

Patroclus Rising



A Twilight
Fanfiction

g i s e l l e - l x

For Team CarlWard Slash:
capricorn75, deelovely, HeBelongsToMe, Its929,
mycrookedsmile, and sleepyvalentina
with my humble thanks for both the wonderful prompt
and for your unending patience.
I hope that it's everything you wanted.

Chapter 1

FORKS, WASHINGTON—2005

Edward was in the biggest hurry Carlisle had seen him in since 1927.

He'd been buried in paperwork, what, ten minutes ago? Requisition forms and double-checking discharge instructions. Listening to Puccini. Forks was a deathly quiet town, the hospital a level four trauma center—a rural hospital, the kind he liked. There were almost never emergencies.

Which was why the sudden sound of his son's Volvo had surprised him.

Edward stormed in looking deranged. He didn't notice Carlisle's quick check of his eye color, thank God. He began talking at once, the words coming out jumbled, incoherent, missing the logic that tied the pieces together.

"I have to go. Now."

Carlisle's stomach dropped. Edward had uttered those words once before. Decades ago, moments before he stormed out into a rainstorm not to be seen again for three years.

He swallowed, hoping that he could keep the panic from creeping into his voice.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing. Yet. But it will, if I stay."

Edward cringed away when Carlisle reached out to him. But a second later, Edward looked up at him, his eyes plaintive. The eyes that reminded Carlisle that Edward, for all his bravado, for all his posturing, was merely a boy.

"Have you ever...has there ever been a time..."

Edward drew a breath, then exhaled through his nose, steadying himself. For a moment, just long enough for Carlisle to shiver, he didn't go on.

"Has any one person ever smelled better to you than the rest of them?" Edward finally finished, then added, "*Much* better?"

"Oh."

It came out as almost a sigh. Before Carlisle knew what he was doing, his hands were fishing in his desk drawer for his keys. He shoved them into Edward's hand. For the briefest of seconds, their fingers interlaced, and then slid apart again.

Carlisle mumbled something about his car being faster. Suggested that perhaps a retreat to their cousins in Alaska was called for.

Edward nodded.

And just as quickly as he'd come, Carlisle's son was gone, the engine of the Mercedes roaring to life in the parking lot outside the office, tiny flecks of limestone gravel kicked up by the tires and assailing the wall like machine gun fire.

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS—1918

It smelled like heaven.

There was simply no other word.

Two hundred seventy-four years of temperance were nearly shattered with a single inhalation. Everything about the earthy, sweet scent called to him, beckoning his body and tormenting his mind. He might have compared the flavor favorably with nutmeg, or cardamom, one of the rarer spices that kept with its scent a sharpness alongside the sweet.

Carlisle Cullen, ruined by nutmeg. Now *that* would be a story for Aro.

Sickness had its own unique smell. Skin drying, phlegm building in the lungs—all these things had their own scents. Ill humans grew more delicious smelling by the day, reminding Carlisle that healer that he may pretend to be, he was at his core a predator. As his prey grew weaker, they grew more attractive to him.

But *this*. This wasn't merely the scent of illness indicating that a human would be easily disposed of. This was nothing short of divine. Venom pooled in his mouth as he moved past the slowly emaciating bodies, the parents holding children, the pools of spit and vomit that were spilled faster than the nurses could clean them. He brushed past them all in search of this one exquisite scent.

Aro had talked about this on occasion. The ancient vampire studied their world in the same way Carlisle studied the humans', seeking to know all he could about the way they existed. Carlisle had scoffed at the idea. *La cantante*, the singer, the human with irresistible blood. Carlisle had curbed his thirst from the beginning, when his mind had been at its wildest. The idea that there could be one whose blood was so potent that it would break his conviction had seemed silly, and he had written it off as one more result of his kind's general lack of temperance.

Until now.

He was ashamed of how quickly his feet carried him—at a speed just faster than appropriate for a rushing doctor, even amid the chaos of the influenza. He was even more ashamed of the words that were surfacing in his mind: *kill....drink...* To his recollection—and his recollection was perfect—he had never wanted to harm a human. But all that temperance rushed away from him now as he wound his way through the crowded hospital, the blood of this human thrumming in his ears.

He reached the end of the hall and turned into the waiting parlor.

She was a beautiful woman, if not exceptional. Dark, coppery red hair tumbled over her shoulders, and her eyes were a striking bottle green. Carlisle closed his eyes. To the woman, it would seem to be not more than a split second, but to him, it was long enough to suck in the sweet ambrosia of the air. Her smell was mouthwateringly exquisite, and he wanted to stand here and soak in it. His concerns for the other patients—every other patient—began to slide away from him; the din of the hospital faded to a thrum.

He could take her away, he thought. Her hair falling over his shoulder, him carrying her out of the hospital and perhaps into the woods. He would bury his nose in her neck, and lick, and inhale, and *bite*...

Carlisle gulped. He needed air.

But instead, he took a breath so that he could speak.

"How do I help you?"

"It is not I," she whispered. "It's my son."

He looked again, and realized he had barely seen her the first time. Slung across her shoulders was the pale arm of a young man. He, too, had dark reddish hair that blended into his mother's where his head lay on her bosom.

Clucking softly, Carlisle inched closer. He placed a hand beneath the boy's chin and lifted his head. The eyelids fluttered open, revealing the same dark green eyes, but the son's were flatter, unfocused by fever.

His hand was on the boy's forehead in an instant—it felt like fire. The boy let out a low moan as he turned his face upward into the cool skin.

"Please, doctor," the mother whispered. "His father died five days ago..."

And Carlisle remembered. He hadn't treated the man, but he'd caught a glimpse—and, he realized, a glimpse of the wife as well. Like so many, the father had come in to the hospital already too far gone to do much for. One of the hardest lessons any doctor learned was triage—to put one's effort into those who would most benefit, and to let go those who were beyond help. The boy's father had been triaged right out of Carlisle's attention, but given Carlisle's memory, he had not been shoved completely from his mind.

"Masen," Carlisle said quietly. "Edward Masen?"

Her tears spilled over suddenly, splashing into the boy's hair where they clung, glistening before they ran down over his forehead.

"It's his name, too," the woman said. "Edward Junior."

Carlisle nodded, and bent over to lift the boy.

According to Aro, *La cantante* was supposed to be irresistible. When one encountered it, one was supposed to be driven mad by the intoxicating scent, to the point that it became impossible to control oneself. So many had lost their immortal lives because they had acted foolishly while attacking the blood that sang to them. Carlisle had seen it time and time again when he'd lived with the brothers—heard the keening wail, the metallic scrape of a head being separated from its body.

But what was his life for if he gave up his conviction now? He closed his throat as much as he could. If this woman was his singer, then he would do whatever he could to make her life worth living.

A mother. He could focus on the fact that she was a mother.

Carlisle reached out and pulled the spindly arms away from their mother's embrace. The body was unfathomably hot against his skin; he could feel it even through his shirt and his doctor's coat. The boy was pliant in his arms, but he moaned as he was tugged from his mother.

"Shhh," Carlisle said softly. "Let me take you, Edward."

The mother looked up with those same beseeching eyes as Carlisle stood, lifting the body into his arms and letting Edward's fevered head loll against his shoulder. She laid a hand on his arm, just above where her son's hair lay limply.

"I can't lose him, Doctor," her voice said weakly.

"You won't," Carlisle muttered. But as he got fully to his feet and turned away, he almost fell to his knees in shock.

Because when the air didn't clear, he realized the scent was coming from the boy.

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It took him a long while to find Edward Masen a bed.

The children's ward was packed; the men's wards equally so. Already they were turning away those who weren't near death, sending them to the armories and churches where makeshift infirmaries had been set up. Carlisle worked at those places, too—he didn't need to sleep, and there were too few trained hands available. If he could be of use twenty-four hours a day, he would be.

So the hospitals were full to bursting, and Carlisle carried Edward Masen for nearly an hour before he finally found a bed near the end of the corridor in the men's ward. He suspected that it had been recently vacated by a corpse, but he tried not to think about this as he stripped the sheets and laid the shivering body on the bare mattress. And then, like a smart doctor, he left.

That first night, he actually managed to stay away.

On the second, he made one quick check on all his patients.

On the third night, he made five.

"You should leave," Carlisle told the mother on the third night. She'd taken up residence on the stool next to the bed at once, which was a terrible idea. The influenza was the most virulent Carlisle had ever seen. Patients doubled over in their beds, clutching at their stomachs, their eyes bloodshot and their noses dripping. They coughed up blood and bile, and their lungs filled with fluid as the pneumonia set in.

And the boy was no different. He was pale, emaciated, bony. Porcelain skin, covering such a fragile, thin body. Carlisle could see perfectly, of course, but he wondered what the mother must be seeing of her child in the darkness. Could she see

the way his cheeks shone in the moonbeams? The way his eyelashes cast a tiny, subtle shadow over the sunken, bluish eye socket?

He blinked and shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"You won't be immune," he said.

Mrs. Masen didn't answer Carlisle directly. Instead, she lifted up one of Edward's hands. It was pale, with long, bony fingers that ended in stubbed, dirty nails.

"He was going to the Institute for Musical Arts," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "He plays the piano. Beautifully. I used to teach him, but he outgrew what I knew so quickly." She clasped her child's hand in her own, stroking the dry skin.

"But he wants to go fight in Wilson's infernal war," she went on. "Senior thought it was a good idea; that it would make him more of a man, or some silly thing."

She ran her hand through Edward's hair. The strands were dark, but even in the moonlight Carlisle's eyes could see the hints of red.

For a brief moment, Carlisle's mind wandered. He remembered so little of his own family. Like Edward, he had no siblings; he knew that much.

Unlike Edward, he'd had no mother.

Would his mother have sat here, he wondered? Were it him, lying here, ill with influenza, would his mother also refuse to leave his side, and tell the doctor everything about who he was?

Would his hair have looked like hers?

He checked Edward's breathing, noted on his chart the signs of the disease's progression, and then stepped away from the bed.

"You may stay," he said.

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The next day, Carlisle found himself making flimsy excuses to go into the men's ward. A new patient had been admitted, and he needed to go see them. A nameless nurse had asked him to recheck the progression of a patient's cyanosis; it seemed more advanced than other patients. He simply wanted to make sure that the nurses were following the cleanliness protocols that this epidemic demanded.

Anything. Anything at all he could think of to give him reason to wander down the long corridor of beds to the one four from the end, close enough to the radiator that there was an extra blast of heat every now and then, but far enough away that the mother and son had privacy. He would pretend just to check vitals, but instead he'd look over the boy.

Edward had obviously been wiry for his age even before days of influenza took their toll on his appetite. His limbs were long and spindly, and he appeared strikingly young for seventeen. But his features were strong, and Carlisle could see he would be a handsome man later, when his trunk caught up with the rest of him and he outgrew his acne.

Every time he stepped onto the ward, the boy's heady scent hit him like a curtain, enveloping him and making him almost delirious. And yet every time, he managed to walk into the ward, and even to stand next to Edward Masen's bed and talk to his mother.

If he was smart, he thought, he'd run. He'd run before. From England, and then from the Brothers, and then from that strangely appealing girl in Ohio. And no one would miss him here. Hadn't enough doctors already defected? Fear of contracting the disease themselves kept any number of doctors away; it seemed half the medical profession had run off to the country or the prairie or someplace the influenza was less severe.

He wasn't human, and he felt he shouldn't run because he didn't need to. And so he'd promised himself that he would stay; that he wouldn't be like the doctors who ran off and abandoned their patients. He would be the responsible one.

But young Edward Masen and his incredible scent had turned the tables. It would be smarter of him to run. Running would keep the boy safe. There were plenty of doctors in the hospital; any one of them could take excellent care of Edward Masen and his mother.

At what point did one commit the sin of pride, he wondered. Had it long since been committed, when he chose to test himself instead of running headlong out the door the moment he caught Edward's scent?

Or would it only be committed when he finally succumbed to the desire to kill?

Pressing open the door, Carlisle entered. At once, he looked down the ward. For a moment, he was confused enough that he didn't see the bed; so used he was to the figure which always sat beside it. But, no, the scent was still here.

Carlisle found himself almost running down the row of beds. To the one, four from the end, with the skinny boy with the freckles across his nose. And he was there, lying with the sheet twisted around his legs so that it wrapped his lower torso like a swaddling cloth. Asleep, his eyelids fluttering as he mumbled something incoherent.

But the stool next to his bed was empty. The mother was nowhere to be found.

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It took Carlisle the better part of an hour to find her, and when he did, he wished he hadn't.

Even in the semi-dark, to his eyes it was obvious that her lips and fingernail beds had already turned the purplish-blue of those afflicted with the influenza, as their weakening lungs deprived their blood of oxygen. She looked small, lying there on the hospital bed, her hands crossed over her stomach as though she were already arranged for the coffin.

His heart sank.

If a heart which didn't beat could do that.

"Mrs. Masen?" he called as he approached the bed.

She didn't stir, and he forced himself to focus on her heartbeat.

"You can't die."

It was a foolish order, as though he could command death and life. She answered only by way of a soft exhalation. So he tried harder.

"Edward needs you."

But needed her for what, exactly? The boy was seventeen. Yes, he was young to be alone, but a handful of his age peers were married, some even with children of their own. And as the mother had pointed out, he was very near the age at which many boys enlisted to the Great War. Even though President Wilson had only a few months earlier lowered the conscription age, younger boys had been lying about their ages and signing up in droves almost since the fighting had begun. The boy was an adult in nearly every sense of the word.

Carlisle was so sufficiently lost in these thoughts that when Elizabeth Masen suddenly grabbed his arm, he barely felt it. It wasn't until she whispered to him that he turned.

"Take care of him," she said.

He jerked his arm out of her grip with such force her hand flung down and hit the side of the bed with an ominous clang. At once, his stomach twisted. He grabbed for it, patting the knuckles.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "You startled me."

Ridiculous, but true. When had he last been startled? One did not sneak up on him; his senses were too inhumanly keen.

Edward Masen and his mother had rattled him quite a bit more than he'd been aware.

"Take—care of—him," the woman rasped. "Edward—needs you."

Carlisle blinked. Hadn't this been what he'd just said to her? To say nothing of the fact that Edward was unlikely to live.

For some reason, this made Carlisle's stomach give an odd jerk.

Elizabeth Masen turned her head toward him, almost at once breaking into a coughing fit. Carlisle clutched her hand as her whole body convulsed, and the little droplets of spittle and blood formed at the edges of her lips. Fumbling for a rag on the bed stand, he found none, and instead used the sheet to wipe frantically at Mrs. Masen's lips. It was unstarched—the hospital's laundry was working triple time to keep patient bed linens clean and there was no time for anything as mundane as starching. It was a miracle that Mrs. Masen had a clean sheet at all.

The coughing subsided after a moment, and the woman lay still underneath his hands.

"Mrs. Masen?" he called, even though he could hear her heartbeat and her breath.

She rolled to the side nearer to him, and her eyes snapped wide open. The eyes that were the same, sea-glass green as her son's. The same sunken expression of those whose bodies were ravaged by the disease.

Carlisle willed himself not to look away.

"Mrs. Masen?"

"Take—care of him," she repeated. "You must."

She didn't know what she was asking. The best thing for him to do would be to run. To be in air that wasn't adulterated by her child's awful and wonderful scent. To be separated from the desire that Carlisle couldn't quite pin down.

Yet, Carlisle found himself gripping her hand again in the darkness, and murmuring his assent for reasons he didn't quite understand. Because how did he explain to this mother that saving her son was the last thing he felt he ought to do?

"I will take care of him," he murmured.

And as though that was all she needed, Elizabeth Masen rolled back onto her side and fell into sleep.

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Somehow, Carlisle managed to avoid the men's ward until the following night. He made his way through the rows of beds, checking temperatures recorded by the nurses, clearing faces of spit and phlegm. Two patients were very near death; he made a note to himself to alert the nurses. Standard procedure—well, the new standard, forced by the dire necessity of the situation—was to move them out of the ward to make room for newer patients who had a greater chance of survival. Half the floor below them was relegated to these patients near death; the ones whose lives would be unsalvageable and who simply needed a place to lie in wait of their winding sheets.

