

## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

### Concerning Vampires

Some say that in the beginning, mania is a lot like being high on E, and by E I mean Ecstasy, not Edward, though I suppose I could have considered myself high on Edward in more ways than one. It wasn't a bad high at all, but it was an intense one. As we cruised into the heart of Sequim bay the world amplified, experience opened to me like petals on a blossoming flower. I surfed swells of euphoria and withstood surges of frantic energy, heavy electrical pulses in my brain. I inhaled sweet dark breezes off the water scented with promise, lifting us into the dark night sky. It was all possible now. I was in love with a vampire. I was in love with a vampire. I was in love. With a vampire. A fucking vampire.

"How would I know if I was getting too high?" I asked Edward, blurted it out, completely random, mid some conversation I couldn't follow about Carlisle's call to Billy Black about the graduation meeting with the Quileute.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"The sky is too bright," I said. "You're all too loud and the sea is too deep. I can hear it breathing. Everything I thought wasn't real is now real. Ghosts and pixies and fairies and pegasus must exist too, right? Is there life after death? What about zombies?"

"Zombies?" Emmett said. "Seriously?"

"I wonder if I can fly."

"You can't," Edward said. "Don't try."

"Are you sure?"

"This isn't a lucid dream," he said. "It's mania. Mania doesn't give you extra powers."

"What about your venom? Will that give me extra powers?"

"I'm not sure," Edward said, and then looked at Carlisle.

"Perhaps," Carlisle added. "We have to wait and see if the effects are permanent."

I got up and climbed onto the deck, scrambling, still barefoot, feeling more surefooted than I probably was. I grabbed onto the mast and leaned back, feeling the wind chase my hair into the sky. Everything felt good. I buzzed from the base of my spine through the top of my head.

"Take the helm, Emmett," Edward said and followed me as I skipped to the bowsprit, where I then lay on my belly, hanging my head low, over the edge so I could feel the water spraying my face. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I sort of want to fight someone," I said.

"She is high," Emmett said.

"I heard that," I said. "My hearing is getting better."

"I'll fight you," Rosalie said, from back in the cockpit. "Come take a swing at me."

"Don't even think about touching her," Edward said.

I turned onto my back and looked up at the moon. I had to shield my eyes with my hands it was so bright. "Does turning into a vampire feel like this?"

"Not quite" he said.

"Well, coming out of the transition does, sort of," Jasper said, climbing towards us. He and Alice sat next to Edward and studied me. "Nothing feels real when you first come out of it. It's like a permanent dream. And then the edges of reality are always a little fuzzy afterwards."

"All I remember is this," Alice sighed.

"What's the transition like?" I asked.

"Days of pure agonizing, death-wishing hell," Rosalie said bitterly, coming onto the deck and sitting tentatively next to Alice. "You will never experience a more painful thing in your life."

"I remember," I said, eyes wide, bolting upright. "I remember now."

"Remember what?" Edward said.

"Begging you to kill me," I said. "I remember the pain of your bite. Jesus, that was terrible. It's like that for everyone?"

"Yes but it goes on for days," Rosalie said. "And when it's over? You're this. Forever."

"That's what I want."

"No, you don't," she said.

"You're all stunningly beautiful," I said. I got up and walked, not carefully enough, back towards the cockpit. Edward caught me as I stumbled once towards the portside. "You have super strength, hearing, vision. You never age, and you're all immortal. It doesn't seem so bad to me."

"Yes, but we're monsters," Rosalie said, climbing back into the cockpit behind Alice.

"You've got to stop thinking of yourself like that, Rose," Esme said. "You work so hard to rise above it, and you are very successful. It's an important accomplishment. Can't you allow yourself to feel good about that?"

"It doesn't matter," she said. "We are frozen in time and we have no afterlife. All we can do is make more monsters and crave blood."

"That's not entirely true," Emmett said, putting his arm around her shoulder and pulling her close. "We crave other things."

"I remember waking into this reality over three centuries ago," Carlisle said. "I was horrified, honestly. It felt very much like madness."

"Do you have a maker or someone like that?"

"No," he said. "I'd been left for dead. When I came through the transition I swore I would fight with everything I had against the desire to murder."

"He was the first of our kind to successfully resist it," Edward said. "He was the one who proved you could be a vampire and not be a killer."

"But we still are damned," Rosalie said. "We can't move on from this world."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Everyone knows that," she said.

"I know everyone believes it," I said. "But are you absolutely sure? I mean, are there vampire ghosts that come back from the dead and tell you, hey, it sucks, try not to get yourself killed?"

"Vampire ghosts?" Alice said. "You are high."

"I feel high. Like, very high."

"You need to sleep before you get any higher," Edward said.

"I'm not sleepy."

"We can fix that," he said.

"What do you mean you can fix it? How?"

"You really have a lot to learn about vampires," Rosalie said, shaking her head at me like I was a naive child, and I suppose to them I was, being only thirty to their collected centuries of life, or rather, I guess you'd call it "undead" experience.

"I'm trying to learn," I said. "You've got to teach me."

