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Opening extract from

New Moon

Written by

Stephanie Meyer

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ATOM

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These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which, as they kiss, consume

Romeo and Juliet, *Act II, Scene VI*

PREFACE

I FELT LIKE I WAS TRAPPED IN ONE OF THOSE TERRIFYING nightmares, the one where you have to run, run till your lungs burst, but you can't make your body move fast enough. My legs seemed to move slower and slower as I fought my way through the callous crowd, but the hands on the huge clock tower didn't slow. With relentless, uncaring force, they turned inexorably toward the end—the end of everything.

But this was no dream, and, unlike the nightmare, I wasn't running for *my* life; I was racing to save something infinitely more precious. My own life meant little to me today.

Alice had said there was a good chance we would both

die here. Perhaps the outcome would be different if she weren't trapped by the brilliant sunlight; only I was free to run across this bright, crowded square.

And I couldn't run fast enough.

So it didn't matter to me that we were surrounded by our extraordinarily dangerous enemies. As the clock began to toll out the hour, vibrating under the soles of my sluggish feet, I knew I was too late—and I was glad something bloodthirsty waited in the wings. For in failing at this, I forfeited any desire to live.

The clock tolled again, and the sun beat down from the exact center point of the sky.

1. PARTY

I WAS NINETY-NINE POINT NINE PERCENT SURE I WAS dreaming.

The reasons I was so certain were that, first, I was standing in a bright shaft of sunlight—the kind of blinding clear sun that never shone on my drizzly new hometown in Forks, Washington—and second, I was looking at my Grandma Marie. Gran had been dead for six years now, so that was solid evidence toward the dream theory.

Gran hadn't changed much; her face looked just the same as I remembered it. The skin was soft and withered, bent into a thousand tiny creases that clung gently to the bone underneath. Like a dried apricot, but with a puff of thick white hair standing out in a cloud around it.

Our mouths—hers a wizened pucker—spread into the same surprised half-smile at just the same time. Apparently, she hadn't been expecting to see me, either.

I was about to ask her a question; I had so many—What was she doing here in my dream? What had she been up to in the past six years? Was Pop okay, and had they found each other, wherever they were?—but she opened her mouth when I did, so I stopped to let her go first. She paused, too, and then we both smiled at the little awkwardness.

"Bella?"

It wasn't Gran who called my name, and we both turned to see the addition to our small reunion. I didn't have to look to know who it was; this was a voice I would know anywhere—know, and respond to, whether I was awake or asleep . . . or even dead, I'd bet. The voice I'd walk through fire for—or, less dramatically, slosh every day through the cold and endless rain for.

Edward.

Even though I was always thrilled to see him—conscious or otherwise—and even though I was *almost* positive that I was dreaming, I panicked as Edward walked toward us through the glaring sunlight.

I panicked because Gran didn't know that I was in love with a vampire—nobody knew that—so how was I supposed to explain the fact that the brilliant sunbeams were shattering off his skin into a thousand rainbow shards like he was made of crystal or diamond?

Well, Gran, you might have noticed that my boyfriend glitters. It's just something he does in the sun. Don't worry about it . . .

What was he *doing*? The whole reason he lived in Forks, the rainiest place in the world, was so that he could be outside in the daytime without exposing his family's secret. Yet here he was, strolling gracefully toward me—with the most beautiful smile on his angel's face—as if I were the only one here.

In that second, I wished that I was not the one exception to his mysterious talent; I usually felt grateful that I was the only person whose thoughts he couldn't hear just as clearly as if they were spoken aloud. But now I wished he could hear me, too, so that he could hear the warning I was screaming in my head.

I shot a panicked glance back at Gran, and saw that it was too late. She was just turning to stare back at me, her eyes as alarmed as mine.

Edward—still smiling so beautifully that my heart felt like it was going to swell up and burst through my chest—put his arm around my shoulder and turned to face my grandmother.

Gran's expression surprised me. Instead of looking horrified, she was staring at me sheepishly, as if waiting for a scolding. And she was standing in such a strange position—one arm held awkwardly away from her body, stretched out and then curled around the air. Like she had her arm around someone I couldn't see, someone invisible . . .

Only then, as I looked at the bigger picture, did I notice the huge gilt frame that enclosed my grandmother's form. Uncomprehending, I raised the hand that wasn't wrapped around Edward's waist and reached out to touch her. She mimicked the movement exactly, mirrored it. But

where our fingers should have met, there was nothing but cold glass . . .