It was gruesome. But it was necessary.

Slowly, he made his way to every other patient on the ward before Edward. When at last there was only the bronze-haired boy left, Carlisle made his way to the cot. His mother's seat still stood at his bedside, and Carlisle dropped himself onto it.

Like most of the influenza patients, Edward Masen wasn't quite conscious, the fever keeping his mind locked such that he couldn't discern the goings-on around him.

All the better, Carlisle thought, as he realized that some part of him wanted this boy to be spared the horror of seeing men carted off to the morgue.

"It's better," he muttered, and Edward let out an exhale as though he'd understood.

Carlisle took the boy's hand. It was slender, with long fingers, and Carlisle remembered how Mrs. Masen had gone on the Institute of Musical Arts. Edward did have a piano player's hands. Carlisle could imagine these slender fingers tripping their way across a keyboard, bringing out arpeggios and chromatic scales and all the things that made the instrument so difficult.

He slid his fingers into the boy's, feeling the soft skin between them. It was sensitive there, he knew; humans could be injured in that delicate crevice between their fingers by the slightest pressure or nick, and it would bleed for days.

The mere thought of that made him want to scream—with joy? Fear? Passion? He gulped. He needed to run.

But he couldn't move.

He'd never been this close to a human before. Well, he had, of course, as a doctor, but not just sitting with one, and certainly not sitting with one while the human in question was asleep. And it was sleep, Carlisle could tell, because his eyelids fluttered beneath the long, dark lashes. Even as his face was etched with pain, something about his very carriage was relaxed as he dreamed.

He wondered what those dreams were like.

It had been a long time since Carlisle had dreamed.

Keeping one hand entwined with the boy's, he let the other stroke through the boy's hair—it was heavy with several days' oil, but still soft, like a child's. Carlisle marveled at how silken it felt under his fingertips.

"I promised your mother," he whispered. "I don't know why, but I did." It was a mistake, he thought as he appraised the boy. The body was near death, cyanosis having set into the lips and eyelids. With his advanced hearing, Carlisle needed no stethoscope to hear the fluid building in the lungs.

Edward groaned again, flinging a wiry arm over his head as he turned. His underarm hair was still fine and down-like, and redder than the hair on his head. It wasn't the bare underarm of a boy, and yet, not the developed one of a man, either.

If the influenza took him, Edward Masen would die on the very cusp of manhood, in this body that was at the very height of youthful perfection.

And that, to Carlisle, seemed cruelest of all.

Before he'd had a moment to think, Carlisle leaned in to Edward's shoulder, so that the wispy hairs touched his nose. Carlisle's body did not expend excess venom—his eyes would not tear, his skin did not sweat. But this boy was human, and the same sweat that caused his face to glisten and redden made his scent impossibly strong.

"Perfect," Carlisle whispered, and the word startled him so that he jerked himself back from the bed, realizing what he'd been doing. Frantically, his eyes searched the ward, but there was only one night nurse, far on the other side, engrossed in caring for her patient and paying him little mind.

He pressed his hands to his head. What would the nurse have said, if she'd looked across the room and found him smelling his patient's skin? An impossibility to shrug that action off as diagnostic.

But when he stood, Edward rolled over and reached a hand out in his sleep, groping at the air where Carlisle had sat just a moment before. In his sleep, he swiped once, twice, then balled his hand into a fist and tucked it back under his chin like an infant.

Perfect.

It took everything Carlisle had to make himself leave.

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For two more nights he fell into an uneasy rhythm. He would arrive to the hospital, and walk to his office to hang his unnecessary coat and hat. Then he would

make his rounds and attend to the paperwork; the death certificates for those who had expired under his care the day before, the work of updating the notes on the patients he saw.

Edward Masen and his mother had lasted over a week, longer than Carlisle had expected, but still it gave him hope.

As he hung his coat, he glanced at the wall behind his desk. Other doctors would put their credentials there; diplomas and certificates and all the things which identified who they were. What Carlisle hung behind his desk was not any less that sort, he figured.

Childe Hassam had been known as "Fred," but he'd confessed to Carlisle his dreams of being someone greater—notoriety, time to study in Paris, to be recognized for bringing the French style of painting to the United States. He'd spent afternoon upon afternoon in the Boston Common, sometimes painting, but mostly just observing. Observing the light, the way people moved, the exact flash of color of a startled robin redbreast as it frantically took flight.

They'd gotten to know each other one summer, on the overcast afternoons. At first it was only discussions of art, but then they progressed to medicine, to the art of life, to games of chess. Carlisle suspected he was the only one who called the artist "Childe," but the name suited him—he was playful and devilish, always trying to best Carlisle and his impeccable perception. Not by outwitting him—Childe was a quick study and understood that was impossible—but through subtle distraction, humor, and a perpetual habit of thoughtfully twirling his mustache over one finger as he contemplated his moves. Every game would break down when Carlisle pointed out this habit, and rooks and kings and knights gave way to conversation every time.

In his two hundred seventy-four years, it was the only time Carlisle had ever had a human friend.

His friendship with Childe ended abruptly after that summer, when the young painter had decided to pursue his dream of studying in France and boarded a train that would take him to a steamship in New York. But before he left, he presented Carlisle with a painting—to the uninformed eye, simply a pastoral scene of a walking path with somewhat faceless figures making their way through the overcast day.

Carlisle, however, could see the painting for exactly what it was; a young painter and his doctor friend, playing chess.

He stared at it now, at the two lighter-colored clusters of daubs that in his mind, morphed into the painter and the vampire. Childe had been in France for three years, and it was another three before Carlisle knew his friend had returned stateside. And by then, Carlisle knew, Childe would notice how unchanged he was.

They never made in-person contact again.

What would Childe think, he wondered, if he knew what Carlisle was doing?

It wasn't friendship that he had with Edward Masen. The boy scarcely knew who he was. At times, he would groan and grope for Carlisle's hand or arm, but that was nothing more than reflex. It wasn't recognition.

"I would like to be recognized," Carlisle muttered, and was surprised to hear himself voice his thought aloud. Hurriedly, as though someone might have heard him talking to himself, he swung his doctor's coat over his shoulders, and began to head for the door.

But as he stared at the painting, whose colors shone in the dim lamplight of his office, he stopped short, stared at it for several long moments, and then cleared his throat.

"I *would* like that," he repeated more firmly. To the painting? To himself? He wasn't sure.

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But Edward showed no signs of recognizing Carlisle when he went in to sit at the boy's bedside that night. And so he contented himself with just holding hands, the valleys between his fingers interlacing with the soft, delicate spaces between Edward's.

The boy was so fragile. One move, one twist of Carlisle's wrist in the wrong direction and the boy's whole arm would snap. Perhaps it would rip right off, and that delicious blood would spill...

He had to stop thinking like this.

But his own mind had betrayed him, a few hours ago. "*I would like to be recognized.*" Because that, if anything, was what he wanted most. Having someone to talk to, someone who would be excited to see him, someone who knew that he liked Baroque music, and that he enjoyed chess but considered checkers a form of torture.

As much as he ached for Edward's blood, he ached for this other thing, too. It was an asinine hope if ever there were one. Edward had been brought in already delirious. He didn't even know Carlisle's name.

Carlisle squeezed Edward's hand, running one hand through his hair. The pads of his fingers ran over Edward's scalp, the hair sliding against them as he stroked.

Laying one hand on the hot, sweating brow, Carlisle carefully leaned in to put his lips next to Edward's ear.

"I'm Carlisle," he whispered.

The boy didn't stir.

From an inch above the face, Carlisle could feel each exhalation hit his own cheeks, a gentle breeze that carried with it the most luscious scent. Edward slept with his lips slightly parted. They were blue, signs that no matter how bravely the wishful soldier battled, the disease was winning this war. And they were parched; little cracks appearing from where he was so dehydrated.

Carlisle leaned in closer, pressing his nose against warm skin, and tilting his head.

Edward's lips were supple, and even in sleep, moved against Carlisle's in a delicate motion; on the inhalation, sucking Carlisle's lip between them, on the exhalation, pushing him away.

It was like nothing Carlisle had ever felt before, and he allowed himself to get lost in it.

For a moment too long.

He leapt back from Edward's bed with such force the floor shook. From across the ward, a nurse looked up at him in alarm.

"I stumbled," he said, putting a hand in front of himself as though for balance. "Thank you. I stumbled." A lie, unless...did a moral stumble count as much as a physical one?

The nurse frowned, looking at him suspiciously, but then seemed to accept his explanation and turned back to her own patient, leaving Carlisle to contemplate what he'd just done.

He had just kissed a patient. And more than kissed a patient, kissed a child. And more than kissed a child, kissed a male.

Carlisle didn't have trouble balancing, but as the room spun, he felt it safer to sit back down and he did so. Edward was still sound asleep, his breath still coming evenly, his lips still parted invitingly. His heart had sped as Carlisle kissed him, but it now returned to its normal rate, slowing with each intake and exhale of breath.

Leaning back on the stool, Carlisle covered his face with his hands. He hadn't killed his singer. But this—he would be fired, and reviled, and run out of town.

A boy.

He'd kissed a *boy*.

He remembered how the brothers in Italy had wondered about him, asking him if he found any of the female guard attractive. Renata, Aro's servant, with her statuesque good looks and the severe, but beautiful lines of her face. Corin, with her long hair and voluptuous curves. When he had answered he didn't, they grew concerned. At the time, he'd written it off as another way they wished to exercise control over him; if he took a mate from the guard, or took a mate at all, then they would have one more means of getting at him.

But perhaps it had been this which concerned them.

In his memory, he'd never kissed anyone. The urge simply had not been there.

He began to walk swiftly, to put distance between himself and the men's ward, between where he stood and the boy in the bed at the end of the long row.

He hadn't expected it to be so easy, to lean over another and to suddenly find that your lips melded with theirs. That it was so pleasurable and mutual; that they could fit together, overlapping, that their breathing would fall in sync.

He hadn't expected the lips of another man would be so soft.

His steps sped a little more. He wouldn't go back. The boy would die, and he simply wouldn't go back. He would come up with some reason to stay out of the men's

ward, and if he couldn't do that, he would simply leave altogether. He would claim he was afraid of becoming ill, and he would simply leave.

It would be worth it. He'd find other work.

Only when he grew hard in his pants did he break into a run, jogging down the hall until he reached his office, where he quickly closed the door behind him and leaned against it, falling to his knees and putting his head in his hands. His chest was heaving, as though he had need to breathe.

He'd kissed a man.

Was that better or worse than killing one?

Chapter 2

Carlisle's vow to stay away from Edward lasted exactly half a day. As soon as he was back the next night, he found himself circling. The men's ward. The women's ward. The boy. The men's ward. The boy. The children's ward. The boy.

Edward's condition was worsening. Where two nights ago, he'd been able to speak, he was now locked in a delirium so furious he called every nurse "Mother." If he recognized Carlisle at all, there was no evidence. Which, if Carlisle admitted it, was probably for the best.

At least he wouldn't be accused of being a pederast.

But he couldn't help but stare every time he came to the bedside. Edward was the picture of youthful virility—pectoral muscles and an abdomen that were coming into what they would be as he grew into an adult; the smattering of hair across his chest and running down toward his navel...and further, but Carlisle tried not to think about that.

He replayed the kiss, brief as it had been, in his mind, as though he were an unwilling prisoner to it, being forced to undergo a brainwashing. Yet who was brainwashing him, but himself?

Which was how he found himself wandering not in the men's ward, but in the women's, wending his way toward Edward's mother. She'd taken a turn for the worse. Carlisle had been waiting for this; he knew that Death was coming for them both. For Edward, with his thin fingers, for Elizabeth with her bizarre eyes.

They would both leave him, and it was probably for the better that they did.

Yet his stomach still twisted every time he thought about it.

The women's ward was full of sound; women coughing, nurses murmuring, even one other doctor, checking pulses and listening for breath sounds through his stethoscope. But when Carlisle saw Elizabeth, it was as though the entire ward was just the two of them.

She sat bolt upright in bed when he entered, her hair mussed in the back where it had become tangled from her pillow. It was gathered on top of her head like a nest. Fine, he saw, like her son's. Her green eyes no longer shone; instead, she stared at him with an odd, flat expression "Save him," she muttered.

"I'm sorry?"

"Save him!"

This time, her eyes locked with his. She'd found him, even in the dim light of the handful of lamps.

Did she even recognize him?

"Mrs. Masen, I—"

"Save him!" This time she reached for him, and Carlisle found himself moving toward her bed. He grasped both her hands in his and gently urged her to lie back down. As soon as she was horizontal, the fluid reached her lungs again, and she began to cough the raspy, wet cough of one who was drowning in her own body.

"Shh," he said, pressing her down gently into the sheets. The hospital issue blankets were woolen and gray, scratchy. But he pulled it over Elizabeth's body anyway, up to her chest, tucking it in.

"Save Edward," she mumbled.

"I'll do everything in my power," he whispered back. And at once, he realized this was true. He would do whatever he could to keep Edward safe.

Even though it meant prolonging his own torture.

"You must..." Elizabeth's eyes turned back to the unfocused, blank state. The green went flat once more. "You must do everything in *your* power. What others cannot do, that is what you must do for my Edward."

Carlisle pulled his hands away from her as though she'd caught fire.

What others cannot do?

She couldn't know. There was no sunlight here. And with Edward so nearby—he had to hunt almost daily to keep his thirst at bay. She wouldn't even have seen his eyes in their darkened state, would she? She couldn't have.

And she was delirious. She could barely tell up from down; there was no way she was able to tell human from immortal. There would be no reason for her to think he was anything other than a physician.

Whatever was in his power. His power as a doctor, of course.

He pressed her shoulder gently into the mattress, shushing her.

But what if she hadn't meant that?

He was two hundred seventy four, an ungodly age. In that time, he'd never allowed himself companionship. The summer with Childe Hassam had come to an end almost forty years ago.

And since then, Carlisle had not had a friend.

She gasped, and then she let out one, long exhale, and the room was suddenly silent.

"Mrs. Masen?"

Of course she didn't answer. Her hand was still warm, and he dropped to his knee as he held it and studied her face. Her chest was still, and he could no longer hear her heartbeat. But her face...even in death, her expression still twisted with concern.

For the briefest of seconds, Carlisle found himself wondering if his mother had held the same expression. Whenever he'd imagined it, longed for it, he'd always imagined that death would mean being at peace.

But Mrs. Masen was not at peace, and Edward Masen was alone. Orphaned. To say nothing of half-dead himself.

An awful set of things for he and Carlisle to have in common.

Reaching out, Carlisle gently pressed Mrs. Masen's eyes closed. Then he found a nurse in the hallway, asked her to bring the winding sheets and call an orderly to take the body. The nurse nodded and a what seemed like an instant later, the bed was clear. As though Mrs. Masen had been of no importance whatsoever.

He shook his head, scolding himself. She *needed* to be of no importance. He had no business mourning her.

Nevertheless, he didn't stick around to see which patient would replace her.

A mere twenty minutes passed before he found himself back in the men's ward, sitting before The Bed. The Bed. The Boy. It all seemed so ominous now; everything said in capital letters.

Edward, he forced himself to think. *Edward*. Not "the boy." A boy. Elizabeth Masen's son. A young man who'd had hopes and dreams, and maybe even a pretty girl who had his eye, who he would go on to marry as he finished Latin school and went to university. Or to the Institute of Musical Arts.

He had all sorts of reasons not to become like Carlisle.

But those options were only open to him if he lived. And he wasn't going to live, that much was frighteningly clear.

Carlisle put his hand over Edward's again, and at once the pianist's long fingers stretched between his own.

Did he imagine that the grip strengthened?

Was he crazy for thinking that Edward knew he was here?

He put a second hand over Edward's, squeezing the hot palm between both of his, and his mind went racing off with the possibilities. A companion. A friend. Someone to talk with, and laugh with, to play chess with.

He would work out the kissing thing. Besides, once Edward didn't smell so appealing...

The boy's breath came in rattling gasps. He didn't have much longer. The breath always did this, shook on the intake just before death.