"He can hypnotize you with a look," she said. "And once you're hypnotized, he can get you to do pretty much anything."

"So that's why Jake is all freaked out about me not being with you of my own will?" I asked Edward. "He thinks you hypnotized me? Like those guys who can make people act like a chicken in front of crowds of high school students and they don't remember it?"

"You're not that suggestible," Edward said.

"Have you hypnotized me?"

"Not recently," he said, looking a little uncomfortable.

"Oh sure you have," Rosalie said. "What about the Mercy Brown show?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, curious. "I thought that was just the guitar playing."

"That's not recent. It's been a long time since I did anything like that to you."

"When else? The sail over spring break?" I said. "Did you use it to convince me to go?"

"Reckoner didn't need my help," he said. "That was all her."

"Well, you haven't needed any vampire tricks," I said. "I've wanted you ever since I first saw you."

Edward turned to Rosalie as if to snub her and for once she didn't give him the vicious bitch brow, she didn't scoff, she just gave a small smile back. I could tell despite her bitterness, she was very attached to her family, Edward included. Even I had begun to grow on her. And for certain she'd grown on me, as they all had, strange and beautiful undead creatures that they were. Maybe they were vampires, but I was already thinking of them as *my* vampires.

As we rode cresting white caps under the moon, I could feel the decades of time these beings had together in the ease of their conversation, the openness of their expressions. I imagined them wandering the landscape of this earth in search of some higher purpose they believed had been denied them all by circumstance. Sadness filled my heart at the thought of them stuck here on earth as it fell further and further into decay, without any chance of moving on, if indeed there was a world to move on to from this one, and that was something that they had no further proof of than I did.

I wished I could do something for them to show them how good I thought they were, how much I believed in them and their philosophy. How impressive it was to me that despite being created as predators they had consciously chosen to survive without human blood out of some sense of empathy with their former humanity. How unique, I assumed, this made them among vampires. How incredible it was that they could choose a different destiny for themselves. If all I could do for them was to love every single one of them for what—who—they were, then I would at least do that.

And then there was Edward, who was fast becoming my all-consuming reason for being awake and alive in the world. The more I allowed myself to experience the intense attachment I'd fought so long to keep at bay, the more I felt alive inside that sacred space that two people create when they are really, fully in love. I'd been born fully into that circle now with him. I didn't ever want to leave.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking at me intently as my thoughts raced.

"I love you," I said. "That's all."

"I love you too," he said.

"Then change me," I said.

"Bella." Edward gave me a warning look. "We've already discussed this."

"We didn't finish discussing it."

"You actually want to be a vampire—after all you know now?" Rosalie said.

"I want to be with Edward."

"You don't have to be a vampire for that," he said.

"I don't want to die and leave you. I'm serious."

"If she dies she'll move into the next world and you'll be stuck here for eternity without her. How can you not change her?" Alice asked. "If that's what she wants?"

Edward shook his head. "Who's side are you on?" he asked Alice.

"Bella's side," she said. "Obviously."

"Thank you Alice," I said. "Maybe you can change me if he won't."

"Sure, I'll do it," she said. "Just let me know when."

"Oh, all right, fine then," he said, exasperated, "if you're all going to be so insistent about it." Edward pulled me into his arms and put me into a dramatic dip. "Are you ready right now, Bella?" he asked.

"Yes." I said, trembling. I squeezed my eyes shut as my heart began to pound. "Hurry. Before I lose my nerve."

"Okay, then," he said. "See you on the other side. Good luck."

He ran his hand through my hair and then caressed my neck. He kissed me on the forehead and then I winced as I felt his lips touch my neck. He paused and I heard Emmett and Jasper snicker. "Bella, open your eyes," Edward said.

I opened them and they all began to laugh.

"What?"

"How can you possibly commit to immortality with me when you're not even ready to commit to marriage?"

"Is that sadistic sense of humor something you picked up at the Vampire Academy?" I said.

"No, that's just him," Emmett said.

"Sorry," Edward said, trying to contain the smart ass smile on his face.

"It isn't funny. I was being serious."

"Well if we're being serious then know this. There is no way I'm turning you into a vampire if you're not marrying me."

"Okay, fine," I said. "Are you going to ask me again?"

"Right now?"

"I could ask you, you know," I said.

"I suppose that's true. I mean, this isn't the 1950s, right?"

"You'd hate that, wouldn't you?"

"Very much so."

"How long are you going to make me wait?"

"How long are you going to make the rest of us wait?" Alice asked. Rosalie poked an elbow into her side.

"I waited a long time to ask the first time," Edward said. "You've got to give me a little bit more than twenty-four hours to plan the do-over."

"Come on," Alice said. "You're such a perfectionist. It's a perfect time to ask. We're all here!"

"Alice, it's between Edward and Bella," Esme said. "Don't pressure him."

"I already know the answer this time, anyway," Alice said, and Edward turned to give her a curious smile.

"You've seen it?" I asked.

"I can see it all over your face," she said. "That's more reliable than any vision I've ever had."