With a dizzying jolt, my dream abruptly became a nightmare.

There was no Gran.

That was *me.* Me in a mirror. Me—ancient, creased, and withered.

Edward stood beside me, casting no reflection, excruciatingly lovely and forever seventeen.

He pressed his icy, perfect lips against my wasted cheek.

"Happy birthday," he whispered.

I woke with a start—my eyelids popping open wide—and gasped. Dull gray light, the familiar light of an overcast morning, took the place of the blinding sun in my dream.

Just a dream, I told myself. *It was only a dream.* I took a deep breath, and then jumped again when my alarm went off. The little calendar in the corner of the clock's display informed me that today was September thirteenth.

Only a dream, but prophetic enough in one way, at least. Today was my birthday. I was officially eighteen years old.

I'd been dreading this day for months.

All through the perfect summer—the happiest summer I had ever had, the happiest summer *anyone anywhere* had ever had, and the rainiest summer in the history of the Olympic Peninsula—this bleak date had lurked in ambush, waiting to spring.

And now that it had hit, it was even worse than I'd feared it would be. I could feel it—I was older. Every day

I got older, but this was different, worse, quantifiable. I was eighteen.

And Edward never would be.

When I went to brush my teeth, I was almost surprised that the face in the mirror hadn't changed. I stared at myself, looking for some sign of impending wrinkles in my ivory skin. The only creases were the ones on my forehead, though, and I knew that if I could manage to relax, they would disappear. I couldn't. My eyebrows stayed lodged in a worried line over my anxious brown eyes.

It was just a dream, I reminded myself again. Just a dream . . . but also my worst nightmare.

I skipped breakfast, in a hurry to get out of the house as quickly as possible. I wasn't entirely able to avoid my dad, and so I had to spend a few minutes acting cheerful. I honestly tried to be excited about the gifts I'd asked him not to get me, but every time I had to smile, it felt like I might start crying.

I struggled to get a grip on myself as I drove to school. The vision of Gran—I would *not* think of it as me—was hard to get out of my head. I couldn't feel anything but despair until I pulled into the familiar parking lot behind Forks High School and spotted Edward leaning motionlessly against his polished silver Volvo, like a marble tribute to some forgotten pagan god of beauty. The dream had not done him justice. And he was waiting there for *me,* just the same as every other day.

Despair momentarily vanished; wonder took its place. Even after half a year with him, I still couldn't believe that I deserved this degree of good fortune.

His sister Alice was standing by his side, waiting for me, too.

Of course Edward and Alice weren't really related (in Forks the story was that all the Cullen siblings were adopted by Dr. Carlisle Cullen and his wife, Esme, both plainly too young to have teenage children), but their skin was precisely the same pale shade, their eyes had the same strange golden tint, with the same deep, bruise-like shadows beneath them. Her face, like his, was also startlingly beautiful. To someone in the know—someone like me—these similarities marked them for what they were.

The sight of Alice waiting there—her tawny eyes brilliant with excitement, and a small silver-wrapped square in her hands—made me frown. I'd told Alice I didn't want anything, *anything,* not gifts or even attention, for my birthday. Obviously, my wishes were being ignored.

I slammed the door of my '53 Chevy truck—a shower of rust specks fluttered down to the wet blacktop—and walked slowly toward where they waited. Alice skipped forward to meet me, her pixie face glowing under her spiky black hair.

"Happy birthday, Bella!"

"Shh!" I hissed, glancing around the lot to make sure no one had heard her. The last thing I wanted was some kind of celebration of the black event.

She ignored me. "Do you want to open your present now or later?" she asked eagerly as we made our way to where Edward still waited.

"No presents," I protested in a mumble.

She finally seemed to process my mood. "Okay . . .

later, then. Did you like the scrapbook your mom sent you? And the camera from Charlie?"

I sighed. Of course she would know what my birthday presents were. Edward wasn't the only member of his family with unusual skills. Alice would have "seen" what my parents were planning as soon as they'd decided that themselves.

"Yeah. They're great."

"*I* think it's a nice idea. You're only a senior once. Might as well document the experience."

"How many times have *you* been a senior?"

"That's different."