"Edward?" he asked quietly. "What do you want?"

Edward's eyes opened when Carlisle used his name, and they stared up blankly, flat, like his mother's.

"Do you hear me?" Carlisle whispered. "Edward, what do you want?"

Edward squeezed his eyes closed and shook his head.

"You don't want to die," he answered for him, and Edward kept shaking. Which was understandable. Who wanted to lose their life, especially at seventeen? At seventeen, he was supposed to be the very picture of youthful vigor, not lying pallid on a cot, fighting for breath.

It would be a crime to allow this boy to die.

It would also be a crime to turn him.

Edward's breath came in even shorter gasps now, as his mother's had, only a short time before. Carlisle didn't have any choice. It was either make a decision, or have his decision made for him—once the heart stopped beating, was it even possible to transform another?

Everything in his power...

But if Elizabeth knew anything about what actually lay in his nature, was this the life she would want for her child?

He would teach Edward about hunting animals instead of people. He would show him that there was another way. He would prove Aro wrong about their nature.

Edward whimpered, causing Carlisle to look him over again. His lips were parted slightly, and his eyelids fluttered. He had long eyelashes and strong cheekbones, a slender nose. There was a pure innocence in this face. If anyone could retain their humanity, this boy could.

And there would be time for all the things that Edward would otherwise miss. Time for him to attend University, for him to understand the things he would have learned in his last years of Latin school. There would be time for all the things that Carlisle wanted to show him, and all the things that Edward wanted to learn.

But for pretty girls...

Carlisle sighed.

Well, perhaps there would be time for those, too.

If Edward remembered Carlisle's affections, his doting, the nights of sitting here and stroking his hair, then that would be wonderful. But if he didn't, there was no reason for Carlisle to bring it up.

He didn't want a lover.

He wanted a friend.

And Edward could be a friend.

The rattling breaths came with more difficulty, and Edward's eyes opened halfway, looking out with no direction. Carlisle scooped him into his arms.

The heartbeat fluttered erratically against his chest, but the body remained limp and pallid.

Edward Masen looked dead. And that would be sufficient.

Clutching Edward's body to his own, Carlisle fled.

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His apartment was tiny, one room with a rusted sink in the corner, lit by a bare bulb. He had a single bed, which was for show just in case someone asked him to open the door. He'd never before had occasion to use it.

When he laid Edward atop the covers, he began to shiver with such force that the bed rattled against the floor.

At once, Carlisle jumped onto the bed himself and pulled the boy into his arms, steadying the shaking body. Carlisle ran his hands through the hair again, and he pressed his nose into it, inhaling deeply. He would accustom himself as much as he

was able, so that when the time did come to bite, he would be able to resist the kill. It would be the ultimate test. Something even Aro wouldn't have thought him able to do.

Something he wasn't sure he *could* do.

Edward squirmed, still coughing, and Carlisle used his shirtsleeve to wipe the boy's lips and nose. Dark streaks appeared across his sleeve, along with small splotches of blood.

He liked the way that this felt, if he allowed himself to admit it. The lithe body in his arms, and the heartbeat fluttering against his chest. Everything about Edward was exquisite.

He ran his hand up Edward's neck, his fingertips grazing the delicate skin there. He could see the artery and the vein running there, just a fraction of an inch below the surface. Waiting for him.

His own throat burned like nothing he'd ever felt before. It was so painful he almost wished to reach down with his hands and rip out the skin which ran down the inside of his digestive tract.

He could stop it. It would be as simple as taking the flesh between his teeth, clamping down, letting the blood flow back down his tongue, into the throat, where it would be so soothing...

He settled instead for burying his nose in Edward's collarbone.

The boy tilted his head involuntarily, trapping Carlisle's beneath his head and his shoulder.

It took him a moment to realize that he had tickled Edward. The thought was delightful. He wondered where else he could tickle? What ways could he bring pleasurable sensations to his new friend?

And even though he hadn't been thinking of that kind of sensation at all, he found that he stiffened.

At once, he scooted back, letting Edward's body fall into the pillows.

He couldn't let him feel that. He would be terrified. And Carlisle would be ashamed.

Reluctantly, Carlisle got out of bed. He sat on the floor, Indian-style, with his back to Edward. He listened to the rasping breath, and felt the heat of the boy's breathing on the back of his neck.

Edward placed his hand on Carlisle's shoulder as if to beckon him back.

It only had the effect of increasing the arousal.

Sooner, he thought. Sooner, rather than later. And then he could get over this...whatever it was. It was loneliness. He didn't know how to respond to physical touch, because no one ever touched him—not in centuries. So of course his brain couldn't distinguish the two. It expected a woman, and it would behave as though there were one.

And the sooner he could deliver himself from this, the better.

He stood, breaking Edward's grip on his shoulder, and the boy rolled onto his side, pulling his knees to his abdomen and tucking his arms under his chin. The fetal position, they called it, because it was the way a baby tucked itself inside its mother's womb. Safely, securely, warm. Protected.

"I don't have that to offer you, Edward," Carlisle whispered. "I don't have a mother's love for you."

But he had desperation.

He wouldn't turn this into a mistake.

Leaning over Edward, Carlisle put his lips to Edward's neck. He let his tongue search there a moment, dipping into the little crevice between his neck and shoulder.

And as he opened his mouth to bite, he allowed his hardness to press against Edward's thigh.

~||x||~

Three days later, it began with Edward pulling away from Carlisle's embrace.

Carlisle let out a little surprised yelp when he did so. But Edward recovered quickly, and in an instant, they were back in contact.

The blood had been amazing, even better than Carlisle's wildest imagination. And when Edward's body went still, Carlisle had panicked. He threw himself away from the bed with such force that he cracked the lathe on the opposite wall.

You killed him.

All his years of fighting, of staving his own appetite...for nothing.

He fell to his knees, his hands clutching at his hair. But the beginnings of a wail had only barely left his lips when they were met with Edward's scream.

He'd been rendered temporarily unconscious. That was all.

And so Carlisle returned to the bed, first sitting beside it, and then, as the blood changed and Edward's scent grew less tempting, lying beside him on the bed. They stayed that way for three days, Carlisle with his arms wrapped around Edward's torso, and Edward curled into him.

Now, Carlisle found he was making soft, shushing noises. He wrapped his arms more tightly, as though he could restrain a newborn vampire—unlikely, as no doubt Edward's strength was equal to his probably three or four times over.

But Edward didn't move right away. If anything, he curled closer.

So Carlisle kept holding, and kept shushing.

"Are you all right?" he asked at last, burying his nose in Edward's hair.

Instead of the rich spice, he smelled another of his kind.

Carlisle felt an odd pang shoot through him. Joy, of course, that he didn't have to worry any more, and yet, with it, a deep sense of loss—Edward would no longer smell like Edward. No longer would the boy have the scent that had so captivated him.

It took a long time for Edward to answer.

"I'm all right," he said at last. "That...hurt."

Carlisle held him even more tightly. "I know," he whispered, brushing his lips against Edward's hair every time he spoke. "I know it hurt, and I'm sorry I did that to you. You're safe, now. And nothing will ever hurt you again."

Edward didn't move.

"What are you?" he asked at last.

The question caught Carlisle off guard. "I'm sorry?"

"What are you?" He turned, and studied Carlisle's face. For a moment, they stared at each other. Carlisle wondered idly if his eyes had begun to return to their normal color; he hadn't walked across the room to look at himself in the mirror since he'd laid down after shaving the boy. Was Edward seeing the red eyes of a monster?

Or the golden eyes of a friend?

"They're gold," he said. "And what do you mean, a monster?"

Carlisle jerked himself away, breaking his grip on the boy.

Edward could hear him.

His mind raced back to Italy, to the tall vampire with the dark, stringy hair. The way he would bring in all the vampires at once, touch them, hear everything they thought. everything they had ever thought. He recalled the odd sensation of having ones memories hijacked, forcibly taken away so that the other could view them at his leisure. The incredible violation of privacy, of knowing that whatever you felt or thought, even if you held it for days or weeks at a time, at some point in time, you would be asked to touch him, and none of those thoughts would be yours any longer.

And if that was the case, then there was no way for Carlisle to hide.

Edward stared.

"What do you mean, everything they had ever thought?" he asked at last.

"What?" Carlisle spluttered.

"What do you mean, everything they had ever thought?"

Carlisle backed up, only to find the wall still solidly behind him. He was behaving like a frightened cat, he knew. He could almost imagine himself hissing and spitting at Edward from across the room—except that he couldn't imagine ever treating Edward with anger.

"You can hear me from there," he whispered. It wasn't actually a question.

"You're talking. I can hear you talking." His brow wrinkled. "I hear a lot of things. There's a lot of noise here. Why do you live in such a noisy place?"

Carlisle tried to remember back to his own turning. What the world had been like when he first awoke. He remembered the cacophony of sounds; the way he could hear for miles. Things his human ear had glossed over, had sorted as background noise, all at once, all those sounds had assaulted his senses. It took him months to learn to filter them again. But now he could once again hear the flush in the water closet at the end of the hall, and the neighbors arguing in Italian upstairs, and the footsteps in the hallway, and to dismiss them as things which were unimportant. To focus on the only thing that mattered.

Edward.

"I live in a tenement," Carlisle said. "It's easier to live in an apartment, for me. And yes, they're noisy. You can hear between the floors. But you'll learn to pay attention only to the important parts, I can promise you that." And as for what else he was hearing—well, how exactly did you explain to a boy that he was suddenly gifted with the ability to hear thoughts?

Edward's eyes widened. "I can hear what?"

Carlisle actually laughed. "I didn't mean to think that to explain this to you, but—I suppose it works, just the same." *You're hearing my thoughts, Edward. See? I'm not speaking. You're hearing what's going through my head.*

Edward looked confused.

"I'll show you."

Carlisle made his way back across the room, and replaced himself behind Edward, pulling him close again. He leaned down and laid his head on Edward's shoulder.

I want you to be safe, he thought. I'm so glad you're here.

There were many things he was worried about. That he hadn't even allowed his mind to begin to process. That he now wanted to keep private, terrified he would scare Edward.

But he had wanted Edward. That much was the truth.

You are wanted.

Edward's brow furrowed ever so slightly. Then he leaned into Carlisle and seemed to relax.

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What ensued was the oddest conversation Carlisle had ever experienced. His mind raced ahead of the words on his tongue, and Edward answered Carlisle's thoughts every bit as often as he answered his statements.

Carlisle's story poured out of him in disjointed buckets. What he knew of English history. Being a human with his father. Becoming a doctor, which had happened almost two centuries later. Living with the Volturi, which had happened half a century before that. Becoming a vampire, which had happened first.

When Carlisle uttered the word *vampire*, he saw Edward's eyes flicker immediately to his bookshelf. He'd developed the collection habit from Aro, he supposed; the older vampire had a predilection for keeping tabs not only on their actual population, but also on their ongoing interpretations in the human world. And so Carlisle had inherited this curiosity, with one shelf given over to the ongoing collection: Ossensfelder, Burger, *The Bride of Corinth*, Southey, Byron, Shelley. Polidori next to Grey, and Féval, and of course, the one the boy's eyes drew to, the one he recognized...Stoker.

He allowed the boy a moment to take it in, then took both of Edward's hands in his, forcing eye contact.

"Fiction," he said forcefully. "It's all fiction."

Edward blinked. "But then, you don't..."

He didn't need to finish the phrase.

"I don't. I could." *And you very well might*, he thought, before he could help himself. Newborns were stronger than their sires, and their bloodthirst was legendary. If Edward fixated on human prey, Carlisle would be helpless to stop him.

At once, cold air brushed Carlisle's suddenly bare chest as Edward shrank into himself, curling his arms and head over his knees.

He looked terrified.

I don't want him to be afraid.

Edward snarled.

The bed was bent in two before Carlisle even registered that Edward had moved. Carlisle was across the room in sync with Edward, grabbing him by the shoulders and pinning his arms. An odd noise came from Carlisle's lips, and it took him a fraction of a second to realize he was shushing the boy, and a fraction of a second longer to realize he'd begun to do so because Edward was trembling.

They were the same height, although Carlisle was of a much hardier build, and it was this which allowed him to hold Edward with force, as though he were swaddling him with his arms. If Edward struggled, he would break free—newborns were strong—but he didn't struggle. Instead he went almost limp.

If Carlisle leaned forward, he could put his lips at Edward's ear, the way he had that first night when he'd whispered his name. His mind raced, remembering...and just as quickly, he brought his thoughts back to the present.

There were things Edward didn't need to see.

He did, however, lean forward and put his nose next to Edward's ear. His skin no longer smelled as it had four days ago; the burn in Carlisle's throat was no more pronounced than it customarily was. If anything, Edward's scent had now taken on a hint of Carlisle's own.

"We need to get you out of here," he whispered.

For both their sakes.

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"You can't keep up with me!" .

He was actually laughing.

Four miles had been all it took for Edward to be at home in his new body. The boy was giddy, occasionally rushing away from Carlisle and darting through the woods so quickly Carlisle could barely keep an eye on him. In the moonlight, his skin shone a glorious silver, and Carlisle had to constantly keep his thoughts in check as he gave chase.

There was so much for Edward to take in. The speed. The strength. Carlisle remembered how it had frightened him, the way he could move almost at the speed of his own thoughts. How he had given chase to a man before he'd even been able to

think otherwise, how the man's scream had saved his life as Carlisle stood there, bewildered.

He wondered how much of it Edward understood. The boy had been inquisitive about Carlisle's long life, amazed at how Carlisle had lived through history about which Edward had merely read.

But as he chased after Edward, Carlisle wondered if the boy grasped the enormity of what had just been thrust on him. After all, what seventeen-year-old didn't wish to live forever, strong of body and beautiful of face? How many times had Carlisle thought of himself as a monster? How many times had he hidden in the darkness, waiting for an unexpected burst of sunlight to go away before he'd been able to continue on his way? How many times had he repulsed himself drinking from an animal, knowing that it was the unfulfilling substitute for what he actually desired?

And that what he actually desired was so vile?

Edward stopped so abruptly that bits of dirt flew up from around his feet. Already he was running through the soles of the shoes that Carlisle had put on him; they were excellent shoes, but not made for this.

His eyebrows raised.

"Yes?" Carlisle asked.

"I thought my mother was a worrier," he said, shaking his head. "You put her to shame." His face broke into a wide grin. "Here we are, running into Wisconsin in the dead of night, faster than an automobile, and you're worried about my *shoes*."

Carlisle didn't answer right away. Edward closed the distance between them.

"I heard the other things, too," he said.

Carlisle gulped.

"Are we?" Edward crossed his arms over his chest so that he was almost hugging himself, as though it was possible for him to be chilled.

"Are we what?"

"Are we monsters."

Monsters. He had thought that, hadn't he? Edward's gift was going to take getting used to.

"I didn't mean it that way."

They didn't call Chicago the windy city for no reason. Even though they were easily fifty miles north of the city, they were still on the shores of the lake, and the wind coming over the shore whipped the water onto their skin. Carlisle watched as a single droplet of water ran down Edward's nose, gathering at the tip and glistening, larger and larger, before it fell in a tiny splash onto the ground.

"How did you mean it, then?"

"It's something I've thought about myself. And it's not something you should think."

Edward frowned. "I don't care for you telling me how to think."

"That's not what I mean." Carlisle reached out to him. He laid a hand on Edward's shoulder with authority, placing his thumb on the soft skin of Edward's collarbone. He stroked this skin gently, and Edward's posture relaxed.

The water lapped against the shore in a steady rhythm, slapping against the rocks and then rushing back out. He remembered how it had amazed him, the first time he'd made his way into the Northwest Territory and seen these huge bodies of freshwater. For the ocean to be so vast made sense; even at the time he'd first crossed to the New World, it was well known that the ocean covered nearly the entire Earth. But for a lake to stretch so far that it disappeared at the horizon, well, it was something Carlisle had never experienced. It was breathtaking. It made him feel small.

"I've never seen the ocean," Edward mumbled.

Carlisle raised his eyebrows.

"It was part of why I wanted to go fight." His eyes closed, and for a long moment, neither of them said anything. When Edward finally spoke again, his voice was wistful. "There's so much I wanted to see."