We headed back to the marina outside of Port Angeles, and as they took their leave I gave each vampire a hug, even Rosalie, and she gave me one of those quick pats on the back, but she didn't snarl or act otherwise repulsed. Emmett hugged me and lifted me off my feet. "You're a good sport," he said. "I like that in a human."

Alice squeezed me and chattered about Edward flying me to Paris with her and Rose for massive expenditures on clothing once all this nonsense with the Quileute was dealt with. I hugged Jasper too, and he reeled, just a little from it, but it didn't stop him from giving me a small hug back.

"Have fun you two," he said. "See you Saturday."

"We are very, very glad Edward found you, dear Bella," Carlisle said as he held me close, and then he grazed my cheek with a light kiss as he took his leave. Esme kissed me on the cheek as well, like a future mother-in-law might, giving me a most satisfied smile.

"Welcome to our family," she said.

And then once they were off the boat, they just disappeared into the night, like June bugs that stopped flitting and faded into the stars.

"Are we staying here tonight?" I asked him when they were all gone.

He didn't answer me. Instead he just looked at me in that peculiar way of his, and then I could remember the few other times he'd given me quite that look. It was the look that quieted my mind, stilled my heart, reached deep inside of me and touched something I didn't even know was there. Just as I was about to close my eyes, he smiled and caught me in his arms. "How did you do that?" I asked, yawning.

"Vampire skills," he said. Then he helped me down to the stateroom and lay me in the berth. "Sleep now. I've got a lot planned for you for the next couple of days."

"How much of it involves you being naked?" I said sleepily and he laughed.

The last thing I felt was the cold, reassuring touch of his goodnight kiss on my lips.

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When I woke up and realized I was still safely cradled in Reckoner's stateroom, I burst into tears, just for a moment. I was still with Edward. I was inside his ship, inside his heart. It was the best dream I'd ever had and it wasn't ending, which made it better than any dream could ever be. I couldn't wait to see him.

I climbed up the companionway to the cockpit and saw the moon, as huge as the sky itself, hovering what felt like inches from the tip of the mast, now naked with its sails tied up along the beam. We were at anchor. But Edward wasn't on the deck, and he wasn't in the cockpit. He wasn't down in the cabin, either. The dinghy was still floating behind us, so he wasn't on shore. A quick scan of the nearby landfall confirmed that as well. I looked out towards the water, towards the moon, and then I saw him many yards off. Swimming. Under the moon.

"Hey sailor!" I called to him. He turned his head towards me and waved and began to swim to where Reckoner and I waited. Just like Lake Crescent, I thought. Only a thousand times better because this time I wouldn't just peek. I'd gawk.

"You're awake," Edward said as he came near the boat and treaded water.

"It's still dark. I guess I didn't sleep very long."

"It's Thursday night—you've been out for nearly twenty hours," he said.

"No! Really?"

"Yes, really. You sleep like a champ."

"I can't believe you let me miss a whole day of sailing with you," I said. "Why didn't you wake me up this morning?"

"You needed the rest. How do you feel?"

I instinctively checked my pulse.

"You're fine," he said. "A nice, steady 70 beats a minute."

"How do you know?"

"I can hear it," he said. "It's my favorite sound in the world."

"Where are we?"

"Shaw Island," he said. "In the San Juans"

"How's the water?"

"Great," he said. "If you have no pulse."

"I'm coming in," I said, stripping my nightgown off.

"It's too cold for you," he said. "I'll be right out—don't move."

I stood naked in the cool air, waiting, feeling his eyes wander over me as my skin reflected the soft rays of the moon.

"It feels like this moon has been full for a month," I said. "Did you enchant it so it would stay and light our nights?"

"Maybe," he said, watching me.

"I thought you were coming out?" I said.

"In a minute," he said. "Turn around."

"No way. I get to peek this time."

"I want to look at your ass."

I laughed and turned a little to the side, looking over my shoulder, watching him inspect me. Then I heard him practically fly out of the water, but I leapt out of his reach to the bowsprit.

"Impressive," he said as he stalked up the deck towards me, naked and dripping cold water onto the wooden boat. I stood there, arms crossed, tapping my foot pretending to be impatient as I watched him. As his hand reached for my waist, I tossed myself right off the side of the boat and dove headlong into the frigid depths of the cove.

It was fucking cold. So cold I was afraid my heart might stop.

"Holy shit!" I heard him say when I popped my head out of the water. "Bella? What the hell are you doing?"

"Swimming," I said. "It's cold as hell."

"I told you," he said. "You'll get hypothermia. Get out of there."

"I'll come out in a minute." I began to stroke, plunging my hands into the water and propelling myself towards the moon. Several lengths out I turned to the boat and looked at him, full length, naked, glittering in the moonlight, drops of water reflecting

soft light from him like small prisms. His hair was tousled, twisted strands glistening all over his head. The broad expanse of his shoulders were slightly flexed as he rested his hands on his hips. He stood looking some cross between perplexed, annoyed and wondering. My eyes wandered down his torso and despite the fifty degree water I tread, I felt myself getting warm as I lowered my gaze to his legs, and that part of him that hung comfortably there, very there. I tried not to blush as he smiled at me gawking at him. "Turn around," I said.