We reached Edward then, and he held out his hand for mine. I took it eagerly, forgetting, for a moment, my glum mood. His skin was, as always, smooth, hard, and very cold. He gave my fingers a gentle squeeze. I looked into his liquid topaz eyes, and my heart gave a not-quite-so-gentle squeeze of its own. Hearing the stutter in my heartbeats, he smiled again.

He lifted his free hand and traced one cool fingertip around the outside of my lips as he spoke. "So, as discussed, I am not allowed to wish you a happy birthday, is that correct?"

"Yes. That is correct." I could never quite mimic the flow of his perfect, formal articulation. It was something that could only be picked up in an earlier century.

"Just checking." He ran his hand through his tousled bronze hair. "You *might* have changed your mind. Most people seem to enjoy things like birthdays and gifts."

Alice laughed, and the sound was all silver, a wind

chime. "Of course you'll enjoy it. Everyone is supposed to be nice to you today and give you your way, Bella. What's the worst that could happen?" She meant it as a rhetorical question.

"Getting older," I answered anyway, and my voice was not as steady as I wanted it to be.

Beside me, Edward's smile tightened into a hard line.

"Eighteen isn't very old," Alice said. "Don't women usually wait till they're twenty-nine to get upset over birthdays?"

"It's older than Edward," I mumbled.

He sighed.

"Technically," she said, keeping her tone light. "Just by one little year, though."

And I supposed . . . if I could be *sure* of the future I wanted, sure that I would get to spend forever with Edward, and Alice and the rest of the Cullens (preferably not as a wrinkled little old lady) . . . then a year or two one direction or the other wouldn't matter to me so much. But Edward was dead set against any future that changed me. Any future that made me like him—that made me immortal, too.

An impasse, he called it.

I couldn't really see Edward's point, to be honest. What was so great about mortality? Being a vampire didn't look like such a terrible thing—not the way the Cullens did it, anyway.

"What time will you be at the house?" Alice continued, changing the subject. From her expression, she was up to exactly the kind of thing I'd been hoping to avoid.

"I didn't know I had plans to be there."

"Oh, be fair, Bella!" she complained. "You aren't going to ruin all our fun like that, are you?"

"I thought my birthday was about what *I* want."

"I'll get her from Charlie's right after school," Edward told her, ignoring me altogether.

"I have to work," I protested.

"You don't, actually," Alice told me smugly. "I already spoke to Mrs. Newton about it. She's trading your shifts. She said to tell you 'Happy Birthday.'"

"I—I still can't come over," I stammered, scrambling for an excuse. "I, well, I haven't watched *Romeo and Juliet* yet for English."

Alice snorted. "You have *Romeo and Juliet* memorized."

"But Mr. Berty said we needed to see it performed to fully appreciate it—that's how Shakespeare intended it to be presented."

Edward rolled his eyes.

"You've already seen the movie," Alice accused.

"But not the nineteen-sixties version. Mr. Berty said it was the best."

Finally, Alice lost the smug smile and glared at me. "This can be easy, or this can be hard, Bella, but one way or the other—"

Edward interrupted her threat. "Relax, Alice. If Bella wants to watch a movie, then she can. It's her birthday."

"So there," I added.

"I'll bring her over around seven," he continued. "That will give you more time to set up."

Alice's laughter chimed again. "Sounds good. See you tonight, Bella! It'll be fun, you'll see." She grinned—the

wide smile exposed all her perfect, glistening teeth—then pecked me on the cheek and danced off toward her first class before I could respond.

"Edward, please—" I started to beg, but he pressed one cool finger to my lips.

"Let's discuss it later. We're going to be late for class."

No one bothered to stare at us as we took our usual seats in the back of the classroom (we had almost every class together now—it was amazing the favors Edward could get the female administrators to do for him). Edward and I had been together too long now to be an object of gossip anymore. Even Mike Newton didn't bother to give me the glum stare that used to make me feel a little guilty. He smiled now instead, and I was glad he seemed to have accepted that we could only be friends. Mike had changed over the summer—his face had lost some of the roundness, making his cheekbones more prominent, and he was wearing his pale blond hair a new way; instead of bristly, it was longer and gelled into a carefully casual disarray. It was easy to see where his inspiration came from—but Edward's look wasn't something that could be achieved through imitation.