"Oh, *Edward*." Carlisle began to put an arm around him, but then thought better of it—that was, until Edward nodded. With his permission, Carlisle pulled Edward's body into his own.

Human bodies were warm to the touch, particularly when they were feverish. Edward's body had seared as Carlisle dashed with him from rooftop to rooftop, away from Cook County Hospital. But he touched humans rarely, and in his recollection, he'd never come close to this kind of contact with another of his own kind, unless one counted the excruciatingly invasive moments of holding Aro's hand so that the older vampire could probe Carlisle's mind.

Edward's skin was warm to Carlisle's touch, but not in a human way. It was exactly like his. Pliable, but not breakable. Even just the tiny bit of resistance under his thumb told him that Edward was no longer the fragile human he had been a few days before.

It felt strange and perfect at once.

He clutched Edward to him. They would need to hunt soon, he knew. The newness of becoming a vampire could only keep the thirst at bay for so long. But just then, standing there felt as though it was the right thing to do. The wind continued to whip them both as they stood on the shore, continuing to spray the frigid water up their bodies. Somewhere, in the distance, Carlisle could make out the pulsing, intermittent beam of a lighthouse as it swept over the dark.

"You are not a monster," Carlisle said, his voice low.

Edward turned to look at him. His eyes were wide, and even in the moonlight, Carlisle could see the odd crimson color. He looked small, young. Vulnerable. Afraid.

Unbidden, his mother's memory spun in Carlisle's mind. Everything in your power. Everything in your power, that is what you must do.

He had promised.

Squeezing Edward's shoulders once more, Carlisle added, "And one day, Edward, I will show you the ocean, too."

They stood another twenty minutes, listening to the waves.

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Slowly, they ran their way all the way to northern Wisconsin, stopping to hunt every time Edward complained of the burn, hiding for hours and even days when they got too near a human population.

"I'm not a child," he whined, when Carlisle insisted they hunt yet again, but Carlisle shushed him every time.

"We'll take no risks," he said. "One day, you'll have plenty of control."

Edward grunted in answer every time, but he always followed. He was a messy hunter, but that was understandable. When he voiced this thought, Carlisle answered, "I was even worse." He showed Edward the memory, the way he ruined doublets and breeches in an age when clothing wasn't easily had.

The images made Edward laugh, and little by little, he picked up Carlisle's technique.

Because the hunting took time, and because Carlisle insisted they go often, it took them a week to reach the northernmost tip of the state, and another was spent camping outdoors before Carlisle bought them a small farmhouse. It stood miles outside the nearest town, a shipping port on the western shores of Lake Superior. The distance was a precaution—Edward was a faster runner than Carlisle was, and there was no way Carlisle could stop him.

He hoped keeping the humans at bay would keep Edward from temptation.

He refused to acknowledge that the distance made it impossible to keep from his.

They settled in. Carlisle bought a sofa, a reading chair, and two utterly unnecessary beds. Wilson signed the armistice, and the boys came back from the war.

"See," Carlisle joked when they read the news. "You would never have made it to Europe anyway."

Edward shoved him, but they laughed.

November gave way to December, and the days grew bitterly cold—Edward marveled at how his new body could lie in feet of snow and still be comfortable and warm. An occupational privilege, Carlisle explained.

They took their shirts off and made snow angels.

Edward was content to spend his days in Carlisle's company. During the days they read together, or played chess, just as he'd imagined. At night, they hunted or play fought. Some nights, they only ran.

Carlisle reveled in having a companion, someone to sit and read with, who would look up on occasion and talk to him about how the story was progressing. Someone he could sit outside with and talk to on a cold night. Someone to play a

game of chess, who was equally matched and who would occasionally beat him through nothing but sheer outmaneuvering. Though most of the time Edward cheated, whether accidentally or on purpose, by reaching into Carlisle's mind and stealing his next moves before Carlisle had the chance to make them.

Carlisle found he didn't mind.

The scent had gone away completely in The Change. But other things very clearly had not.

He was watching Edward run one night in the woods. The younger vampire ran barefoot, and often bare-chested, so that he could feel the wind whipping past his body and feel exactly how the earth moved beneath his feet. In the moonlight, his skin shone a blue-white, his hair shimmered a blackish red.

No one looked more beautiful.

Carlisle ran behind him by several paces, watching as he moved, darting through trees. They played this game of chase more often than not, to see if Carlisle could either outrun Edward, or if he could outsmart him.

Tonight, he thought it might be just possible. He couldn't outrun Edward, he knew that. Edward was faster—newborns always were, but Carlisle suspected that Edward's speed might remain a hallmark of his forever.

But as he ran, Carlisle had an idea.

Springing thirty feet, he launched himself into a tall oak. He would cover more ground in the air than Edward could on the ground. He jumped from tree limb to tree limb, going so far that he nearly overtook the boy on more than one occasion. Finally, as though he were coming to his senses, Edward stopped short and began to look around wildly. Grabbing hold of a branch, Carlisle swung himself down to the ground, landing with such force that he knocked Edward off his feet, and the two of them fell to the ground in a tangle of limbs and laughter.

"How—" Edward breathed, and Carlisle only pointed up.

"You're inattentive," he said, and Edward laughed.

"I suppose I am." He pushed his hands against Carlisle's chest. They'd landed so that Carlisle was astride, his hips splayed and his arms out wide where he pressed against Edward's shoulders. Carlisle had fallen forward in the landing, so that his nose was mere inches from Edward's.

And their lips...

He threw himself backward into one of the huge oaks.

Edward stood up more slowly. He brushed the dirt from his pants, and then advanced.

Carlisle became still.

"I remember," Edward said quietly.

"I beg your pardon?"

He nodded. "I remember, Carlisle. In the hospital. That thing you keep trying to pretend never happened. That thing you were hoping would just go away, if you didn't think about it. It didn't go away. It's not going to go away. And I remember."

Edward was so close now that Carlisle could feel his breath on his nose stepped in so close that Carlisle could feel his breath on his own nose. He planted his feet so that they were between Carlises, and He tipped his head forward so that their foreheads touched. And then he leaned in just a fraction of an inch further.

His lips were as soft as Carlisle remembered, but now they matched his own in temperature. At first, it felt rubbery and odd, but after only a moment, they fell into a rhythm, their mouths opening and closing in perfect sync. Edward let out a little sigh of breath that sent a shiver straight down Carlisle's spine.

It felt amazing, this kiss. To have Edward's lips on his own, his body moving against him—

His body.

Abruptly, he realized that the pressure at the front of his trousers was not merely the firmness of his own member. No, Edward's was there, too, and somehow Carlisle's hips were moving, pressing himself closer.

As though he recognized this, Edward at once slid his hand down Carlisle's back to his hip, pulling Carlisle's pelvis in closer. In an instant, he was writhing in time to their kisses, soft snarls and mewls coming from his lips.

Carlisle put his own hand on Edward's hips.

"We can't..." he began to say, but he was cut off by Edward's lips on his again. A forceful pull, and a shove—Edward was stronger than him, newborns always were—and Carlisle was spilling into his pants, groaning into Edward's lips.

It was only when he'd reached his completion that he managed to pull away.

Edward's mouth hung open in a strange, seductive grin.

Carlisle sprang back from him. What had he done? What had they both done? "Edward—I'm sorry..." he stammered, but Edward was already twisting away from him, moonlight glinting off his bare back.

"Catch me again, Carlisle!" he called, and by the time Carlisle regained sense enough to move his own feet, Edward was little more than a bronze-colored flash between the trees.

Chapter 3

Edward liked to read.

It pleased Carlisle, because it was something they could share. Over the years, books were often his only companionship, and he had sought out stories in place of either one of his own kind, or the humans with whom he couldn't interact. To share reading with Edward, then, was to share this secret part of himself.

A well-placed letter to the landlord of the tenement building—along with a hefty cheque and promise of twice as much after the goods were delivered—had resulted in a shipment of Carlisle's belongings. And so, once again, Carlisle found himself surrounded by books and art, these physical things which had been his constant companions.

At least, they had been before now.

"Which ones are your favorites?" Edward asked, one night as he lay on Carlisle's bare chest on their couch. Being touched had quickly moved from foreign to comfortable, and Carlisle found he liked it—the feeling of Edward's silken hair beneath his fingers, or the warmth of Edward's bare skin against his own.

He could spend eternity like this, he thought, and it was the first time he had ever had a reason to think those words.

At this, Edward stretched like a cat, his muscles rippling so that Carlisle could see each individual contraction and release. "Am I that much of a distraction?" he asked coyly.

Carlisle laughed, and ruffled his hair, and at once, buried his nose near Edward's ear. In a fraction of a second, Edward's head turned and their lips met, in one of the short, searing kisses Carlisle was still only barely used to. When they broke apart, he found he was strangely breathless.

"You are the best kind of distraction," he whispered.

Edward chuckled and buried his face back in Carlisle's collarbone, pressing his groin into Carlisle's leg and eliciting a faint whimper.

Edward only grinned.

They kissed often now. Edward's bringing the secret to the fore meant that Carlisle was free to indulge. It had been awkward at first, and Edward was often the instigator, approaching Carlisle and catching him unaware. He might be sitting at his desk, reading or writing in his journal when suddenly in Edward would fly, and he would find himself showered with kisses. It was bizarre, to go from being so utterly alone to suddenly having nothing but constant physical contact. And yet it was nice, also.

A finger poked Carlisle's chest.

"I asked you a question."

Edward was kneeling now, straddling Carlisle, with his hair hanging over his temple. The style was for men to wear their hair slicked against their scalps with pomade, but Edward didn't care for it, and his bronze locks were beautifully untidy, youthful, and wild.

"You did," Carlisle answered, a smile spreading across his face. "My favorites. Hmm. Robert Louis Stevenson, I suppose. And Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Perhaps Austen? Shakespeare, too."

Edward frowned. "Adventure and mystery and romance. You are unbearably wishy-washy."

"Many things may strike my fancy in any given moment." A quick jerk upward allowed him to brush a kiss against Edward's cheek, and the returned kiss kept them both occupied for a few minutes.

"You should pick something out," Carlisle whispered at last. "Perhaps Austen? You could use a lesson in romance."

Carlisle found himself bopped with a cushion, and as he grabbed Edward's shoulders, they both crashed off the couch with a loud bang. They were both laughing so hard their chests heaved.

"Don't...tell...me...about...romance," Edward gasped through his laughter. "I'll show you."

He jumped to his feet and sauntered to the bookcase, scrutinizing the contents with an exaggerated concentration. He'd failed to pull his suspenders back over his shoulders, and his trousers hung loosely, exposing just the top of his buttocks.

Carlisle swallowed.

"Aha," Edward said at last, with a triumphant grin. He lifted a volume of Plutarch over his head like a prize. "This is what I'll read."

"The Moralia?"

"You disapprove?"

Carlisle shrugged. "I told you, I prefer Stevenson. But, to each his own, I suppose." Next to the couch lay the copy of *Anna Karenina* which had been upended and abandoned in haste when Edward had attacked. Carlisle gathered it and settled himself back into a supine position, with one knee curled beneath him in hopes it would hide the hardness in his trousers.

As soon as Carlisle had the thought, he saw Edward's eyes flicker to his pants. It truly was no use.

But Edward simply settled back in at Carlisle's side, and said nothing as he opened the book and began to read.

The Moralia.

Well, it was probably not a bad thing for at least one of them to be considering what might and might not be immoral.

Carlisle nestled into the couch and resumed his reading.

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Compared to the bustling streets Carlisle had known in Chicago, the streets of Ashland were a ghost town. The downtown consisted of a handful of low, simple buildings which barely obscured the view out to the vast lake beyond. A small school sat at the end of the main street, and as Carlisle made his way down the immaculate sidewalk, he smiled at the ruddy-faced children playing tether-ball and running and screaming on the small playground.

An automobile passed him, its driver a dark-haired man wearing a top hat and driving gloves. The man peered curiously at Carlisle, and Carlisle waved in what he hoped would be read as an expression of good cheer.

He knew he stood out.

It was part of their offense, Aro had told him once. All vampires were inordinately beautiful and sexually appealing. The better to attract their prey.

The idea had repulsed Carlisle, and he never questioned about it again. But it continued to haunt him; although he wanted nothing more than to be recognized and accepted as equal to the humans he saw around him, they always treated him as an outsider. Whether it was a matter of the constant flirtation he received from hospital nurses, or other men being distrustful of him, or even a stranger thinking that perhaps he was a silent film star, his appearance created distance where he didn't want it.

Except with Edward.

The mere thought caused a dull ache in both his heart and his groin.

Edward was home this afternoon. They'd spent the morning tangled together on Carlisle's bed reading, just limbs and skin and little sharp kisses that were more like pinpricks than anything. When they tired of kissing, they returned to lie skin-to-skin while they read.

Lately, he'd been encouraging Edward in his study of the ancients. It was one of the things Edward remembered; he'd been in his seventh year in the Latin school, and his reading skills were still sharp. Carlisle was grateful, for the language gave Edward something of his human life to cling to. Their kind had perfect memories—but only for the time after they were Changed. In a cruel joke, one was destined to lose all but the strongest memories of one's humanity, and yet to be able to vividly relive every stultifying second of eternity as an immortal, which made the loss of the human memories every bit more excruciating.

And it had already begun in force for Edward. Carlisle saw the way he occasionally stared out the window as though completely lost in thought. Once, when Carlisle approached and asked what he was doing, Edward simply blinked, answering candidly, "Trying to remember my parents." Then he walked to his room and closed the door.

Carlisle had known better than to follow. Edward emerged a few hours later.

Unlike Edward's memories of his parents, however, Latin was something Carlisle could help him keep sharp. They'd begun with the *Aeneid*, and it wasn't long

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before Carlisle found himself reciting bits and pieces of Homer as background. For his part, Edward seemed intrigued by the story, both in English, as Carlisle translated it to him, but also in its original Greek. He marveled at how much more quickly his enhanced brain could hold the new language.

So Carlisle had come into town to investigate the small bookshop, in hopes of perhaps finding an old Greek textbook, or even a catalog from which he could send away for one.

To get to the bookshop, he needed to pass the Ashland hospital, a low, two-story building made of a dark red brick. From the outside, it appeared indistinguishable from a large house, and it was only the sign in front that even let Carlisle know what it was.

He paused before the building, staring at the sign until its letters seemed to blur.

Once he had longed to stay inside a hospital all day, every day. It had only been a few short months...

He stopped and counted. When the armistice was signed and the Great War finally came to its close, he and Edward were secluded in the woods of Wisconsin. At Christmas, Carlisle unstopped the chimney and they built a roaring fire. On Carlisle's birthday, Edward had taken him for a spectacular hunt near a frozen waterfall. They'd celebrated May Day like the rest of the citizens of this cold tundra, by running outside in the sun and the very beginning hints of warmth. Edward's eighteenth birthday had been spent buried under the quilt on Carlisle's bed.

And summer had easily given way to fall, and the first nip of frost was already threatening to bite...

Carlisle hadn't seen the inside of a hospital in nearly a year.

First it had been the necessity of training Edward, then the necessity of staying near him, then simply reveling in his company. But Edward was nearly a year into this new life, the time when he would naturally show more temperance.

After all, Carlisle had left him alone this afternoon.

When he heard footsteps, he simply assumed they would pass him by, and before he realized he was being approached, the woman was already looking him over.

"Something I can do to help you, son?"

Carlisle turned. Beneath her long coat, he could see the white tights and dress, and in her hand was clutched the hat which marked her profession.

Of course. It was late afternoon, getting toward twilight. The time when the night shift would be coming on.

The time when he himself had once arrived to work.

For the first time since Edward had come into his life, Carlisle felt an odd pang of sadness.

The nurse stared at him.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I was thinking."

"A hospital is an odd place to stand and think." She frowned. "Are you new to town?"

He nodded. "I live out closer to the county line, but yes. We—I came here a few months ago." He offered his hand. "Cullen. Doctor Carlisle Cullen."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Doctor?"

"Er..." He began to backpedal at once, but before he had a chance to think about what to say next, she cut him off.

"We only have three doctors here now."