Without warning he dove in after me. I tried to swim away from him but he caught me quickly, with little contest. "This brave new you is really making me work," he said as he pulled me to him and swam us both towards the boat. I couldn't stop smiling as I felt his arms strong around me, pulling me along as I lay on my back, my head on his shoulder, my feet trailing lazily in our wake.

"I'm supposed to swim every day," I said. "Doctor's orders."

"Not in fifty degree water," he said. "I'll have to work you out some other way."

"Swimming is low impact," I said.

"Since when are you a fan of low impact anything?"

"I'm not," I said. "As you know."

"Up the ladder, Swan," he said as we reached the stern of the boat. I clambered up, into the cockpit and squeezed the excess water out of my hair. He tossed me a towel and we both dried off. Then he went down into the cabin and brought back a wool blanket and wrapped it around me and put his jeans on.

"I don't see why you're bothering with those," I said.

"Watch it or I'll lock all your clothes up and make you stay naked until Saturday."

"You say that like I'd care," I said.

"God, I love you more and more every minute." He sat down and kissed me on the nose. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving," I said. "Completely famished."

Edward could cook, as it turned out, another reason I was now determined to marry him. So I threw on a t-shirt and a pair of jeans as he prepared me a simple meal of bread, grilled salmon and greens and I ate every morsel as though it might be my last meal. I was always hoping now that each meal would be my last, that there would be some moment of weakness and I'd convince him to turn me. So I enjoyed the meal for its simplicity and its sustenance and its representation of all those human things I would most certainly miss once my time came to shed them for eternity.

I was cleaning up the galley as he sat at the chart table, plotting a course around the San Juans, marking the places he wanted to show me along the way. I looked at him now, thought of him not as some forbidden object of my affection, as he had been just over a month ago when we were in these very places doing these same tasks, but as my future husband.

"I want to know everything about you," I said. "I want to know the names of every person in your biological family—cousins, aunts and uncles too. I want to know your grades from kindergarten on. I want to know the name of every girl you ever kissed, and what you hoped for your future when you were really seventeen. Tell me everything."

"Well, that is a lot," he said, looking up from the chart table and smiling at me. "It may take awhile."

"I'm not going anywhere. And I want full details."

He laughed and then came over to where I stood and lead me by the hand into the stateroom. He lay on the berth, then propped himself with some pillows. I climbed up next to him and lay down, settling in for a good, long tale.

"I was born Edward Anthony Masen Jr. on June 20th, 1901 in Chicago," he began. "My mother's name was Elizabeth and my father, Edward Sr., was a lawyer..."

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And so Edward told me the details of his short human life. He had no biological siblings and had been extremely close with his mother as a child. They were a fairly typical upper middle class family living in the suburbs of Chicago in the early 1900s. And yes, she did have a closet full of dresses just like the one I'd worn at prom, and no, I didn't look like his mother. She'd been a blonde, but apparently she had a flair for humor and I had a feeling I would have liked her very much if I'd ever been able to make her acquaintance.

Edward had dreamed of becoming a doctor, but when World War I started, he wanted to fight for his country and so decided to become a soldier. That didn't surprise me at all. When the first wave of Spanish Influenza hit, his father died and he put his plans to enlist on hold so he could take care of his mother. Then the second wave of the flu hit, taking both him and his mother with it. Carlisle had been the attending doctor at the hospital where Edward and Elizabeth lay dying. Edward's mother had implored Carlisle to save him, to do everything within his power to see that he lived. Carlisle snuck Edward from the hospital back to his home and transformed him and adopted him as his own son. Edward had been his first conversion.

Next to the Cullen family came Esme. Carlisle fell in love with her as she lay dying in his Emergency Room after she'd attempted suicide after the death of her only child. He transformed her and they became mates.

And next they found Rosalie.

"That's a whole other story," he said.

"I want to know," I said. "Everything."

"It's horrible," he said. "Rosalie was brutally assaulted by her fiance and his friends and then left for dead in the road." His eyes flashed with rage as he spoke. "Carlisle came along and smelled all the blood and found her, dying. He tried to save her life but he was too late. He couldn't bear to let her die that way, so he brought her home to us."

"Oh no," I said. "No wonder she's so... "

"Mean?" Edward said with a small laugh. "You should probably know, Carlisle transformed her hoping that she would become my mate."

"Really? You two were..."

"No, never."

"I thought she and Emmett... "

"Yes, they're married," he said. "They've been together since 1935. Rosalie and I never tried to be more than siblings, and even that has been a stretch," he said.

"Why didn't it work out between you and her?"

"We're completely incompatible," he said. "She resents me because she believes the only reason Carlisle turned her was for me. Before she met Emmett, she swore she would have rather died."

"How terrible," I said.

"We've learned to deal with each other," he said. "Some days are better than others."