As the day progressed, I considered ways to get out of whatever was going down at the Cullen house tonight. It would be bad enough to have to celebrate when I was in the mood to mourn. But, worse than that, this was sure to involve attention and gifts.

Attention is never a good thing, as any other accident-prone klutz would agree. No one wants a spotlight when they're likely to fall on their face.

And I'd very pointedly asked—well, ordered really—

that no one give me any presents this year. It looked like Charlie and Renée weren't the only ones who had decided to overlook that.

I'd never had much money, and that had never bothered me. Renée had raised me on a kindergarten teacher's salary. Charlie wasn't getting rich at his job, either—he was the police chief here in the tiny town of Forks. My only personal income came from the three days a week I worked at the local sporting goods store. In a town this small, I was lucky to have a job. Every penny I made went into my microscopic college fund. (College was Plan B. I was still hoping for Plan A, but Edward was just so stubborn about leaving me human . . .)

Edward had a *lot* of money—I didn't even want to think about how much. Money meant next to nothing to Edward or the rest of the Cullens. It was just something that accumulated when you had unlimited time on your hands and a sister who had an uncanny ability to predict trends in the stock market. Edward didn't seem to understand why I objected to him spending money on me—why it made me uncomfortable if he took me to an expensive restaurant in Seattle, why he wasn't allowed to buy me a car that could reach speeds over fifty-five miles an hour, or why I wouldn't let him pay my college tuition (he was ridiculously enthusiastic about Plan B). Edward thought I was being unnecessarily difficult.

But how could I let him give me things when I had nothing to reciprocate with? He, for some unfathomable reason, wanted to be with me. Anything he gave me on top of that just threw us more out of balance.

As the day went on, neither Edward nor Alice brought my birthday up again, and I began to relax a little.

We sat at our usual table for lunch.

A strange kind of truce existed at that table. The three of us—Edward, Alice, and I—sat on the extreme southern end of the table. Now that the "older" and somewhat scarier (in Emmett's case, certainly) Cullen siblings had graduated, Alice and Edward did not seem quite so intimidating, and we did not sit here alone. My other friends, Mike and Jessica (who were in the awkward post-breakup friendship phase), Angela and Ben (whose relationship had survived the summer), Eric, Conner, Tyler, and Lauren (though that last one didn't really count in the friend category) all sat at the same table, on the other side of an invisible line. That line dissolved on sunny days when Edward and Alice always skipped school, and then the conversation would swell out effortlessly to include me.

Edward and Alice didn't find this minor ostracism odd or hurtful the way I would have. They barely noticed it. People always felt strangely ill at ease with the Cullens, almost afraid for some reason they couldn't explain to themselves. I was a rare exception to that rule. Sometimes it bothered Edward how very comfortable I was with being close to him. He thought he was hazardous to my health—an opinion I rejected vehemently whenever he voiced it.

The afternoon passed quickly. School ended, and Edward walked me to my truck as he usually did. But this time, he held the passenger door open for me. Alice must have been taking his car home so that he could keep me from making a run for it.

I folded my arms and made no move to get out of the rain. "It's my birthday, don't I get to drive?"

"I'm pretending it's not your birthday, just as you wished."

"If it's not my birthday, then I don't have to go to your house tonight . . ."

"All right." He shut the passenger door and walked past me to open the driver's side. "Happy birthday."

"Shh," I shushed him halfheartedly. I climbed in the opened door, wishing he'd taken the other offer.

Edward played with the radio while I drove, shaking his head in disapproval.

"Your radio has horrible reception."

I frowned. I didn't like it when he picked on my truck. The truck was great—it had personality.

"You want a nice stereo? Drive your own car." I was so nervous about Alice's plans, on top of my already gloomy mood, that the words came out sharper than I'd meant them. I was hardly ever bad-tempered with Edward, and my tone made him press his lips together to keep from smiling.

When I parked in front of Charlie's house, he reached over to take my face in his hands. He handled me very carefully, pressing just the tips of his fingers softly against my temples, my cheekbones, my jawline. Like I was especially breakable. Which was exactly the case—compared with him, at least.

"You should be in a good mood, today of all days," he whispered. His sweet breath fanned across my face.

"And if I don't want to be in a good mood?" I asked, my breathing uneven.

His golden eyes smoldered. "Too bad."