Carlisle blinked. "Three?"

He'd worked at small hospitals before, ones that served tiny towns with one-room schoolhouses, where if an injury was at all serious, the patient would need to be carted to the real hospital some distance away. But Ashland was a port, with the population and business to match. It needed more than three doctors.

"Some of them got called up to the war. Others of them, they went into the war hospitals 'cause they pay more, and then they haven't come back. And some got scared of the Spanish Flu, even though we barely got any up here." She stared up at him, and for a long moment, neither of them said anything.

"We need doctors," she said finally.

The day was overcast, but Carlisle could still see that the sun was dipping its way toward the horizon, lighting the clouds in an odd lavender hue. It reminded him of the sunset with Edward, a few weeks after they'd arrived in Ashland, when they stood on the shore of the lake, watching as the huge orange disc slowly sank beneath the lake water. His arms encircled Edward's still-slender waist, and he rested his chin on Edward's shoulder.

Edward had wondered that Carlisle wasn't bored. Being forced to stay in one place, to spend his days watching over Edward, terrified that something would go wrong. Missing out on practicing medicine, when it was so obvious that it had been his passion for so long.

Carlisle laughed. "I've never had such reason to enjoy being in the same place," he said. "You are everything to me."

He'd meant it. He would give up medicine again and again for the perfect contentment he felt in Edward's presence. Edward was everything.

But could there be room for everything and a little more?

Before he knew it, he was following the nurse inside.

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Edward's skin was warm almost to the point of burning as Carlisle ran his fingers up and down the bare spine. Edward shivered and giggled, burying his face in Carlisle's shoulder, as Carlisle locked his arms around him in return. There was no end to his fascination with the way that he could feel Edward's skin against his body. There needed to be nothing beyond this—lying with their legs entwined before a roaring fire, hands running over each other's chests.

And Edward tasted amazing. If he admitted it, Carlisle wasn't a terribly good kisser. He had no experience. But he and Edward figured it out together. That opening lips was a signal for tongue, that a tongue thrust deep into the other's mouth could be exquisitely delicious, that a groan of pleasure muffled by locked lips could send charges of electricity down both their bodies.

So it was tonight, as Edward writhed under Carlisle, his body sending surges of energy that seemed to course straight to Carlisle's groin. The shopping excursion had taken most of the day, and when he returned home with a tattered Greek reader, and the shopkeeper's promise to procure an additional one, Edward had taken one look at the book, tossed it aside, and pounced.

That had been three hours ago. And of course, his shopping had been truncated by the hospital...

He shook his head. He wouldn't tell Edward about that. Not yet.

"Where are you, Carlisle?" Edward's voice called, at once bringing Carlisle back to the room and to the heat of the fire. He began to shower Edward's face with tiny pecks again.

"I'm right here," he answered.

"Hardly." Edward laughed. "And what is it about the hospital?"

"Nothing," Carlisle said, at once drawing an arbitrary connection. "The hospital reminds me of the hospital where I found you," he said, and Edward's face seemed to relax.

"Where you snatched me, you mean," he said, but he was smiling.

Carlisle punched him in the shoulder, and they both laughed. "I save you from dying, and you call it snatching? I wanted you."

"You only wanted me because of my mother," Edward teased, stroking Carlisle's hip and eliciting an odd, helpless whimper.

Carlisle pecked Edward on the nose. Edward's face had once been freckled, but they had disappeared in The Change. His perfect memory recalled them, however, and it was to one of the now-vanished spots that Carlisle swept his lips.

"Your mother was a bright woman," he whispered.

Edward smiled wanly. He didn't usually tolerate discussion of his parents.

"Are you thinking of her?" Carlisle whispered.

Edward shook his head. "I don't think so," he said quietly. "She wouldn't...well."

Suddenly, he sat upright, with his back to Carlisle. Like Carlisle's, Edward's feet were bare; this was the extent of intimacy that Carlisle would tolerate. They hunted without shirts, and so their first kiss had been that way, too; bare chest to bare chest, Edward tracing a pattern through Carlisle's much thicker chest hair.

In the months since, their kissing had always been this way; without shirts, but with trousers firmly fastened, sometimes to the point of suspenders still slung over

bare shoulders. Carlisle liked that best: nipping at the tender skin next to the suspender, kissing Edward's collarbone, where his teeth had left their prints.

The one indulgence he allowed them was this other scant display of skin, from the toes to the ankle, and so as they lay before the fire each night, their bare feet touched and tickled and caressed.

In the firelight, Edward's hair shone, the flickering light glinting off the red in his hair so that it glowed.

"Edward?"

"I remember my parents fighting, sometimes," he said quietly, not turning to face Carlisle. "When they thought I wasn't around them?" He closed his eyes. "My father thought my mother coddled me. That I would turn out..." he trailed off, but Carlisle knew what he was going to say.

Like this.

Edward abruptly changed the subject. "I've been reading," he said.

Carlisle chuckled. "That doesn't surprise me." What else was there for him to do?

Even as he made the joke, however, Carlisle's stomach wrenched. Edward had an insatiable intellect—a fact which as far as Carlisle was concerned, drew them together. In their first weeks, Edward had peppered Carlisle with questions about their existence: What did he know about older vampires? Were there ones older than the brothers in Italy? How old was Carlisle, really? What had it been like, coming across the ocean in a giant sailing ship? Before Boston had trolley cars?

It had been exhausting, but Carlisle lovingly answered each one. And with each piece of information, they'd seemed to grow closer.

But still, Edward ached for anything he could learn. When Carlisle went to town—which was rare, he hated being away from Edward—Edward would beg him for a newspaper. Current news, recent past, or ancient history; Edward wanted it all.

At some point, Carlisle knew, he would need to send the boy to a university. But the thought made his stomach wrench.

For the time being, he could pretend it was about the bloodlust.

Edward scooted himself around Carlisle's head to reach the tome he'd left lying on the floor. The Plutarch, Carlisle saw at once. The firelight danced across the page as Edward opened the book to his bookmark. Carlisle smiled. Bookmarks were unnecessary for them, of course, but one day, Edward would move among humans. And when that day came, he would need to have made a habit of things like bookmarks. He leaned against Carlisle and pretended to read, though Carlisle guessed that Edward had memorized the passage.

"Ye boys, who come of noble sires and beauteous are in face,
Grudge not to give to valiant men the joy of your embrace,
For the love that does the limbs relax combined with bravery,
In the Chalcidiean cities has fame that ne'er shall die."

At this, Carlisle sat up, breaking their contact. He was breathing heavily, which was silly. Taking a steady breath, he turned away.

"Surely you noted that the piece is called *A Dialogue on Love*, Edward," he said, only barely managing to make his comment sound playful.

Edward rolled his eyes. "The counterargument is weak, and you know it," he answered, flipping hastily to another page and reading another quote.

"For sight seems to paint all other fancies on a wet ground, so soon do they fade and recede from the memory, but the images of lovers, painted by the fancy as it were on encaustic tiles, leave impressions on the memory that move, and live, and speak, and are permanent for all time. The Roman Cato, indeed, said that the soul of the lover resided in the soul of the loved one."

Like a cat, Edward stretched himself across Carlisle's body. "The soul of the lover resides in the soul of the loved one," he repeated, laying his head on Carlisle's collarbone. "So my soul resides in yours." He leaned in, and at once, his overheated skin was against Carlisle's, causing them both to harden.

"I love you," he whispered.

Carlisle's throat seemed to catch. He'd wanted to utter those words to Edward. How long had he meant to tell the boy, "I love you," and he hadn't for fear he would scare him away?

And now there the words were, and Carlisle found himself tongue-tied.

"I've taken a job at the hospital," he blurted.

Edward blinked. "You've what?"

"You're ready to be alone. You have the same self-control that I have. You can make it a few hours each day without my company. And they need me there."

A cold shock hit Carlisle's skin as Edward pulled away. For a long time, he didn't answer. When he did, he addressed his words to the wall.

"What will I do without you?"

"You'll read more." He playfully ran a finger down Edward's nose. "I'll have to buy you more books."

But Edward didn't laugh. Instead, he pulled himself into a ball, his knees coming up to his chest and his arms wrapping around them as though for warmth. Which was of course unnecessary, as not only did he not need to stay warm, his skin was already near searing.

"Edward, come," Carlisle murmured. "I'll be home every day to lie with you like this. It won't change. But people here need my help, and I'm trained, and I'm good at what I do. It would be uncharitable for me not to work."

He reached out to stroke Edward's hair, that sensitive, ticklish spot at the nape of his neck that so often caused the chin to tip upward and the soft lips to meet his own.

But before he could make contact, Edward's bedroom door slammed, and Carlisle was left clutching air.

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He was forced to knock on Edward's door after a day and a half.

"I have to go to the hospital," he said. "They're expecting me."

The bed creaked ever so slightly, as though Edward were shifting position, but Carlisle heard no feet coming toward the door. He knew Edward was still in the room—Carlisle heard the rustling of pages that told him Edward was reading.

Edward was safe, and at least Carlisle knew where he was. But his mind jogged ahead of him anyway. What if he was wrong, leaving Edward alone? What if he killed?

What if he left?

Carlisle pressed his forehead to the door, inhaling Edward's scent where it crept over the threshold. "Please don't leave," he whispered.

There was no answer.

The Ashland hospital was so different from Cook County. Part of this was of course due to the influenza having subsided, but part of it was also the size. Ashland was a tiny fraction of the population of Chicago, and the three—now four—physicians served it easily.

On his first day, Carlisle treated two patients; a woman with bronchitis, and a ten-year-old boy with the measles. He'd expected it to feel strange, returning to medicine after almost a year, and after his own life had changed so completely. Wouldn't it be different to practice medicine no longer as the outsider, but now as someone who had been humanized by the addition of a companion? He'd expected he would miss Edward, and crave the opportunity to get home and tell Edward about his day.

But instead he became lost in the medicine, in the diseases and the diagnoses, in writing down temperatures and pulses and observations. It was freeing. Carlisle felt oddly whole.

And that made him feel guilty.

He raced home at the end of his shift, and as soon as he crossed the threshold, went straight to the second floor.

Edward's door was still closed.

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"You have to hunt."

Carlisle slumped against Edward's bedroom door, his nose flattened as he pressed it hard against the wood. The door creaked and gave a bit in answer.

"Edward..."

The bedsprings creaked, and for a moment, Carlisle thought that perhaps Edward was getting himself off the bed and coming to unlock the door. But a moment later, the bed went quiet again. He could break down the door, of course, but it wasn't an emergency, yet. It had been three days since their fight, and ten days since their last hunt. Longer than Edward had gone before, but not an impossible amount of time by

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any means. Edward was almost a year old now, and his thirst was more and more in control seemingly by the minute.

"Then leave me alone," growled the voice from the other side of the door. "I'm fine, Carlisle."

"I just don't want you to"—*be angry with me*—"slip."

"I won't slip," came the reply. And a split second later, "And you could've thought about me being angry with you before you took the job."

The bedsprings creaked again, and Carlisle heard a shift in the position of Edward's bedclothes that seemed to indicate he'd thrown a pillow over his ears. It wouldn't help.

"I know it won't. What would help is you going away."

Carlisle sighed. He turned his back to the door and slid down until he was sitting on the floor, with his knees pulled up to his chest. He buried his head in his knees so that his hair fell forward over his forehead.

He'd ruined it.

Out of greed, he'd ruined it. Before Edward, there had been nothing but medicine. The long days and nights in the hospital sustained him, kept him sane. And the pang that shot through him when he saw the desolate hospital here was real.

He loved Edward.

He missed medicine.

"I don't know how to have you both," he whispered.

And though he knew that even behind the door and under the pillow, Edward had still heard him, no answer came.

~||x||~

Like his home, Carlisle's new office at the hospital was nearly bare. He had two items that traveled with him from hospital to hospital—a small grandmother clock, and the painting from Childe Hassam.

He stared at it now, remembering the conversation he'd had with it—had it really been only scant months ago? The hospital here in Ashland was quieter than Cook County had been; street violence and cars and horses and the sheer crowding of people in Chicago meant that illness and injury were common occurrences. Not so, here. The occasional case of the measles kept a patient here; and sometimes women came in for childbirths, farmers and ship hands had minor accidents.

It was peaceful, and for that, Carlisle was thankful.

Two weeks had passed since the night when he and Edward had lain entwined on the rug before the fire. Sometimes, Carlisle would come home to find that the books had been shuffled around as though Edward had been reading them. He could smell animal blood in the entry; it seemed Edward hunted almost daily.

These things were all small comfort, but Edward still wasn't speaking to him. So when Carlisle's door swung open, the last person he expected was Edward.

He shot to his feet, and at once cast around for any humans who might have seen him. And at once, he checked Edward's eyes. They were a violent shade of gold.

"You hunted," Carlisle breathed.

Edward only chuckled. "I'm not stupid, Carlisle." He stalked across the room, his hips swinging with each step. It was sultry and it was attractive and it set Carlisle entirely on edge.

Carlisle took a step backward. "What are you doing here?" he asked. Already he felt his panic rising. He had long ago inured himself to the scent of blood, but Edward was still a newborn. And one who had barely been exposed to humans—Carlisle's fault, of course.

"I came to see you." Pushing aside some of Carlisle's papers, Edward moved so that one of his hips slid onto Carlisle's desk.

"You can't be here."

Edward shrugged. "I am here." He leaned over the desk. "And I just hunted. I've been hunting every day, sometimes more than that. Aren't you proud of me? I'm safe, Carlisle. I can be part of this part of your life, too."

"Edward—"

"That was it, wasn't it? You told me I couldn't come here because of the blood. Because I would be tempted. But I'm not tempted. No more than you are." He leaned across the desk, his breath lolling hot against Carlisle's cheek.

"If you're going to be away all day," he muttered, "then I can join you when I wish."

Carlisle shoved himself backward, hoping Edward's eyes wouldn't drift to his no-doubt noticeable arousal.

Of course, having thought it, he saw Edward's eyes move there at once. A smile spread across his face.

"It isn't safe for you here."

"Why? Because of the blood?" He shook his head and laughed. "Carlisle, I'm fine. Besides, we're in your office. No one here is going to bleed."

One thing they could be thankful for. For a fleeting moment, Carlisle's mind flickered away to fingernails, scraping their way down bare chests, to the sizzling heat of kisses licking their way up a neckline, of hands clutched at the napes of necks...

He blinked, at once beginning to recite the patients he'd seen today. James Callahan, twenty-five, a new father, sliced his hand open with a kitchen knife while his wife was nursing their baby. Temperature was ninety-eight point eight, wound required seven stitches to close. Clara Dunworthy, sixty-five, whooping cough caught from her nephew. Temperature was ninety-seven point six

"Stop it."

Edward's eyes were narrow and dark with anger as he leaned over the desk again. He was slighter than Carlisle, and Carlisle figured that with enough surprise, he could potentially forcibly remove Edward from his office.

"Really? You'd try to remove me?" Edward's smile was bemused now. "And exactly how would you do that? Moreover, why?"

Carlisle stood, placing his hands on his desk and leaning toward Edward so that their eyes were level and they were nearly nose-to-nose. "Edward, you cannot be here. This is my place of work."

Edward snorted. "As I recall, being in your place of work didn't stop you initially."

At once there was another set of lips on his own. Hot, moving against his, a tongue probing at the seam between his lips. And much to Carlisle's embarrassment, he was kissing back, his hand reaching behind Edward's neck and crushing him in closer, eliciting a loud groan from Edward.

Then there were footsteps in the hallway.

Carlisle jerked with such force he sent his chair flying into the wall; a bit of cinder block chipped off and rained dust to the floor.

"Who—" Edward started, but Carlisle shook his head.

The door swung open.

"Dr. Cullen, I—" It was another of the hospital doctors. Dr. Taylor, like Carlisle, had come from the city to Ashland, though in his case the city was merely Madison. He stopped abruptly when he saw Edward sitting in the chair. "I'm sorry. Am I interrupting a consultation?"

"No, not at all," Carlisle answered, offering a quick and fervent prayer that Dr. Taylor would fail to notice that his tie was askew.

"This is"—he thought quickly—"my brother-in-law."