"Did you ever have a mate of your own, then?" I asked, hoping he'd say no, knowing that was a stupid hope to have.

"No," he said, smirking a little.

"What about Mercy?" I asked. "You've been with her, I know."

"Yes, okay, we've been together," he said. "But it was never serious between us."

"Why not?" I started to feel my heart pound a little. How could he possibly prefer me over someone like Mercy Brown? "I know it's not because she doesn't sail."

"I could never commit to a relationship with her. She's known that since I've known her."

"You don't strike me as the 'can't make a commitment' type."

"I'm not."

"So what was the problem?" I asked. "She's smart, beautiful, talented. She's already a vampire so you don't have to worry about her ever getting hurt or sick or dying. I don't understand why you wouldn't want to be with her."

Edward stopped, a curious smile on his face. A new softness fell around his eyes. He put his hands to my face and pulled me to him and then kissed me softly on the lips.

"Edward?"

"I couldn't commit to anyone else because I knew you were coming," he said.

His words blew the cloud cover of my rationalizations, expectations, and summations about what had been happening to me away, not just in the last few days of knowing he was a vampire, not just in the last several months of knowing him, but all of it. Every step I'd taken upon this earth had been leading me right here.

"For how long?" I asked, my eyes tearing up.

"Fifty-two very long years." He brushed a tear from the corner of my eye and then kissed me there. "Alice had a vision of us."

"How could that be?"

"I swear I don't know. I've never seen anything like it, and neither has Alice," he said. "At first I looked all over for you. After a few years went by, I thought maybe it wasn't a vision, but a projection of some sort. I tried to give up on it, but then Alice would have the vision again."

"That's incredible," I said.

"You have no idea how crazy it made me, searching for you. I felt like I'd fallen in love with a hallucination. And I could see this vision of hers in vivid detail, which isn't how it normally works at all. Usually I can just hear thoughts like someone is speaking. This? I could see the dress you were wearing, the way you'd fixed your hair, the sunset. I'd memorized every detail."

"What was the vision?"

"Our dance at prom." He took both my hands in his. "But for all those years I believed it was a vision of us dancing at our wedding."

"Oh Edward," I said, burying my face into his neck. "Is that why you were so upset that night?"

"Yes," he said. "When I realized the vision was from a damned high school dance I realized that the future might not work out the way I'd planned."

"No wonder you were so pissed when I got engaged."

"You have no idea how many times Carlisle and Illeana had to talk me out of stalking Derek Banner. And then that dog Jacob Black, when I saw him the morning after he was with you, God help him."

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And then I didn't want to hear him talk about Jacob, Derek, Mercy or anyone else. In fact, I didn't want to hear him talk at all right then, so I just kissed him with all of the intensity I felt in my heart. He returned my kiss and placed his hand on top of my pounding heart. Then he pushed me gently down to the berth and stripped me naked in seconds. He studied me in such a way that made me feel more than naked, if that was possible, his eyes lingering like I was a prized painting... or maybe a banquet. My heart rate accelerated, my skin tingled as he lightly traced the contours of my chin, my neck, my shoulder.

"Sometimes I still can't believe you're real," he said.

"I know the feeling."

Then he lovingly touched the shiny, bite-shaped scar on my neck, causing me to shiver, my nipples to harden and my desire to flow hot in my veins. His gentle touch to that spot on my body, the place where his essence, his venom, had both entered and exited me, reminded me that this part of me would always be irrevocably his. I squeezed my thighs together and felt the dampness between my legs. Edward breathed deeply and then looked into my eyes.

"For fifty-two years I've been in love with a vision of you. Then when I finally have you in the flesh, it's all I can do to keep myself from devouring you completely."

"I want you to devour me," I said. His eyes flickered and he tightened his jaw, his mouth in a straight line, unexpressive. I swore then I could see that vampire part of him, imprisoned behind all that careful restraint. I wanted to release him. I wanted to engage. "What if you just devour part of me?" I sat up and faced him, kissing him lightly, slipping my hot, needy tongue into his mouth.

"Now, that sounds pretty good," he said. "Which part should I start with?" He ran his hand down my belly and then down between my legs as ran his lips along my jawline to my ear. Then he took my ear between his teeth and slipped his tongue around my earlobe. "Should I start here?"

He kissed me on the lips again and I ran my tongue across his lips playfully. He caught it between his teeth and held it there delicately. Those teeth, I thought. Those teeth with such power to strip me of my mortal self. I ran my tongue along the underside of his teeth and he sucked on it lightly, pulling me into his lap.

And then I did something very, very bad.

As he began to lose himself inside of that kiss, pressing his lips more intently to mine, I nipped my tongue and felt a slight sting. Then I tasted blood. I pushed my tongue back into his mouth and Edward gasped, surprised. He groaned, greedy as he pushed me back down to the berth and held my head in his hand, holding me still as he sucked the blood off my tongue and then through my tongue.