My head was already spinning by the time he leaned closer and pressed his icy lips against mine. As he intended, no doubt, I forgot all about my worries, and concentrated on remembering how to inhale and exhale.

His mouth lingered on mine, cold and smooth and gentle, until I wrapped my arms around his neck and threw myself into the kiss with a little too much enthusiasm. I could feel his lips curve upward as he let go of my face and reached back to unlock my grip on him.

Edward had drawn many careful lines for our physical relationship, with the intent being to keep me alive. Though I respected the need for maintaining a safe distance between my skin and his razor-sharp, venom-coated teeth, I tended to forget about trivial things like that when he was kissing me.

"Be good, please," he breathed against my cheek. He pressed his lips gently to mine one more time and then pulled away, folding my arms across my stomach.

My pulse was thudding in my ears. I put one hand over my heart. It drummed hyperactively under my palm.

"Do you think I'll ever get better at this?" I wondered, mostly to myself. "That my heart might someday stop trying to jump out of my chest whenever you touch me?"

"I really hope not," he said, a bit smug.

I rolled my eyes. "Let's go watch the Capulets and Montagues hack each other up, all right?"

"Your wish, my command."

Edward sprawled across the couch while I started the movie, fast-forwarding through the opening credits.

When I perched on the edge of the sofa in front of him, he wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest. It wasn't exactly as comfortable as a sofa cushion would be, what with his chest being hard and cold—and perfect—as an ice sculpture, but it was definitely preferable. He pulled the old afghan off the back of the couch and draped it over me so I wouldn't freeze beside his body.

"You know, I've never had much patience with Romeo," he commented as the movie started.

"What's wrong with Romeo?" I asked, a little offended. Romeo was one of my favorite fictional characters. Until I'd met Edward, I'd sort of had a thing for him.

"Well, first of all, he's in love with this Rosaline—don't you think it makes him seem a little fickle? And then, a few minutes after their wedding, he kills Juliet's cousin. That's not very brilliant. Mistake after mistake. Could he have destroyed his own happiness any more thoroughly?"

I sighed. "Do you want me to watch this alone?"

"No, I'll mostly be watching you, anyway." His fingers traced patterns across the skin of my arm, raising goose bumps. "Will you cry?"

"Probably," I admitted, "if I'm paying attention."

"I won't distract you then." But I felt his lips on my hair, and it was very distracting.

The movie eventually captured my interest, thanks in large part to Edward whispering Romeo's lines in my ear—his irresistible, velvet voice made the actor's voice sound weak and coarse by comparison. And I did cry, to his amusement, when Juliet woke and found her new husband dead.

"I'll admit, I do sort of envy him here," Edward said, drying the tears with a lock of my hair.

"She's very pretty."

He made a disgusted sound. "I don't envy him the *girl*—just the ease of the suicide," he clarified in a teasing tone. "You humans have it so easy! All you have to do is throw down one tiny vial of plant extracts . . ."

"What?" I gasped.

"It's something I had to think about once, and I knew from Carlisle's experience that it wouldn't be simple. I'm not even sure how many ways Carlisle tried to kill himself in the beginning . . . after he realized what he'd become . . ." His voice, which had grown serious, turned light again. "And he's clearly still in excellent health."

I twisted around so that I could read his face. "What are you talking about?" I demanded. "What do you mean, this something you had to think about once?"

"Last spring, when you were . . . nearly killed . . ." He paused to take a deep breath, struggling to return to his teasing tone. "Of course I was trying to focus on finding you alive, but part of my mind was making contingency plans. Like I said, it's not as easy for me as it is for a human."

For one second, the memory of my last trip to Phoenix washed through my head and made me feel dizzy. I could see it all so clearly—the blinding sun, the heat waves coming off the concrete as I ran with desperate haste to find the sadistic vampire who wanted to torture me to death. James, waiting in the mirrored room with my mother as his hostage—or so I'd thought. I hadn't known it was all a ruse. Just as James hadn't known that Edward was racing

to save me; Edward made it in time, but it had been a close one. Unthinkingly, my fingers traced the crescent-shaped scar on my hand that was always just a few degrees cooler than the rest of my skin.

I shook my head—as if I could shake away the bad memories—and tried to grasp what Edward meant. My stomach plunged uncomfortably. "Contingency plans?" I repeated.