A furious, wounded look crossed Edward's face in a split-second before he settled his features back into a sweet, complacent smile.

The other man frowned. "I didn't know you were married, Dr. Cullen." Then he smirked. "The nurses will be devastated."

"No, I'm—" *Not able to think fast enough, that's what.* "She's passed. In the Spanish flu." He'd keep the lie close to the truth.

Edward's eyebrows shot up. His chest was still; he'd stopped his breathing as soon as the other doctor entered. Perhaps he was ready for more human interaction, after all.

"Edward, Dr. Taylor." He gestured to them both in turn. Edward gave a slight nod of his head, and Carlisle let a shy smile creep onto his face.

"My apologies, Edward has always been somewhat shy."

Daggers.

"Well, I was just bringing by my notes on your whooping cough patient, Dr. Cullen. My apologies for interrupting your meeting." He handed over a chart, and Carlisle thanked him. They both listened, utterly still, until the footsteps were far enough away that they knew he would be out of earshot.

Carlisle let out a shuddering sigh of relief.

Edward exploded.

"Your brother-in-law?"

"What did you expect me to say?" And for that matter, what were they? Sire and newborn? Friends?

Edward's lip curled, and at once he shoved himself away from the desk.

"There *is* a name for it," he snarled.

"Edward—"

He growled. "I'll see you at home."

The papers on Carlisle's desk rustled as Edward fled the room.

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It was snowing by the time Carlisle arrived home, the flakes sticking to his own frigid skin and piling up. It would all disappear the moment he crossed the threshold, he knew, but tonight, he didn't open the door. He laid a hand on the knocker instead and dropped his head against it.

He hadn't meant to anger Edward. And the younger vampire was right; there was a name for what they were doing.

Drawing the curtains.

Becoming nancys.

Being three-letter men.

He'd thought it was going to stop when Edward was turned. That once the boy was a vampire, Carlisle's cravings for Edward's body would disappear along with the cravings for his blood.

But they hadn't. And though he was trying, it was impossible to keep things from taking the course they seemed to want to take. He couldn't hide the way he grew hard when Edward kissed him, or suppress the groan when Edward touched him just further, he didn't want to. He'd missed the last almost two weeks, of Edward lying with his legs entangled in Carlisle's at night, of the long, slender, piano-commanding fingers snaking their way gently down Carlisle's chest.

His mind drifted back to Childe, to the laughter they'd shared on the Boston Common. To the awful conversation when Childe revealed he was going away to Paris. To the letters that arrived when Childe returned; and which Carlisle answered, knowing he could never again resume in-person contact.

Now, life had granted him another companion. A friend who knew him, who could talk to him, who could lie beside him at night and run his hands over Carlisle's chest. Someone he could shower with kisses and cling to in the dark. Someone to laugh with again.

As much as he hated to admit it, this last fortnight spent apart from Edward had been excruciating.

"I miss you," he whispered to the frozen knocker.

The door swung open so quickly he stumbled, but a pair of strong arms caught him, and he found himself looking up into a pair of honey-amber eyes.

For a second, they stood there, Carlisle caught in Edward's arms.

"You miss me," Edward breathed at last.

The plaster rained down on his shoulders before Carlisle even registered that he'd been thrown into the wall. Edward's lips were on his, hungry and insistent, searing into him as their bodies met.

They were the same height, but proportioned the same, too—long torsos and long legs, and it was such that their shoulders met at the same spot, as did their chests, and their groins...

Edward reached between them, grabbing at Carlisle through his pants and eliciting a helpless whimper. Carlisle slapped his hand away, but before Edward had a moment to react, suddenly it was Carlisle who had Edward against the wall, his hand mashed against Edward's groin with such force it caused Edward to yelp and snarl.

But that Edward's face resolved at once into a wide grin told Carlisle he was doing just fine.

"You miss me," he said again, turning the words around in his mouth as though they were a completely novel utterance.

"Yes. I miss you," Carlisle repeated.

He stroked Edward through his pants, causing a shudder so violent the wall shook and the chandelier swayed over their heads.

"I miss you."

Another shove, this time, one which flattened Edward's back against the wall as Carlisle flattened his own body against him.

"I miss you."

Edward had foregone suspenders again today, and his trousers slid easily off his slender hips. That he had nothing on underneath should not have come as a shock—Carlisle knew Edward found union suits restrictive—but nonetheless Edward's sudden nakedness was surprising and erotic. At once, Carlisle moved his hands to Edward's bare buttocks, clutching him even closer, pressing Edward's erection to his own. Burying his face in Edward's neck, he left a burning trail of kisses from Edward's jawbone to his collar before dropping swiftly to his knees.

What he saw startled him. Babies were born in hospitals these days, and so the procedure which had once been reserved for differentiating Jews from Gentiles had become commonplace for all men. To promote sanitation, argued the medical journals, and Carlisle had adhered to the new procedures as well, taking his scalpel to the tender penises of newborns before they were swaddled and returned to the women who'd borne them.

But the routine was still sufficiently new that Carlisle had rarely encountered a circumcised adult. Fascinated, he ran his fingertips over Edward's member. It was smooth and silken and woodenly erect. He ran his fingers up to the head, finding the tiny spot underneath where the doctor had cut eighteen years before.

He touched the tip of his tongue to the scar, causing Edward to yelp. A moment later, Carlisle found both his ears clamped as though his head were in a vise, the tip of Edward's member nudging urgently at his closed lips. Instinctively, he opened his mouth.

Edward reached his completion on his first stroke inward, slobbering a noise that was somewhere between a snarl and a whine. Sticky venom spurted onto the roof of Carlisle's mouth and dribbled from his lips before he had a chance to even try to swallow, which he found to be a tricky maneuver with another man's organ in his mouth.

Withdrawing and releasing his grip on Carlisle's head, Edward whimpered and shuddered as he went flaccid and Carlisle stood.

"I'm sorry—" he began, but Carlisle only shushed him and pulled him close, entwining his fingers in the bronze locks and pressing Edward's face to his shoulder. He swayed a little bit, as though he was rocking a baby, reveling in the feel of Edward's naked body against him.

"I missed you," he whispered again, his lips brushing Edward's ear with each syllable. "I missed you so much."

And when Edward followed him upstairs and tumbled naked into his bed ten minutes later, Carlisle knew his apology had been accepted.

Chapter 4

Edward's belongings arrived in a truckload of large trunks just before their second Christmas. Never one to take a gift graciously, Edward made several quips about the lack of reindeer, but the delight in his eyes showed nevertheless.

To his amusement, Carlisle learned that Edward was a collector: from his bedroom in Chicago came a whole slew of knick-knacks. Some prompted involved stories about afternoons playing stick ball, or being drenched to the bone sledding in the park. Some of them prompted less involved stories—"This was given to me by my father, I think"—and others, no story at all.

Those were the times that Edward simply got up and walked away. Carlisle would find him a few hours later, curled up on his bed and staring blankly at the wall. Then he would simply slide in behind him so that Edward's back was against his chest, and run his hands up and down Edward's torso in between a firm, comforting hold. Sometimes this happened with both of them naked, and those times, Carlisle found his hands made their way to Edward's groin and his beautiful, silken flesh.

It was on one of these nights that Carlisle discovered Edward's thighs. The boy was wiry and pubescent in many areas, but his thighs had already become those of a man; strong and supple with coarser hair that Carlisle found intoxicating. So it was that one night, in the midst of holding Edward, Carlisle found himself nudging his member between them. Seeming to know by instinct what to do, Edward clamped his legs as Carlisle began to thrust.

The friction caused him to explode on Edward's leg in under a minute, and he helplessly pawed at Edward's hair as he groaned.

"This is what Plutarch meant," he whispered happily when he'd finally gone still.

Edward grinned.

They celebrated Christmas by swimming nude in the freezing waters of Lake Superior. The water froze at once when they got out, and they spent an hour caressing each other's faces as they broke icicles out of each other's hair. Finally, laughing, Edward threw Carlisle into the snow and buried him in icy kisses before straddling his face.

Carlisle bought Edward a piano. Edward, still an overzealous and strong newborn vampire, broke it. So Carlisle bought another. Edward played it gingerly at first, but gradually learned to control his fingers again. He was amazed at his own skill, and the way he could play pieces he'd never been able to master as a human.

It didn't take very long for Carlisle to discover that it was even more wonderful to thrust between Edward's thighs when he was bent over the instrument.

They bought a Chevrolet, and it turned out that Edward's interest in cars almost paralleled his interest in the piano. They both spent time driving and enjoying the feel of the wind in their hair.

Work again became a joy for Carlisle. Edward read and studied and practiced during the nights, and in the mornings, Carlisle returned to cuddle him in their vast bed. Edward still had his own bedroom, but they closed the door on it in mid-February and never looked back.

The following Christmas they took a boat to Canada and spent the night in a cabin, lying next to a fire so intense it would've burned a human. They took turns kissing and fondling, and Carlisle fellated Edward so many times that Edward's penis grew sensitive and he needed to push Carlisle away.

Ashland had a New Year's tradition of putting on a small fireworks display, with the shells being set off from the end of the immense ore dock. They scaled one of the sheer drops into the lake to see the show from a vantage point that humans couldn't reach. Halfway through their climb, Edward playfully unhooked Carlisle's fingers from the rock, sending him careening into the water a hundred feet below. Dripping and with his clothes freezing to his skin, Carlisle wasted no time scrambling after Edward to turn the tables, and Edward responded with another retaliation of his own. It was only after their fourth attempt that they made it to an outcropping where they could watch the show.

They lay in each other's arms, their legs entwined as they watched the sky light up. Somehow, even though they were the same size, Edward fit so comfortably under Carlisle's arm, and his head felt so right on Carlisle's shoulder.

Neither of them said anything during the show. The sky exploded into purples and blues and reds, and the lake twinkled with rainbows beneath it as the humans oohed and ahed.

It was perfect. Edward was perfect.

Carlisle thought he saw the tiniest smile appear on his companion's face.

At the stroke of midnight, Carlisle rolled on top of Edward and kissed him for several minutes—long, sensuous kisses that made both of them woodenly erect.

"Happy New Year," Carlisle whispered. "You are everything to me."

Edward gave him a coy, lopsided grin. "Everything you ever imagined?"

"Nothing I could ever have imagined." Carlisle kissed his nose. "But everything I wanted."

They took a discreet path home and held hands the entire way.

~||x||~

January hit hard, and a snowstorm of several feet froze the shallower parts of the lake. Carlisle walked to the hospital anyway, in a coat buttoned tightly to his collar and with a warm scarf and hat.

"You could go down to the morgue," one of the nurses suggested when Carlisle was making his fourth utterly unnecessary round of visits to the hospital's three

patients. "No one has been down there since the storm began. I don't know if anyone has made sure that the bodies are taken care of."

They had ice boxes in the morgue, but the storm had delayed their delivery of ice, and so the stench of decomposing human flesh met Carlisle when he entered. There were only two bodies; one belonging to a freighter deckhand, killed in a fall from the big ore dock onto his ship, another a young woman who'd come in with mumps the previous week. Both of them were properly identified and lying in winding sheets.

They had maybe enough ice to keep the bodies from completely rotting for another day or so. Perhaps it was possible to sneak out to the lake and drag in a large chunk from the water—he'd have to rig a sled or some such device to make the carry believable.

Carlisle was just standing to execute this plan when the door swung open and an ambulance man entered, carrying a bloodied body in his arms instead of on a stretcher. The face was wrapped in a sheet, but he could see a long skirt and bare legs beneath.

A young woman. His heart sank.

"It's a cold night to go up on Hollerman's," the ambulance man said, shaking his head as he stretched the body out on the examining table. "The winter gets to some folks, I guess. Well, she certainly done what she set out to."

Carlisle swallowed. Hollerman's Rise was a scenic viewpoint near the lake, where no doubt some giant rock fall had occurred perhaps tens of thousands of years ago. The result was a sheer drop onto jagged shore that stretched almost a hundred yards before it hit the water.

The hospital always listed the cause of death as "accidental fall." But everyone knew exactly what that meant.

"Thank you," he said to the ambulance man.

A shrug. "Sorry to give you more work. We'll see if we can't get the body identified."

More work? It would relieve him from boredom. He began his examination of the body, thankful that rigor mortise had not set in and that he could straighten the limbs.

It was evident from the odd angle the body laid on the table that at least some part of the back was broken. Both forearms were snapped—a common injury in these falls, for it was human instinct to brace oneself. The right leg had broken in a compound fracture—the tibia, he could see. It was a bit of an odd injury for a freefall, unless the woman had somehow managed to land on her feet.

Or unless the bone had already been weak...

Vampires were gifted—or cursed, depending on the day and how Carlisle felt about it—with perfect memory. While at times it took Carlisle a moment to sift

through almost three centuries of thoughts, when he did recall, it was as clear as though he were seeing the same thing again.

Esme Platt had been a tomboyish sixteen-year-old girl from London, Ohio who'd taken an unladylike fall from the top of a crabapple tree. Her tibia had broken straight through her shin, and her father had rushed her to the Columbus hospital where Carlisle had worked at the time.

She wasn't anything like other female patients he'd had. Where most women and girls sobbed and held hands and refused to so much as glance at any sort of injury, Esme Platt peppered Carlisle with questions: exactly why her leg had done what it did, why it bled so much, which leg bone it was sticking out, exactly what were the sutures made of, and why did the laudanum make her giggle?

He answered all of the questions, and each answer only drew another, sharper one. They bantered for the better part of a half an hour.

It was as he was wrapping her leg in plaster that she asked his name.

"Dr. Cullen," he said, keeping his eyes on the plaster work.

"No," she said, "I mean your actual name."

"Oh." He continued to work. "It's Carlisle."

"That's an odd name."

He looked up, then, to find her brown eyes twinkling with laughter. He smiled.

"It was a surname, I believe. Perhaps my mother's."

"Perhaps?" the girl replied. "You don't know?"

He looked away then, pretending to be very interested in the plaster. "She died giving birth to me," he replied. "I didn't know her, and my father never spoke of her."

"Oh."

There was a long silence.

"Esme is not exactly a common name either," he commented. "One wonders why you are not a Mary, or a Margaret."

The girl giggled. "I don't like common names."

"So then you like mine."

"I like yours. I've never met a Carlisle before."

"Nor I an Esme."

She beamed.

He did, too.

The whole encounter had taken less than three quarters of an hour—it had been a slow day at the hospital, much like this one—but he'd found himself unnerved. Why had he told a patient, a stranger to him, about his mother's death? Why had he even revealed his first name to begin with?

What was it about her that had caused him to reveal himself? And what if she returned, and coaxed even more from him?

He'd fled from Columbus before Esme Platt came in for another appointment. Carlisle unwound her bloodied sheet.

She was older of course, the girlish roundness of her face replaced by the more severely beautiful structure that marked her as a woman. The hair, which had been shorter, now reached almost to her elbows, even matted as it was with her blood. The teasing smile which had once graced her lips would be gone forever—a crushing force to her nose and jaw had made sure of that.

Esme Platt had jumped.

The words sounded strange to him in that order. He'd known her for less than an hour, but the girl he knew would never have jumped off a cliff.

Perhaps she had been murdered?

His body seemed to grow hot and tense. He would hunt down whoever had done this and...

...and then do what?

A memory flashed in his mind. The day he'd turned Edward, when for a fraction of a day, his eyes had glowed an odd reddish amber, the bit of his singer's blood that he'd ingested altering his own countenance, reminding him of the demon he was.

No. He wouldn't kill. He could never look into his own eyes again.

The hair at the crown of Esme Platt's head was still pristine, and Carlisle found himself running his fingers over it, feeling how smooth and silken it was. He had never had the chance to do that. He'd never run his hand through a woman's hair at all.

Only Edward's.

His stomach knotted. Standing here, thinking these thoughts, was that a betrayal of the young man who more than likely, this moment, was waiting anxiously for Carlisle to come home, so that they could lie together and read and laugh and explore each other?

No. Edward could be made to understand. He would be able to see Carlisle's memory of the effervescent girl, at the way her cheer lit his entire day. He would understand. He would mourn her loss, too.

