to get carried away.”

“You liked it?” I asked. The answer seemed obvious, but I still wanted to hear him say it.

“It was pure ecstasy, unlike anything I could have imagined.”

“And you’re still okay with losing that?”

“As mind blowing as it was to have your blood and your body at the same time, it pales compared to the thought of completely losing control with you.”

A shiver ran through my body. Edward kissed me again, and then he showed me just how gentle he could be.

SMALL TOWN POLICE CHIEF EXPOSED AS A VAMPIRE, ARRESTED FOR MURDER

Forks Police Chief Charles Swan surrendered after murdering fellow officers and exposing himself as a vampire.

By Jasper Whitlock, *Seattle Independent Journal*

Posted September 22

Chief Charles Swan of the Forks, Washington Police Department murdered a fellow officer in the station where they both worked. Eyewitnesses say Swan entered the precinct shortly before 7 p.m. on Sunday. The victim's body was discovered dismembered and drained of blood after Swan's departure. He surrendered himself later that night.

While in police custody, Swan admitted to murdering two more officers. The names of the victims and further details have not been released at this time, but sources close to Swan say the three men were holding his daughter hostage.

It is uncertain at this time how standard police procedures will be affected going forward, as this is the first case of a vampire in police custody. A representative for the police department said Swan is cooperating with law enforcement.

Swan has worked for the department for over two decades. He has served as Chief of Police for the past five years. It is unclear how long Swan has been a vampire or if anyone on the force had been aware.

Join the fight to end violence against vampire supporters. Contact [...].

Chapter Nineteen

IN THE MORNING, I returned my camera and textbooks to the school. I was officially a Forks High School dropout. It felt wrong to quit school and run away with a boy, but I kept telling myself I'd have all eternity to get my diploma.

Edward insisted on accompanying me, despite my initial objections. I didn't want him to be a target again. He reminded me that if anyone would sustain serious injuries from an anti-vampire vigilante, it would be me. After all, he'd already walked away from a shooting relatively unscathed. I didn't argue further.

We made it back to the house without incident. What we didn't expect were the patrol cars parked outside. I rushed toward the front door, but Edward clutched my arm and held me back. A few seconds later, the door popped open. Three officers filtered out. One I recognized from my interview the day before. He acknowledged us with a nod, and we stood to the side to let them pass.

"If there's anything I can do to help, you have my number," one officer said.

"Don't be a stranger, Chief," said another.

I waited until the last one was out of the door and then rushed inside.

"Dad? You're home!"

“For now—” Charlie began. I didn’t let him finish. I ran to him and hugged him with all my strength. Charlie hesitated before hugging me back. It felt good to share a moment like this with him. Throughout my entire childhood, Charlie had literally kept me at arm’s length. I hadn’t realized how much I needed his affection until this very minute.

“I love you, Dad,” I whispered.

“I love you too, Bells. I always have, and I always will.”

My emotions were approaching dangerous territory. I didn’t want to break down today. Releasing him, I took a step back.

Charlie’s mustache twitched as he sniffed. His gaze locked onto my neck, and his eyes narrowed. I covered my neck with my hand, but it was too late. He’d already seen the cut from the night before. I looked down, afraid he’d be angry or think badly of me.

Edward appeared at my side then. He placed his arm around my waist and drew me the slightest bit closer.

“Charlie,” he acknowledged. His voice was pleasant but also firm. It was easy to forget they were peers. Edward wasn’t going to suck up to win Charlie over. “I’m glad you’re home. Have they dropped the charges?”

“Not yet. The situation is pending further investigation.” Charlie let out a puff of air and combed his hand through his hair. “Because of the circumstances, they didn’t feel I was a danger to anyone else, so they released me on my own recognizance. Honestly, I think the decision had more to do with us being ill-equipped to handle a vampire. The whole issue of food is problematic.”

“Did they fire you?” I asked.

“I’m on leave for now, along with a handful of others. I’ve had my suspicions about a few people around the station for some time now. I gave a list of names of those I believe are involved in the anti-vampire league here. I knew something was coming to a head this weekend, but I didn’t know what.” He gave us both a pointed look. “I didn’t want you alone. It’s why I wanted you to stay with Carlisle for a few days.”