"Well, I wasn't going to live without you." He rolled his eyes as if that fact were childishly obvious. "But I wasn't sure how to *do* it—I knew Emmett and Jasper would never help . . . so I was thinking maybe I would go to Italy and do something to provoke the Volturi."

I didn't want to believe he was serious, but his golden eyes were brooding, focused on something far away in the distance as he contemplated ways to end his own life. Abruptly, I was furious.

"What is a *Volturi?*" I demanded.

"The Volturi are a family," he explained, his eyes still remote. "A very old, very powerful family of our kind. They are the closest thing our world has to a royal family, I suppose. Carlisle lived with them briefly in his early years, in Italy, before he settled in America—do you remember the story?"

"Of course I remember."

I would never forget the first time I'd gone to his home, the huge white mansion buried deep in the forest beside the river, or the room where Carlisle—Edward's father in so many real ways—kept a wall of paintings that illustrated his personal history. The most vivid, most wildly colorful canvas there, the largest, was from Carlisle's time

in Italy. Of course I remembered the calm quartet of men, each with the exquisite face of a seraph, painted into the highest balcony overlooking the swirling mayhem of color. Though the painting was centuries old, Carlisle—the blond angel—remained unchanged. And I remembered the three others, Carlisle's early acquaintances. Edward had never used the name *Volturi* for the beautiful trio, two black-haired, one snow white. He'd called them Aro, Caius, and Marcus, nighttime patrons of the arts . . .

"Anyway, you don't irritate the Volturi," Edward went on, interrupting my reverie. "Not unless you want to die—or whatever it is we do." His voice was so calm, it made him sound almost bored by the prospect.

My anger turned to horror. I took his marble face between my hands and held it very tightly.

"You must never, never, never think of anything like that again!" I said. "No matter what might ever happen to me, you are *not allowed* to hurt yourself!"

"I'll never put you in danger again, so it's a moot point."

"*Put* me in danger! I thought we'd established that all the bad luck is my fault?" I was getting angrier. "How dare you even think like that?" The idea of Edward ceasing to exist, even if I were dead, was impossibly painful.

"What would you do, if the situation were reversed?" he asked.

"That's not the same thing."

He didn't seem to understand the difference. He chuckled.

"What if something did happen to you?" I blanched at the thought. "Would you want me to go *off* myself?"

A trace of pain touched his perfect features.

"I guess I see your point . . . a little," he admitted. "But what would I do without you?"

"Whatever you were doing before I came along and complicated your existence."

He sighed. "You make that sound so easy."

"It should be. I'm not really that interesting."

He was about to argue, but then he let it go. "Moot point," he reminded me. Abruptly, he pulled himself up into a more formal posture, shifting me to the side so that we were no longer touching.

"Charlie?" I guessed.

Edward smiled. After a moment, I heard the sound of the police cruiser pulling into the driveway. I reached out and took his hand firmly. My dad could deal with that much.

Charlie came in with a pizza box in his hands.

"Hey, kids." He grinned at me. "I thought you'd like a break from cooking and washing dishes for your birthday. Hungry?"

"Sure. Thanks, Dad."

Charlie didn't comment on Edward's apparent lack of appetite. He was used to Edward passing on dinner.

"Do you mind if I borrow Bella for the evening?" Edward asked when Charlie and I were done.

I looked at Charlie hopefully. Maybe he had some concept of birthdays as stay-at-home, family affairs—this was my first birthday with him, the first birthday since my mom, Renée, had remarried and gone to live in Florida, so I didn't know what he would expect.

"That's fine—the Mariners are playing the Sox tonight," Charlie explained, and my hope disappeared. "So I won't be any kind of company . . . Here." He scooped up the camera he'd gotten me on Renée's suggestion (because I would need pictures to fill up my scrapbook), and threw it to me.

He ought to know better than that—I'd always been coordinationally challenged. The camera glanced off the tip of my finger, and tumbled toward the floor. Edward snagged it before it could crash onto the linoleum.

"Nice save," Charlie noted. "If they're doing something fun at the Cullens' tonight, Bella, you should take some pictures. You know how your mother gets—she'll be wanting to see the pictures faster than you can take them."

"Good idea, Charlie," Edward said, handing me the camera.

I turned the camera on Edward, and snapped the first picture. "It works."

"That's good. Hey, say hi to Alice for me. She hasn't been over in a while." Charlie's mouth pulled down at one corner.