And if she hadn't been murdered, then what atrocity had happened in the last decade to turn that joyful teen into a woman who could do this to herself?

He leaned in. "Esme Platt, what happened to you?"

Perhaps there would be some mark, some sign of an assailant grabbing her that would not be obscured by her other injuries. It might give her family some peace of mind, if he could prove that her life had not been forfeit voluntarily. He leaned over her, exploring more closely. And then he heard it.

Like the wings of a butterfly. Impossible for a human to hear. Nearly impossible for *him* to hear.

Swish.

The valve opening and closing. The flow of blood from one chamber to the next. Slow. Stuttering. But still, a heartbeat.

The girl who fell from a tree was still alive. He could still save her. He could carry her upstairs, lay her on one of the surgical tables, and he would set the bones, and repair the face, and stitch together the gaping wounds...

...he was being an idiot. She was far beyond his medical ability to help.

Edward had taken days of agonizing. Pacing in his office, listening to the pleas of the boy's mother. Talking to his painting as though his only human friend was there in the room.

He didn't have that luxury. Esme Platt would die within the hour. He had just enough time to wrestle with the what-ifs: What if she had meant to throw herself off the cliff? What if she hated him? What if Edward hated her? What if she was an unruly newborn and ran?

What would happen to him and Edward?

But then the memory swirled in his mind again.

I've never met a Carlisle before.

The morgue had a door directly into the alley, where the undertaker could come with his hearse. Sweeping the body into his arms, Carlisle ducked through it and disappeared into the frigid night.

~||x||~

He was still three hundred yards from the front door when the piano music stopped mid-phrase, the chords ringing mangled and atonal as the pianist leapt from his seat. The bench slammed to the floor, and the front door swung open so quickly that it nearly ripped from its hinges.

It was early morning and still pitch black, the light from the house the only illumination for miles. Edward had made a fire, as they often did, in anticipation of a dawn spent lying entwined on the rug. The firelight flickered behind him, silhouetting his body and casting ominous shadows across the sharp planes of his face.

He looked like a demon guarding the gate to Hell.

"What have you *done*?"

Carlisle shook his head. He'd had to. He couldn't let the funny girl with the insightful questions disappear. Not when she was brought to him and he was the only person who knew that she still lived. It had been a sign, hadn't it? That his decision had been preordained?

Edward took a step back, his eyes wide.

"What did you do?"

Pushing his way into the house, Carlisle made a beeline for the staircase. His bed would suffice as a place for her to lie. He was on the second floor almost in the same instant he'd thought to go there.

Was it his imagination that he heard Edward whisper, "Our bed"?

Edward materialized in the doorway, his face twisted in an agonized horror as he watched Carlisle spread out Esme Platt's limbs on the bed sheets.

"Take her back," he said quietly.

Carlisle blinked. It was impossible for him to have not heard correctly, but he still stammered, "I'm sorry?"

"Take her back!"

This time it was an unmistakable shriek.

"I can't...it's already begun," Carlisle answered. "You can see that. You can hear that."

He had done it hastily, and he would finish the job now that she was home, but he'd nipped just enough, right at the jugular vein. After Edward, Carlisle had his suspicions about how to merge the medical and the mythical, and if he was right, his poison would be quickly whisked back toward her heart and be pumped back out to the rest of her body. It would be expedient, and he would add more, now...

Though if he were to be completely honest with himself, he was worried that it hadn't been done properly—Esme Platt showed no signs of being in pain. Was it that he hadn't introduced his venom correctly, or was it that her injuries were so severe that she couldn't feel the pain?

His arms, which began to warm as soon as he laid Esme on the bed, answered his question. Of course. Esme Platt's body was nearly entirely frozen, having sat at the base of the cliff for the better part of the day. Now that he thought on it, it had likely been the frigid weather which saved her. The cold caused her blood to flow slowly, and it had kept her alive.

But now she was warming up, and Edward was still a very young, very unpracticed vampire.

"You need to leave," Carlisle said quietly. "Go hunt. Come back in six or eight hours or so."

"No! You get her out of our home! She shouldn't be here!"

Carlisle drew himself to his full height, leaning over Esme's body, and pointing to the door.

"Edward. Out."

He was surprised by the authority in his own voice. He'd never given Edward an order. And Edward had never been asked to obey one.

The anger flashed over Edward's face like the backdraft of a fire. Even across the room, Carlisle caught the tiny flickers of motion that were the muscles in Edward's arms and legs going taut. For a fraction of a second, Carlisle thought Edward was going to attack; the younger vampire leaned in with his teeth bared. It was only when Carlisle himself stepped back and placed his hands in front of him that Edward's expression softened even a little.

"It's already begun, Edward," Carlisle repeated quietly.

"Then kill her," came the dark reply.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Then kill her!" Edward repeated, his voice shrill. "Drain her of her blood, or rip her limbs off, I don't care. You're a vampire. Kill her!"

They collided in the middle of the room as Edward dove—for *him*, not for Esme, Carlisle realized, but not before he slammed into Edward with such force that they went crashing into the dresser, shattering the mirror and sending shards spraying into the air. Carlisle threw his arms around the struggling body. *Can I hold him?*

But Edward was no longer a newborn, and Carlisle was the stronger of the two. Edward's arms remained pinned as he flailed his hands ineffectually.

"Let me go!" he screamed. "If you can't do it, I will. She shouldn't be here! She can't be here!"

Carlisle tightened his hold and began to pull Edward from the room, with his feet kicking the air like a toddler's.

If this was Edward's attitude, then he would simply have to keep the two apart.

"Kill her," Edward snarled as Carlisle dragged him down the stairs. "Finish what you started, you coward!"

His hands balled into fists and pounded on Carlisle's chest, making a hollow thumping sound. It hurt, but not as much as it had months ago.

"Finish what you started," Edward repeated, more weakly, as Carlisle tightened his grip. Like he might have with a tantruming child, he locked one arm around Edward's head and hair and kissed his cheek. He started to rock him back and forth and shush him.

The pounding began to lessen.

"Finish what you started," came the feebler reply.

Carlisle shushed again, pulling Edward even more tightly. The fists relaxed, and the palms pressed flat against Carlisle's chest. This time when Edward spoke, it was in a whisper.

"Finish...what...you...started..."

It was only when Edward could no longer manage to scream that Carlisle even recognized that he had begun to cry.

~||x||~

Edward played melancholy music when he was upset, and the three days Carlisle spent locked in his room with Esme Platt were given a soundtrack of some of the most mournful tunes he'd ever heard. At times, an angry outburst would manifest itself in a pounding, modern piece, but most of the time, they were slow ballads in minor keys.

But the piano never went silent. Its player never moved. And for that, Carlisle found he was strangely grateful.

Edward hadn't been injured, only ill, and the process of Turning had done little to his body aside from filling him out a tiny bit. Muscles had strengthened, his jaw had squared slightly, his freckles disappeared. Mostly, however, the body of the boy Carlisle carried out of the hospital was exactly the body of the boy who'd become his companion.

This was not the case with Esme Platt. Watching her changing was nothing short of miraculous—limbs askew straightened, bone knitted back together and placed itself back into the proper body cavities, wounds closed as though they'd been sutured weeks before. Even the tiniest details of her body became more beautiful as her fingernails and hair strengthened.

The second day was when Carlisle realized they had no clothes in the house that would be appropriate for a grown woman. Perhaps a younger woman might have found amusement in donning a man's shirt and trousers for a spell, but Carlisle suspected that such dress would be beyond the pale for his patient.

Edward was playing when he arrived downstairs, and for a moment, Carlisle simply allowed himself to stand and listen. But the music only went on a few more bars before it stopped.

"What do you want?" came the snarl.

They were the first words Edward had spoken in three days.

"I need a favor of you." Carlisle's mind raced forward and backward at once, to the idea he'd had to send Edward to wherever it had been that Esme Platt had been living. Again, he wrestled with the soundness of this choice—was it a good idea to send Edward into temptation's way, especially after exposing him to human blood in their home? Then he thought of the alternative, to send Edward to the town clothier's, with enough money in his pockets to buy a whole wardrobe.

Edward said nothing, just cocked his head.

"I hope she won't be needing a whole wardrobe before she leaves," he said finally. But when Carlisle offered him a fistful of money, he disappeared.

~||x||~

Edward remained gone through the overcast afternoon and on into darkness. At five p.m., Carlisle left Esme's room. By eight, he was pacing the downstairs with such fervor he wondered that he didn't manage to wear a line in the floor.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Carlisle finally put on his overcoat. As soon as he put his hand on the knob, however, he found resistance on the other side of the door.

He wrenched it open.

Edward's hair was matted with snow, two boxes tied with string at his feet. He was standing completely still, staring at the knocker. The wind had kicked up after dark, and little gusts of snow swirled behind him, shimmering in the light from the living room windows.

"How long have you been standing out here?" Carlisle asked.

Edward shrugged. "I wanted to see how long it would take you to come find me." His voice dropped so low that Carlisle almost had difficulty catching the second part of his sentence: "And if you would at all."

"Oh, *Edward*." Carlisle reached out to him, pulling the slender body in toward him, but as soon as his hands made contact with Edward's skin, Edward pulled away,

grabbing the packages and spinning into the living room. He set them on the floor and continued to stare at Carlisle from a safe distance, his eyes wide.

Behind him, their hulking fireplace was empty—when had Edward shoveled out the coals? Over the past year and a half, scarcely a single winter night went by that they didn't build a fire and bask in heat that would've singed a human.

"Yesterday."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I shoveled the coals out yesterday. While you were...upstairs."

With Esme.

Carlisle gulped. "I was worried I'd lost you," he managed.

Edward shrugged, and swung himself around onto the piano bench. He began to play with only one hand, a slow, sad melody that Carlisle couldn't quite place. For a long time, he simply picked out the notes on the keyboard, keeping his other hand still in his lap.

"I thought about it," he said at last. "But she does need dresses. And you wouldn't know what you were doing." The grin he shot Carlisle was almost playful.

He was right about that. Carlisle didn't think he had ever noticed what a woman happened to be wearing that day, unless perhaps it was extremely out of the ordinary. But he would've been completely lost purchasing the dresses that Esme Platt was likely used to wearing.

Edward shrugged. "I bought ones like the styles my mother liked to wear," he said. "I don't have that much experience in that department. Just slightly more than you."

The teasing felt good. Natural. Carlisle walked toward the piano, put his arms around Edward's shoulders.

"Thank you," he whispered, letting his lips brush the top of Edward's ear.

Instead of leaning into him, however, Edward only twisted away.

"I hope she likes the dresses," was all he said.

~||x||~

Carlisle didn't need a stethoscope to hear Esme Platt's heart. So when it began to speed in the middle of the third day, he parked himself beside her bed.

He'd been keeping the room dark, but as the sun began to sink late in the afternoon, he suddenly wondered if he should perhaps light a lamp. At once he wondered if even the lamp would be enough. Esme Platt had grown up on a farm, certainly, but one near enough to Columbus. And now she'd lived in Ashland for who knew how long.

He should've had the house wired.

"That's excessive, and you know it."

Carlisle's head snapped up. Somehow, Edward had managed to go from his bedroom to Carlisle's and stand in the doorway without Carlisle hearing so much as a footstep.

"Because your mind is"—a frustrated glance toward the bed—"occupied." Edward entered the room, shaking his head, and stood at Carlisle's side as they both gazed down at the bed. Esme Platt's entire body was healed now; her skin unbroken and beautiful, her hair like gossamer against her pillow.

Edward rolled his eyes.

"You've never compared my hair to gossamer. Though, truly, don't start."

Carlisle pushed him, but grinned. "You never heard anything I thought about you when you were human."

From the slack-jawed look Edward gave him, it was apparent he'd never considered that.

Carlisle nodded toward the door. "You should probably leave," he said.

"Why? She's no longer bleeding. And I couldn't hurt her now if I wanted to." His eyes narrowed, and Carlisle had a brief twinge of panic that perhaps his two charges would get into a fight. If they did, Esme would hurt Edward; newborn vampires were always the strongest.

He felt an odd twinge in his stomach at the thought. Had he made a mistake, doing this?

Edward snorted. "It's certainly taken you a long time to realize *that*."

There were two chairs in the room, and a half-second later, Carlisle found that the other chair had been pulled up beside him. Edward sat so close their thighs touched, and he scooted so that half his buttocks were on Carlisle's seat. The two of them watched as sunlight gave way to twilight which gave way to dark.

Edward's hand made its way onto Carlisle's thigh. He didn't remove it.

It was deep into the dead of night that Esme Platt's heart finally worked its way into a frenzy, beating a frantic tattoo that he thought he would remember forever.

He reached out and gripped her hand.

Edward squeezed his thigh.

When her heart finally stopped, the room was completely still. She didn't open her eyes, or pull away as Edward had.

An icy fear shot through Carlisle. Had he done it incorrectly?

"Esme?" he called.

When she did open her eyes, they were the startling crimson, and Carlisle and Edward both winced. With Edward, Carlisle had simply forgotten because it had been so very many centuries since he'd encountered a newborn vampire; with Esme, his only excuse for not expecting her eyes was possibly that he spent so much time staring into Edward's.

The grip on his thigh became more intense.

Esme looked around the room for a moment, no doubt taking in how sharp the view was, how she could see even in darkness. She barely moved, except to shift her head a tiny bit to change her field of view.

He squeezed her hand.

Edward's fingers dug.

Would she remember him, he wondered? Unlikely, of course. She did not have vampire memory, and any myriad of things had happened to her in the ten years since they'd met. And it had been forty-five minutes, and she had been intoxicated on laudanum the entire time.

"Esme?" he called again.

She turned her head. At once, her brow knitted into a frown. Then, just quickly, it resolved into an awed shock.

"It's *you*," she whispered.

Edward's door slammed before Carlisle was even able to register that he'd left the room.

Chapter 5

Carlisle had electricity installed after all, fewer than six weeks after changing Esme. It involved a hefty bribe to the county, one which, according to Edward, made the proprietor wonder if perhaps they weren't Capone's men, but they managed to get a line brought out. Edward teased him about it, but in truth, they all enjoyed it. Carlisle was pleased by the electric lamps, but his true delight was that the novelty fascinated Esme. His heart soared every time she happily flicked them on and off when she entered or exited a room.

Esme changed everything.

She wasn't as crazed as Edward had been during his newborn time; at times with Edward, it had been all Carlisle could manage to keep up with the boy's speed and curiosity. He'd lived in terror that first year that Edward would break loose from his control, and take a human life by mistake. But Carlisle had managed to keep Edward in check, even if he wasn't sure how. Well, no, he knew exactly how, if he allowed himself to think of it.

Esme wasn't defiant, like Edward, nor unpredictable. If anything, she was subdued.

On the day she had been turned, Carlisle had the same long conversation he'd had with Edward, although this time he'd been able to have it at his own pace, as Esme couldn't pluck his thoughts directly from his racing mind.

"You were a vampire when I met you the first time?" was the first question she asked.

Carlisle nodded. "You had an easy time recognizing me because I look exactly the same. I haven't aged a day since we first met."

Unlike her. Ten years ago, Esme Platt had been a girl—a beautiful girl, an unusually perceptive and charismatic girl, but a girl nevertheless. Now, however, there was a womanly curve to her hips, a mature structure to her face, an attractive swell in her bosom...

It was a very good thing that Esme couldn't read his mind.

The same could not be said of Edward, however, and it was within a minute or two of their conversation that Carlisle heard the piano cover clack open followed by the slow, mournful opening bars of a Beethoven sonata.

Esme's ears perked up. "He plays the piano," she said, fascinated, then, after thinking a moment, "Could we go listen to him?"

The question made Carlisle wince. There were many things about Edward which still confounded Carlisle, but he knew how to read the signal of "keep away."

"We should hunt," he whispered instead. "It will curb your thirst, and then we can talk more freely."

They excused themselves into the woods, but as soon as she finished, she insisted on coming back in to listen. They sat apart on the sofa, and she closed her eyes, which allowed him to watch her.

That first night, they listened for almost seven hours.

Slowly, their lives took on a different rhythm. Carlisle taking Esme to hunt, coming home to evenings of piano, conversations in the dead of night.