I started to climax under him, first gentle waves that rippled from the tips of my toes, to my fingerprints to the ends of my hair and they began to build, stronger now, stronger again as he drew more blood from me, and then I saw her again, just like two nights before, the white bear floated on the ceiling of the cabin. I cried out, rapturous, fading into light particles as I felt my blood flow into Edward's mouth. I shuddered beneath him as my orgasm peaked and then peaked higher.

Edward groaned again, this time as though he was in pain and then he released my tongue, ran his own over it and I felt the sharp burn of his venom sealing the cut, but not coursing through me. He gripped my shoulders and pried himself off of me, practically heaving with the exertion it cost him. He leapt from the bed and stood on the other side of the room, glowering.

"Come back," I said, sitting up.

"Never, ever do that again," he said, shaking with anger, his eyes blood red and glowing. "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to stop myself? I could have killed you just now."

"You're not going to kill me."

"Jesus Christ, Bella. You don't understand what you've done here." Edward turned and stormed out of the stateroom, out of the cabin and up onto the deck.

Give him a few minutes, I thought to myself. Let him calm down.

My own heart pounded, exhilarated. I sat and took deep breaths until I felt calmer, and then pulled on a t-shirt and jeans and crept up to the deck.

He was standing at the bowsprit, staring out at the water. I knew he heard me but he didn't turn to look.

"I'm so angry with you right now I don't even know what to do. I can't even think," he said.

"I'm sorry."

"I have to be able to trust you not to do things like that to me."

"I know," I sighed and then sat down on the deck, hung my legs down over the side. "I don't even know why I did it."

"I do," he said.

"You do?"

"Yeah," he said. "It turns you on."

I blushed then because it was true. "That's really fucked up, right?"

"It's really dangerous, and you're not just putting yourself in danger here. The last thing I want is to become a predator again."

"Let me make it up to you," I said.

"Oh, you will," he said. "But I'm too pissed off at you right now."

"Okay," I said. "But can I just say something?"

"No."

"Come on. You're overreacting."

"Bella, this is your life we're talking about, okay? There is no over reacting to your life in danger. None."

"My life was never in danger."

"That just isn't true. I am really a vampire, I really can kill you by draining you of your blood."

"I wanted to please you."

"You most definitely did not please me. That's like giving an alcoholic a coveted rare vintage and only letting him stick his nose in the glass."

"I'm sorry. When you put it like that..."

"Sorry isn't good enough. How the hell am I supposed to trust you?"

"I don't know," I said. "You just are."

"We're going to have to have some rules," he said.

"Okay, fine, if it will make you more comfortable."

"From now on, when it comes to sex you do what I tell you to do, when I tell you to do it. You don't approach me, you don't touch me. You wait for me to tell you it's okay."

"No, I hate that."

"Too bad. For now that's how it has to be."

"Why?"

"Because I have to trust you won't pull some crazy stunt like shoving your bloody tongue in my mouth."

"What if I refuse to do something you tell me to do?"

"You won't."

"Wait a minute," I said. "Are you going to use vampire tricks on me?"

"Please, Bella. I don't need to use vampire tricks on you for that."

There was still much I had to learn about vampires. First of all, being above humans on the food chain, they can be quite condescending. Edward's vampire confidence was definitely part of what made him hot but it could also annoy the shit out of me. Like now, when in the heat of his anger, he was punishing me by not allowing me near him without permission.

"Now get yourself down to the stateroom and change into something that shows you off a little and then wait for me on the berth."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite."

It was my moment of truth. I'd like to say I was oppositional, difficult, argumentative. I'd like to say I was assertive at least, or that I questioned his new rules beyond the discussion we just had. There was a very insistent part of my mind that said "Don't take that shit." But sadly, it lost out to the part of my mind that said, "Oh my God, he's going to fuck me. Yay!"

So then I quickly found myself down in the stateroom, digging into my trunk, hoping Alice had dropped some coin on lingerie and I was not disappointed to see there was quite a decent selection available. I suppose she'd anticipated the likelihood

of a honeymoon in the near future, and despite the current little mess I was embroiled in with my love, the thought still made me smile.

I opted for a sheer black negligee and a black lace tanga and nothing else. Then I lay on the berth and waited, waited, waited and waited. But heard nothing. No movement from above at all. I considered poking my head out of the door, going up to the deck to see what he was doing, but then thought better of it.

And so I waited some more. I don't know if was fifteen minutes or three hours, but it felt like days he made me wait. The water lapped against Reckoner's hull. Moonlight shone through the portholes in the stateroom and I turned off the lights and thought maybe I'd just drift back to sleep, but I wasn't tired.

The longer I waited, the more guilt I felt for what I'd done to him. And the more I longed for him to come to me so I could do something to undo it, although I knew it wouldn't be possible.

I stared out the porthole, twisting the edge of my negligee in my fingers, considering what it really meant to be in love with a vampire. He was the predator. I was the prey. I'd seemed to have forgotten that basic fact, and I couldn't say I had any fear of him at all. I only had fear of losing him.

And then he was finally at the door.

"Hi," I said, feeling tentative.

"Get on your hands and knees," he said.