"It's been three days, Dad," I reminded him. Charlie was crazy about Alice. He'd become attached last spring when she'd helped me through my awkward convalescence; Charlie would be forever grateful to her for saving him from the horror of an almost-adult daughter who needed help showering. "I'll tell her."

"Okay. You kids have fun tonight." It was clearly a dismissal. Charlie was already edging toward the living room and the TV.

Edward smiled, triumphant, and took my hand to pull me from the kitchen.

When we got to the truck, he opened the passenger door for me again, and this time I didn't argue. I still had a hard time finding the obscure turnoff to his house in the dark.

Edward drove north through Forks, visibly chafing at the speed limit enforced by my prehistoric Chevy. The engine groaned even louder than usual as he pushed it over fifty.

"Take it easy," I warned him.

"You know what you would love? A nice little Audi coupe. Very quiet, lots of power . . ."

"There's nothing wrong with my truck. And speaking of expensive nonessentials, if you know what's good for you, you didn't spend any money on birthday presents."

"Not a dime," he said virtuously.

"Good."

"Can you do me a favor?"

"That depends on what it is."

He sighed, his lovely face serious. "Bella, the last real birthday any of us had was Emmett in 1935. Cut us a little slack, and don't be too difficult tonight. They're all very excited."

It always startled me a little when he brought up things like that. "Fine, I'll behave."

"I probably should warn you . . ."

"Please do."

"When I say they're all excited . . . I do mean *all* of them."

"Everyone?" I choked. "I thought Emmett and Rosalie were in Africa." The rest of Forks was under the impression

that the older Cullens had gone off to college this year, to Dartmouth, but I knew better.

"Emmett wanted to be here."

"But . . . Rosalie?"

"I know, Bella. Don't worry, she'll be on her best behavior."

I didn't answer. Like I could just *not* worry, that easy. Unlike Alice, Edward's other "adopted" sister, the golden blond and exquisite Rosalie, didn't like me much. Actually, the feeling was a little bit stronger than just dislike. As far as Rosalie was concerned, I was an unwelcome intruder into her family's secret life.

I felt horribly guilty about the present situation, guessing that Rosalie and Emmett's prolonged absence was my fault, even as I furtively enjoyed not having to see her. Emmett, Edward's playful bear of a brother, I *did* miss. He was in many ways just like the big brother I'd always wanted . . . only much, much more terrifying.

Edward decided to change the subject. "So, if you won't let me get you the Audi, isn't there anything that you'd like for your birthday?"

The words came out in a whisper. "You know what I want."

A deep frown carved creases into his marble forehead. He obviously wished he'd stuck to the subject of Rosalie.

It felt like we'd had this argument a lot today.

"Not tonight, Bella. Please."

"Well, maybe Alice will give me what I want."

Edward growled—a deep, menacing sound. "This isn't going to be your last birthday, Bella," he vowed.

"That's not fair!"

I thought I heard his teeth clench together.

We were pulling up to the house now. Bright light shined from every window on the first two floors. A long line of glowing Japanese lanterns hung from the porch eaves, reflecting a soft radiance on the huge cedars that surrounded the house. Big bowls of flowers—pink roses—lined the wide stairs up to the front doors.

I moaned.

Edward took a few deep breaths to calm himself. "This is a party," he reminded me. "Try to be a good sport."

"Sure," I muttered.

He came around to get my door, and offered me his hand.

"I have a question."

He waited warily.

"If I develop this film," I said, toying with the camera in my hands, "will you show up in the picture?"

Edward started laughing. He helped me out of the car, pulled me up the stairs, and was still laughing as he opened the door for me.

They were all waiting in the huge white living room; when I walked through the door, they greeted me with a loud chorus of "Happy birthday, Bella!" while I blushed and looked down. Alice, I assumed, had covered every flat surface with pink candles and dozens of crystal bowls filled with hundreds of roses. There was a table with a white cloth draped over it next to Edward's grand piano, holding a pink birthday cake, more roses, a stack of glass plates, and a small pile of silver-wrapped presents.

It was a hundred times worse than I'd imagined.

Edward, sensing my distress, wrapped an encouraging arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head.

Edward's parents, Carlisle and Esme—impossibly youthful and lovely as ever—were the closest to the door. Esme hugged me carefully, her soft, caramel-colored hair brushing against my cheek as she kissed my forehead, and then Carlisle put his arm around my shoulders.