I averted my eyes. Next to me, Edward stiffened.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” I said.

Charlie sighed. “No, I should be the one apologizing. I should have been honest with you from the beginning. Maybe if I had, you would have known to be on the alert. I just wish I knew how you became a target.”

“I think I know,” I said. “At homecoming, I defended the Cullens in front of Mike Newton. He was selling his parents’ slaying kits out of his trunk.”

This conversation felt surreal. Here I was, with my vampire boyfriend and my vampire father, discussing black market vampire slaying kits and the role my homecoming date played in my abduction. An abduction that drove my dad to murder someone. A lump formed in my throat. Charlie waited patiently. When it became apparent that I couldn’t go on, Edward filled Charlie in on what he knew about the kits and what happened with Mike the day before.

“Are you going to hurt him?” I asked. I didn’t have much sympathy for Mike after what he did, but I also didn’t want Charlie to go on another killing spree. He was in enough hot water as it was.

“No, Bella. But you two need to report it. I’ll give you Mark’s direct number. I—” Charlie hesitated. He cleared his throat before starting again. “I’m sorry for what I did. I really am. But I had to do it. I had to keep you safe.” He gestured toward the door where we’d left our suitcases. “I see you two are leaving.”

“Bella’s not safe here.”

Charlie bristled. “You think you can protect her better than I can?”

“Of course not.” Edward’s smooth voice lent an air of calmness I did not feel. He must have noticed my unease, because he gave my waist the smallest squeeze. “But you have enough challenges to focus on right now. I intend to be there for Bella. For the rest of our lives.” His declaration hung heavy in the air. For a moment, no one moved. The only sound in the room was my own nervous breathing. I looked between Charlie and Edward as they had some sort of silent stare down.

Charlie was the first to break the silence. “I see.”

“Of course, we will come back if you need us. Or if the police should need anything

more,” Edward added.

Charlie directed his attention to me. “So the next time I see you . . .”

“Edward’s going to change me, Dad.”

“Are you sure that’s what you really want? You can’t change your mind later.”

“It is.”

Charlie nodded in resignation.

“Are you disappointed in me?” I asked.

“No, of course not,” he said. “You know I don’t want that future for you, but it’s not my decision to make. I have to get used to the idea that the world is different for you. Despite the dangers, there will be so many more opportunities available to you than what I had.”

“The world is different for all of us,” Edward interjected. “It’s forever changing, and we have no choice but to change with it. Those opportunities are available for you too.”

“I suppose you’re right. Excellent advice,” Charlie said begrudgingly.

Edward leaned forward slightly, a smirk hinting at his lips. “Well, I am your elder.”

Charlie frowned and held a finger in Edward’s face. “Don’t push it.” He focused on me. His mustache twitched again, but this time in amusement. “Your mom know yet?”

I groaned.

“I’ll tell her about myself. She deserves that much. I haven’t gotten a phone call, so she must not have heard it on the news yet. But you ought to see her, at the very least call her, before you do anything.”

Charlie was right. My mom and I didn’t talk nearly as often as we should, but I couldn’t make a decision like that without at least letting her know. I didn’t know which I dreaded more: telling my mom I planned to become a vampire, or telling her I was running away with a boy. I decided they were equally bad.

“There’s no rush,” Edward said to me. “Whatever you want to do, I’ll stay by your side.”

At Charlie's request, we agreed to spend the day with him and rescheduled our departure for the next morning. Charlie called Renee and confessed to the secret he'd been keeping for almost 18 years. My mom was obviously upset. I could make out her sobs on the other end of the line.

Hearing my dad's side of the story was heartbreaking. It began with a routine traffic stop. He had pulled someone over for driving erratically. There were so many situations he'd been trained to handle. Pulling over a vampire was not one of them.

My dad had little guidance in his new life. The other vampire stuck around long enough to make sure Charlie knew the rules and had a handle on himself. Then he disappeared. It wasn't long afterward that Charlie sent my mom and me away. The pain and regret in his voice was unmistakable. I wondered how differently my life would have turned out had my dad remained human. Would my parents have lived happily ever after? Would I have grown up here in Forks?