I hesitated only because I was so aroused by his command I felt stunned. Then I moved into position, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure to him it sounded like a beating kick drum was lodged in my chest. I was dripping between my legs as I heard him approach me, but I didn't turn to face him.

He walked around the berth, inspecting me. Then he lifted the edge of my negligee so it uncovered my ass.

"Edward, I'm... " I began to say.

"Shut up," he said. "Don't speak again until I give you permission."

Oh God! I thought. Why does that turn me on? Who knew? He ran his cold hand up the back of my thigh, onto my ass and held it there. Then he slid a finger into my panties and slipped it along me, just barely inside of me until I was panting.

"I should punish you for what you've done here tonight," he said. "You have no idea the danger you put yourself in. It must never, ever happen again." I began to

tremble and I wanted to speak but still did not. "How well can you listen, Bella? That's what I need to know. You can speak now."

"Are you going to hit me?"

"Bella, if I hit you I'll break you," he said. "That's not what I want. I'm trying to keep you safe."

"What do you mean by 'punish me?'"

"I mean arouse you and then deny you, so you can feel just a taste of what you've done to me."

"I'm afraid."

"Good. You should be. You are far too confident of your new situation." My face burned hot with embarrassment and indignation. Then I felt tears in my eyes and watched as they began to fall onto the bed. He took a step away from me and crossed his arms and I lowered my head, turned my face away from him. "So we see where each other's limits are now, I guess."

"I'm not afraid of you, vampire," I said.

"Oh is that so? What are you afraid of then?"

"I'm afraid of losing you again."

He stepped back from me and exhaled, a heavy sigh. "Bella, sit down."

I sat on the edge of the bed and wiped the tears from my eyes. Edward knelt on the floor before me and took my hands in his.

"Listen to me and know this. No matter how angry you make me, you are never going to lose me. Not until I am utterly destroyed, my limbs ripped from my body and burned to bits could you ever lose me. Not in an eternity will anything take me from your side. The only way you'll lose me now is to send me away yourself."

"I want you to trust me again."

"Then you absolutely must abide me in this way as long as you are human. Can you agree to that?"

"Yes."

"No begging, taunting, pleading. No surprises. Otherwise, no sex. And you have no idea how long I can abstain if need be."

"That would be cruel and unusual," I said. "You wouldn't dare."

"Don't try me."

"I'm pretty sure you'd have a hard time with abstinence on this little boat after awhile."

"Bite yourself again and see what happens then. I'll make you ride in the dinghy."

"I don't know how to be submissive."

"Well, you certainly enjoy being told what to do." I blushed from head to toe. "You're just not very experienced with that sort of thing, I know."

"Do I need a safe word or something?"

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I'd rather die than hurt any part of you. This arrangement is to keep me from hurting you and to keep you from tempting me to hurt you."

"But all I want is for you to relax and feel safe to be yourself with me."

"Well I definitely don't feel that way now. I'm sorry."

"Damn it. I am so, so sorry, Edward."

"Are you going to be okay doing things my way?"

"Yes, but I'm probably not going to be good at it."

"You'll do fine as long as you do as you're told. And if you don't, then no sex."

"That sucks," I said.

"That's the deal," he said. "And seriously, Bella? If you ever stick your bloody tongue in my mouth again, I will hogtie you down here and keep you like that until you forget your own name."

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"Okay, okay."

"Lay down now."

I lay back on the berth and he lay beside me, on his side, propped up on an elbow and then he turned a lock of my hair between his fingers, something I noticed he did often now. This little gesture of affection usually made me smile, but tonight instead it made me pensive and sad, because I realized what had transpired between us. I had found Edward's weakness. No wonder he came back at me with such aggression. I felt awful, having trespassed in such an unkind way into territory that made him feel so unsure.

"I wish you could read my mind," I said.

"Let me try," he said and put his lips to my forehead. I closed my eyes and tried to just open my heart, broadcast my apology. I felt fresh tears roll down the side of my head, onto the blanket, and then felt his lips soothing the salty path between the corner of my eye and my ear. I didn't reach for him though, even when my heart desperately desired it. "I know you're sorry. It's okay. I'm sorry I got so angry with you."

"I broke your trust," I said.

"You found my limit, that's all," he said. "This is all very new to you still and there are things you need to learn. I don't mean to condescend, Bella. It's just the way it is."

"I know, I know," I said. "But I feel terrible."

"Well you have to stop feeling terrible now. I command it."

"You don't get to command anything other than sexual favors," I said. "Those are the rules."

"Okay, fine, then I command you cheer up so I can fuck you. How am I going to fuck you if you're guilt ridden and stressed out?"

I laughed.

"Make a wish."

"A wish?"

"Yeah, a wish. I'm feeling generous."

"I really wish you would propose to me again," I said.

"You're already getting that," he said, kissing me. "Wish for something else." I smiled as he turned me over to my belly and then pulled my hair away from my neck and kissed me right at the base of my skull. The touch of his lips there emptied my mind of every last bad feeling I had about what I'd done. I sighed happily as he pulled my negligee over my head and started kissing my back. Then he moved my knees apart and slid a hand along the inside of my thigh.