"Sorry about this, Bella," he stage-whispered. "We couldn't rein Alice in."

Rosalie and Emmett stood behind them. Rosalie didn't smile, but at least she didn't glare. Emmett's face was stretched into a huge grin. It had been months since I'd seen them; I'd forgotten how gloriously beautiful Rosalie was—it almost hurt to look at her. And had Emmett always been so . . . *big*?

"You haven't changed at all," Emmett said with mock disappointment. "I expected a perceptible difference, but here you are, red-faced just like always."

"Thanks a lot, Emmett," I said, blushing deeper.

He laughed, "I have to step out for a second"—he paused to wink conspicuously at Alice—"Don't do anything funny while I'm gone."

"I'll try."

Alice let go of Jasper's hand and skipped forward, all her teeth sparkling in the bright light. Jasper smiled, too, but kept his distance. He leaned, long and blond, against the post at the foot of the stairs. During the days we'd had to spend cooped up together in Phoenix, I'd thought he'd gotten over his aversion to me. But he'd gone back to exactly how he'd acted before—avoiding me as much as possible—

the moment he was free from that temporary obligation to protect me. I knew it wasn't personal, just a precaution, and I tried not to be overly sensitive about it. Jasper had more trouble sticking to the Cullens' diet than the rest of them; the scent of human blood was much harder for him to resist than the others—he hadn't been trying as long.

"Time to open presents," Alice declared. She put her cool hand under my elbow and towed me to the table with the cake and the shiny packages.

I put on my best martyr face. "Alice, I know I told you I didn't want anything—"

"But I didn't listen," she interrupted, smug. "Open it." She took the camera from my hands and replaced it with a big, square silver box.

The box was so light that it felt empty. The tag on top said that it was from Emmett, Rosalie, and Jasper. Self-consciously, I tore the paper off and then stared at the box it concealed.

It was something electrical, with lots of numbers in the name. I opened the box, hoping for further illumination. But the box *was* empty.

"Um . . . thanks."

Rosalie actually cracked a smile. Jasper laughed. "It's a stereo for your truck," he explained. "Emmett's installing it right now so that you can't return it."

Alice was always one step ahead of me.

"Thanks, Jasper, Rosalie," I told them, grinning as I remembered Edward's complaints about my radio this afternoon—all a setup, apparently. "Thanks, Emmett!" I called more loudly.

I heard his booming laugh from my truck, and I couldn't help laughing, too.

"Open mine and Edward's next," Alice said, so excited her voice was a high-pitched trill. She held a small, flat square in her hand.

I turned to give Edward a basilisk glare. "You promised."

Before he could answer, Emmett bounded through the door. "Just in time!" he crowed. He pushed in behind Jasper, who had also drifted closer than usual to get a good look.

"I didn't spend a dime," Edward assured me. He brushed a strand of hair from my face, leaving my skin tingling from his touch.

I inhaled deeply and turned to Alice. "Give it to me," I sighed.

Emmett chuckled with delight.

I took the little package, rolling my eyes at Edward while I stuck my finger under the edge of the paper and jerked it under the tape.

"Shoot," I muttered when the paper sliced my finger; I pulled it out to examine the damage. A single drop of blood oozed from the tiny cut.

It all happened very quickly then.

"No!" Edward roared.

He threw himself at me, flinging me back across the table. It fell, as I did, scattering the cake and the presents, the flowers and the plates. I landed in the mess of shattered crystal.

Jasper slammed into Edward, and the sound was like the crash of boulders in a rock slide.

There was another noise, a grisly snarling that seemed to be coming from deep in Jasper's chest. Jasper tried to shove past Edward, snapping his teeth just inches from Edward's face.

Emmett grabbed Jasper from behind in the next second, locking him into his massive steel grip, but Jasper struggled on, his wild, empty eyes focused only on me.

Beyond the shock, there was also pain. I'd tumbled down to the floor by the piano, with my arms thrown out instinctively to catch my fall, into the jagged shards of glass. Only now did I feel the searing, stinging pain that ran from my wrist to the crease inside my elbow.

Dazed and disoriented, I looked up from the bright red blood pulsing out of my arm—into the fevered eyes of the six suddenly ravenous vampires.