There was no way of knowing the answers to my questions, but of one thing I was certain: Edward and I were destined to be together. Despite my mom bringing me to Arizona as a baby, fate brought me back. Fate brought me to him.

My mom and I spoke briefly, but she was understandably upset and needed time to process the bomb Charlie had dropped on her. She made me promise I would visit and introduce her to Edward before my change.

That night, as I unpacked my pajamas and toothbrush, I realized I would be the only one in the house sleeping.

"What are you going to do all night?" I asked Edward as I crawled into bed.

"I'm going to stay right here." He lifted the covers and slid in next to me. "Look, I'm a vampire *and* I'm in your bed, and Charlie hasn't shot me yet."

"We've already established shooting you won't work."

"Jokes."

Edward smiled as he leaned in and brushed his lips across mine. He kissed me,

working his way down until he reached my throat. His tongue was cold as it swept across the healing cut. Then he pressed his nose against my skin and inhaled.

“I was looking forward to changing you. I suppose now I’ll have an opportunity to suffer through your blood one more time,” he teased.

I pulled back slightly, just enough to look him in the eye.

“What will it be like?”

“Ah,” Edward said. “I wondered when you’d ask.” He pushed up onto his elbow, covering my body with his, and cradled my cheek in his free hand. “Well, I suppose now would be a good time to mention I’m venomous.”

“Venomous?” I asked in disbelief, sure I misheard him somehow. I pushed away from him and sat up slightly.

“Yes.” Edward dropped his hand from my face and shifted uncomfortably. “The venom spreads slowly, as long as it’s not sucked out. About three days, give or take.”

“Will it hurt?”

“Yes, but the pain will end.” Edward’s expression was unreadable. He stared at me, and I did my best to keep myself composed. I didn’t want him to see my apprehension and call the whole thing off.

“Will I want to kill people?”

“You won’t necessarily want to kill people,” he assured me. “You’ll want blood. It’s tricky to feed at first, without killing, but I’ll be there to make sure nothing goes awry. Over time, the bloodlust will subside. Everyone is different, but after a few months you’ll be able to be near humans again. I wouldn’t recommend being in close proximity with any for the first year, but you’ll be able to exist in society, assuming we even want to exist in society.”

I considered that for a moment. I knew I’d need to drink blood after the change, and I knew it was dangerous to be around people, but I never made the connection that I’d have to be around people to drink blood. It made me feel incredibly foolish. Hopefully, by the time I was ready to reenter society, the attitude toward vampires would be a lot less volatile.

“I’m still waiting,” Edward whispered.

“For what?”

“For you to run away screaming.”

I reached out and touched his face, tracing my thumb across the sharp line of his jaw. He squeezed his eyes shut. Agony flashed across his face. With a deep breath, he composed his features back into a neutral expression.

“If at any point you change your mind, I’d understand. As long as you choose me, I will be a grateful man. We can wait for as long—”

“Edward.” I shut him up with a kiss. He kissed me in return, winding his fingers in my hair and drawing me closer.

“I want this,” I said against his lips. “I want you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Edward kissed his way back to my neck.

“Forever?” he asked, smiling.

“Yes,” I laughed. “Forever.”

And he pressed his cold lips once again to my throat.

WOLF OR BOY? THE NEWEST PICTURE DIVIDING THE INTERNET.

Eight months ago the internet melted down over the color of a dress. Now a new picture has everyone questioning their eyesight once again.

By Jasper Whitlock, *Seattle Independent Journal*
Posted December 13

[Photo] A photo posted on Reddit by a 17-year-old high school student in Forks, WA, went viral last week. Lee Stephens, who was originally credited with taking the photo, said on Thursday that he developed the photo from a roll of film left in the camera by another student.

Viewers disagree on whether the photo depicts a wolf or a naked teenage boy asleep on a porch. According to online polls, most people see a wolf, but those who see the naked teenager, including Stephens, are adamant they are correct.

It is unclear if the photo is a hoax or if there's something more behind the optical illusion that has yet to be discovered. The original photographer is still unknown.

Do you see a wolf or a boy? Tell us at [...].