"Fine, then," I said. "I want a back rub. A very good back rub."

"Really? Is that all? I thought you might ask for a Z4 or something."

"You think I'm going to settle for a BMW when you're driving an Aston Martin? Anyway, the back rub I can get right now. I hate waiting for wishes to come true." I started to relax as his hands began kneading forcefully into my shoulders.

"Oh, all right I suppose," he said. "Though I'd rather rub something else right now." His thumbs pressed into the top of my neck, just where it meets my head. I felt an intense release of tension and exhaled.

"Oh my God, that's better than sex," I said. "Even vampire sex."

"You are pretty tense. Maybe I shouldn't have worked you up like that." He moved his hands quickly down my back, thrusting his thumbs into all the little knots and letting them go.

"I know, you're a beast. Just look what you've done to me."

"Look what you've done to me," he said, rubbing his hard cock against my ass. "I say we're even."

"Not even close," I argued. He pulled my hips up so I was on my hands and knees before him and pressed himself to me. "No way. You can't be done already," I said. I tried to hold my ground but I was already so wet from his hands working over me, the feel of his cock against me, that I didn't even believe myself.

"Bella, I haven't even started," he said as he cupped my breast in one hand and started to knead it softly between his fingers. I moaned and arched my back and couldn't help pressing my ass to him. Then he pushed me back down on the bed and began working over my back methodically with his hands, hitting every sore nerve ending, every hot acupressure spot, loosening all of my muscles, releasing every last bit of tension in my body. Then he took his hands and worked them over my legs and the bottoms of my feet, a special kind of heaven.

"I cannot believe how good I feel right now," I said. "Can you do that every day?"

"Roll over. I want to look at you."

I flipped to my back and he stood at the foot of the berth, his eyes wandering up and down my body, bringing me easily from that state of heavy relaxation back to readiness. He lifted my leg and then kissed the inside of my ankle, cool over the bone, sending a current of sensation right up my leg. I sucked in my breath as he moved his lips gradually up my leg. He climbed onto the berth, forcing my legs apart before him, his teeth lightly grazing on the way up until I was overcome with need for him. I put my hands into his hair like I was holding on for life as he began to lick and suck the skin of my inner thigh. Would I come just from the proximity of his mouth? Maybe.

"Breathe, Bella," he said.

As I inhaled I felt the edge of his tongue sliding along me, delving into the wetness and as I exhaled he dragged it slowly around my hard clit and slipped his finger up inside of me and all I could think was Jesus, I need his cock. Right. Now.

"Please fuck me," I said. "Please. Now. Right now."

"What did I say about begging?" he said into my thigh as he slid two fingers back inside of me and then moved his tongue deftly over my clit in a steady rhythm. I moaned and tightened around his fingers and then he pulled them out of me, flipped me on my belly, pulled my hips up to him and teased me with the tip of his cock.

"I'm... oh..." and just at that moment he plunged deep into me, riding right into the center of my building orgasm. I moaned as his quick, hard thrusts pushed me higher and higher up to the crest.

"Come," he said. "Right now."

It wasn't like he had to tell me twice. As soon as he said it, I clenched tight around his cock and came hard, working it over as he gradually slowed his thrusts.

"See? You listen very well," he whispered in my ear. I felt my face grow hot with the insinuation as my involuntary shuddering told him all he needed to know about that subject.

He rolled me onto my back again and kissed me forcefully, filled my mouth with his tongue and I opened myself to him even further. He pushed my knees back and plunged himself hard and deep into me. My body tightened around him and I began to moan softly as I crested again.

"Wait," he said. "Not yet."

"You're killing me," I cried, out of breath, doing all I could to control myself from slipping over that edge.

"Trust me," he said, cradling my head with his hand as he slowed his strokes.

"No, no, don't slow down... Please," I begged him again. He shook his head at me and then cupped his hand over my mouth and I throbbed beneath him. Then he gripped me tight by the back of my neck, holding my head like a vice. I gasped as I felt his mouth on my neck, his cold lips sending that pulsing current back out into every part of my body. I felt myself clench tighter around his cock as he dragged his tongue right over the bite mark. He gripped my head and held it fast as he began to fuck me harder. I moaned even louder as his thrusts became more intense. "Oh please," I begged. "Let me come now, Edward. Please."

"No," he said.

I felt myself drench below at his refusal, holding myself back. I didn't even consider the possibility that I could defy him. I felt his release near as he quickened his strokes and my body followed suit, yielding to him in every possible way. I didn't care what he required from me as long as he kept fucking me like that. I tensed every muscle

in my body, working to hold on as he continued to fuck me relentlessly, his grip around my neck getting tighter and tighter.

“Okay Bella, come now,” he said, the tension clear in his voice. I finally let go, came as hard as I ever had, pulsing, drawing him in and in again. The force of his orgasm sent me out to another realm, like it carried some secret spell of the life force that made my body behave like endless vibration, at one with the universe itself.

I didn't want to come back from this. Ever.