He telegraphed the hospital to explain that a family emergency necessitated his return to Chicago, and settled in.

At first, Esme hunted daintily, and it was always Carlisle who wound up taking down their kill—an elk, a male in his prime who weighed a thousand pounds if he weighed an ounce. But they went out every day, and she slowly got better. It took Carlisle a very confusing two weeks to figure out that at least part of her subdued hunting style came from worry about staining her dresses, and much to his surprise, that she didn't mind donning his trousers and shirts to go hunt. In his clothing, she felt freer to run and jump and sink her own fingers and teeth into prey.

He found it oddly attractive the way the too-large clothes hung on her.

As she became more confident in their home, she did begin to make changes. It wasn't that things were unattractive. He had a sense of aesthetic, being a fan of the arts. But it was true that aside from his art and his books, he tended toward the utilitarian. Edward hadn't minded, or perhaps it was more that he'd been so occupied with being a newborn vampire that he hadn't noticed, but either way, the two of them had lived comfortably in their surrounds. They hadn't needed much.

Esme took to the home as though it were her personal mission from God. One month it was a pillow on the couch, the next, draperies in the living room. With spring came the electricity, and then there were lamps to buy. And dresses...so many of them. If Esme expressed an interest in one, Carlisle bought four like it, and soon her room was full to bursting with flowers and women's clothing and had a garden-pattern quilt spread across the bed. When Edward complained that their home was becoming overrun, Carlisle reminded him that early on, he had been the one doted upon, and it was only fair for Esme to have a turn.

Meanwhile, Carlisle bought what felt like the entire Sears catalog.

The night Esme had awoken, Edward stopped allowing Carlisle to touch him. Even gestures made in passing—a hand on the shoulder, a pat on the arm—were met with growls. When he wasn't playing the piano, Edward stayed locked in his room, reading and listening to his Victrola. He was cordial to Esme, but nothing more.

It should have been easy, sliding back into this void where no one made physical contact with him, after all, his two and a half years with Edward were but a tiny fraction of his existence. But it wasn't, and it seemed like his entire skin burned for the kisses and caresses he'd gotten used to.

And at night, after Edward finished his concerts and returned to his bedroom, Carlisle sat with his back against the door in silence, listening to Edward breathe.

~||x||~

It was about ten weeks after her turning that Carlisle caught Esme staring at the chessboard.

The board had long since gotten its own table, a castoff that Carlisle had discovered at a rummage sale shortly after they'd arrived in Ashland. He'd been terrified, at the time, to leave Edward alone long enough to go into town, but Edward had a point that their home's furnishings were something less than meager, and so Carlisle had left in search of a sofa (which would later be employed mostly for their carnal desires), a bed for Edward (more of the same), and a table for them to sit the chessboard. He and Edward didn't play nearly as often anymore, and when they did, the games turned into little more than a drawn-out foreplay. Over time, the game had come to be associated in Carlisle's mind with throwing Edward against the wall, and licking his way down the smooth chest.

"Checkmate" had taken on a different meaning entirely.

Carlisle was thankful he couldn't blush as he gestured to the board.

"Do you play?" he asked.

Esme looked startled, as though he'd somehow managed to sneak up on her. He chuckled.

"Lost in thought?"

"Lost entirely, I suppose," she said quietly. Then she nodded. "I do know how to play. My younger brother taught me—it's not a game for women, they say. Or at least, my father said."

She gave him a shy smile. "But then, you already know that I was always terrible at refraining from things that women weren't supposed to do."

Carlisle grinned. "I do seem to remember a certain crabapple tree." He gestured to the two chairs. "Let's see what you remember."

She was an excellent opponent, as it turned out. To Carlisle, chess was mathematical; a series of moves which would end in the capture of an opponent. One could memorize a series to trap one's opponent in one way, and then another series to get one out of a disadvantageous position, and then still another to reclaim the board.

But that wasn't how Esme played chess at all. She almost seemed to know the psychology of the game—she outwitted him in places simply by her sense of how a man concerned with keeping her happy would move.

"Don't let me win," she told him, when she'd captured his second knight. "Nothing annoys me more. Even if I don't figure you out this game, I will soon enough."

He raised his eyebrows as if to ask if she was sure.

A devilish gleam appeared in her eyes, and she nodded as she smiled.

He rallied and checkmated her ten turns later.

She checkmated him after a fortnight.

It was like playing chess with Childe; full of laughter. And even though Carlisle had come to associate the game with the subsequent tearing off of clothes, he found that he enjoyed this once-again chaste twist every bit as much. They laughed and teased and goaded each other over the chessboard, and Carlisle found himself anxiously awaiting their games.

And after chess, they sat and listened to Edward.

He heard her now, descending the stairs slowly, her every movement graceful. Her hair shone in the light, setting off her face.

Edward shot Carlisle a look of disgust.

Carlisle tried to think of anything else.

Most nights, Edward played the piano for hours; long mournful pieces that made Esme sigh and made Carlisle cringe. Esme was fascinated by their lack of need to sleep, as Edward had been, and she was content to listen to Edward play on into the wee hours of the morning. Carlisle had very rarely made it a point to sit and listen to Edward practice, but now, he valued it. He settled himself down onto the end of the couch.

Esme's usual position was on the other side of the couch; sometimes they would sit and listen, or sometimes they would engage in their own pursuits as Edward played, for Carlisle, usually reading one of his many medical journals, for Esme, often drawing.

But tonight, she strode across the room as though she owned it, casually sat so close to Carlisle that their thighs touched, and gently took his hand.

The effects were simultaneous and instantaneous. A chill shot down his spine. His member stiffened in his pants.

And the keyboard cover slammed as Edward flew out the front door.

~||x||~

Carlisle was halfway to Houghton before Edward's scent trail suddenly disappeared, and he stopped with such force that he nearly lost his balance, and began to cast around frantically.

It had taken Carlisle and Esme both a precious few seconds to manage to move. It had been Esme who immediately said that Carlisle needed to go after Edward, and when he protested that it wasn't safe, that she shouldn't be left alone, she promised that she would be fine. It was the dead of night, she pointed out, and they lived miles and miles from the nearest humans. And she was confident he would catch Edward long before dawn.

He hadn't believed her. But then the scent trail abruptly ended, near an abandoned outpost somewhere in the upper peninsula of Michigan, and he whirled to find a young vampire, sitting with his back against the building, his knees pulled to his chest as though he needed to huddle to keep warm.

Carlisle approached as though he were coaxing a dangerous wild animal.

They'd celebrated Edward's twentieth birthday the week before. He wondered briefly what Edward might have looked like had he been granted the extra years. He'd be broader, Carlisle imagined, and perhaps his face would have squared. His chest would have more hair.

"That I was robbed of those years is your fault," Edward snarled.

"The influenza would have taken your life. Those years weren't coming to you."

Carlisle regretted his words the moment they left his mouth.

"Then you should have let me die!"

He might as well have run Carlisle through with a sword. The pain was sufficiently strong that it nearly knocked him to his knees.

"Good," Edward answered. "You should feel pain. God knows I do." He leapt to his feet and began to pace back and forth, his hair whipped into his face by the wind. Summer storms were frequent in the lake region, and one was brewing now—had it already hit Ashland? Was Esme sitting inside, watching the rain?

"Edward—" Carlisle took a few steps.

"Don't you dare." Just as quickly, they were the same distance apart again.

"Don't you *dare* pretend that she doesn't mean anything to you. You're clueless and stupid, I'll give you that"—Carlisle cringed—"but even you see what's going on."

He wasn't wrong. For as much time as it had taken for Carlisle to admit to himself his enjoyment of Edward transcended that of the bond between a sire and the one he turned, confronted with the same pattern, he'd seen it for what it was more quickly this time. It was easier to admit to himself that there was an attraction there. Easier to acknowledge that he was being careful, not because he didn't know what was happening, but because he didn't want to destroy whatever it was to become.

"I'm surprised you let yourself leave her, honestly."

Carlisle blinked.

"I left her to find you," he murmured. "I left her because I have to have you."

He only realized the crushing truth of these words as he said them. But it was right. All these past months, as he admired Esme's womanly figure, as they sat separately and chastely on the couch, as they laughed over chess—they'd been tinged by this excruciating pain that was first Edward's indifference, then his disdain, and now his disgust.

I miss you, he thought, and at once his mind swirled back to that first passionate encounter, to bodies slammed against walls, to the tender exchanges that took place under the covers of his bed. In his mind, they curled up on the rug, the heat of the fire licking bare backs. Those times when he'd almost wished for sweat, for their skin to be slick so that their hands would slide easily over bare chests...

"That won't work this time."

Edward's expression hadn't softened a bit. His arms were crossed protectively over his chest, hugging his sides as though it were possible for him to be chilled. He stared hard at the ground beneath them.

"I wasn't expecting it to," Carlisle answered softly.

He crossed the few feet between them and laid a firm hand on Edward's shoulder. "I do miss you, Edward. It's not a come-hither. It's that I love you."

Edward whirled, turning his back and keeping his arms clenched in place. But he didn't run, and so Carlisle placed his hand back on the slim shoulder, rubbing his thumb up and down Edward's neck.

"You used me," came the whisper a minute later.

Again the words were like ice, slicing through Carlisle so sharply that this time, he did stagger a step as he felt his breath catch in his throat.

"I didn't do right by you," he answered. "I know that much. And I'm sorry, Edward. I'm sorry for so many things."

He stepped in behind Edward and found that Edward didn't run. Wrapping his arms around Edward's front, Carlisle pulled him close, burying his nose in Edward's collarbone, just below a set of crescent-shaped scars. He inhaled.

Spice.

Earth.

Still his perfect Edward.

"But you're choosing her," he said, his voice strained and an octave higher than usual.

He knew Edward had already seen it, but he brought it to mind anyway; the brief encounter in Columbus, the way the young Esme Platt had smiled, the way she had pestered him, the way she had wanted to be his friend.

"I chose her a long time ago," he whispered.

With a growl, Edward pulled away. Carlisle grabbed for him at once, tightening his grip. He was thankful again that Edward was no longer a newborn; Carlisle would remain the stronger of the two of them, it seemed. He crushed Edward to him and whispered in his ear.

"I need you both," he answered. "You both make me whole. You both see into my soul. I was alone for so long, and I thought"—he gulped—"I thought I didn't deserve the happiness you give me. I still don't think I do."

Edward grunted, but didn't struggle.

"But I have you, and I love you, and it's not fair to you, I know that. This. Everything I've done."

He took a deep breath and loosened his grip. The cold air rushed between them as they separated, and Carlisle took a few steps backward, holding his hands before him, palms up in surrender.

"Go," he said quietly. "Run all the way to Canada, or wherever it was you were going. You were meant to have a better life than the one I can give you."

Edward took a few steps, like a frightened animal that had just been released from its cage. His eyes were wide and his gait was careful, and he only made it a yard or two before he turned and looked at Carlisle.

"What will you do?"

Carlisle shrugged. "I'll survive. I always have."

Vampires moved with such speed that they sometimes seemed to be in two places at once, and so it was that Carlisle had barely finished speaking when he found lips on his own, sighing and pressing and hands tangling in his hair. He hiked Edward's body against him so that Edward's legs wrapped around his waist, and held him under his bottom as they pressed against each other. If it was a minute or twenty, Carlisle wasn't sure, but finally the frenetic pace slowed, and Edward's hands slid from his hair, and Carlisle gently released Edward's feet to the ground, as though he could be hurt by falling.

He pressed his forehead against Edward's. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "God, Edward, I'm so sorry. I'll miss you."

"And I you." Edward closed his eyes as though looking at Carlisle was painful. His jaw flexed, but then he said simply, "Go back home to Esme. She loves you, too." Too.

He froze there, his hand touching his lips, thinking about what that word meant.

It was only when Edward's scent finally faded in the distance that Carlisle started to cry.

~||x||~

Esme didn't ask what had happened. She simply gave him a nod of understanding, and when he collapsed onto the couch and proceeded to stare at the piano for thirty hours straight, she only sat next to him and put her hands on his shoulders.

He could have stayed there forever. Vampires didn't need to move.

It was when he finally stood, a day and a half later, that she offered, "I'm sorry you couldn't catch him."

He blinked. Before he plucked that beautiful boy out of his bed at Cook County Hospital, if someone had asked him if he wanted a companion who could read his mind, Carlisle would've said no. It was intrusive, and he valued his privacy. But now, he realized how accustomed to it he'd gotten, how easy it was to be close with Edward simply because he could so easily share himself.

With Esme, he needed to explain things.

"I caught him," he corrected her. "Or—he stopped running, to be more accurate. I caught him and we talked and..."

An odd ache formed in his throat, and he bit his lip to keep himself from crying. Funny how that worked for vampires just as well as it did for humans.

"And?"

"And I told him to keep running. If he wanted to. And he did."

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The words caught again, and Carlisle sank back down onto the couch, putting his head in his palms.

Esme stared at him.

"You told him to run?"

He nodded, dropping his head into his hands and staring blankly at the piano. Would he need to get rid of it? He could play decently, and Esme enjoyed it, but the instrument reminded him of Edward. He wouldn't look at it without remembering sitting next to Edward at the keyboard, or the times he'd shoved Edward against its cabinet...

No. That was over.

"I asked him to run," he muttered. "He's right. I've been terrible to him. I had no right to do what I did to either of you."

He squeezed his eyes closed, and so he only smelled and felt when Esme slid onto the couch next to him, her slender arms finding their way around his neck to clasp at his front. She didn't say anything, but after a few minutes, she leaned in and laid her head gently on his shoulder. Like Edward, Esme smelled faintly of spice, but hers was a sweeter one; mint or thyme perhaps, with some indiscernible bit that was simply her.

"I don't blame you, Carlisle," she said after a long time. "People have been in far less impossible situations and handled them far more poorly."

He blinked. For a moment, Edward's body materialized in his mind, leaning against the piano, with his coquettish grin and slender hips...and then abruptly he saw again the screaming, the hatred, the dark look on Edward's face as he flew out the front door.

"I don't think you could understand," he answered.

Esme was still quite a bit stronger than he, and so when she gripped his chin and turned his face to hers, it hurt.

"Carlisle, I'm not stupid," she said carefully. "Do you think a woman can live to my age without learning to recognize a spurned lover when she sees one?"

His stomach sank. For a good minute, it seemed as though his jaw wouldn't work, and that words had left him entirely.

"How long have you—?" he managed at last.

"Since the first time I saw him with you," she said. "The way he looks at you, the way you look at *him*..." She shifted uncomfortably in her seat. "I wasn't certain I could compete for your affection. And then, when it looked as though even having done nothing that maybe somehow I'd won..."

Her body was deliciously warm as she leaned into him. Different from Edward, so much softer. She curled against him like a cat, pressing her head against his shoulder.

It was the closest they'd been physically. He hadn't let himself get near her, particularly after he learned the details of Esme's life between now and that fateful fall

out of her father's tree. The husband she hadn't wanted to marry. His impossible expectations of her both in and out of the bedroom. The physical punishments that came if she couldn't live up to them.

He couldn't add to that terror. And with Edward around, it was better to stay hands-off anyway.

But now with him gone, and with Esme being the one who chose to put her arms around him, and to lay her head on his shoulder, and to speak softly to him...

It felt right.

"But Edward felt right, too," he mumbled at once, almost unaware of his words until he heard them and saw Esme cringe ever so slightly.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that."

"No..." She scooted a little closer to him on the couch, so that their entire sides touched. "You don't give him up just because you let him run."

"Urged him to run." He turned away again, only to find the crushing grip on his jaw returned as Esme forced him to make eye contact once more.

"That hurts, you know," he managed.

She let go at once. "Does it? I'm still not used to this." She put her hands flat on the sides of his face, so that her palms touched his cheeks. "Is that better?"

He sat stock still, absorbing the feeling of having Esme's hands on his face. "Yes," he said, "it's better."

"Then tell me," Esme continued, "did you ask him to run because it was the right thing for you?"

He shook his head as his stomach wrenched violently again. No, he wanted everything. Edward, Esme, medicine, life—he wanted it all, and he pursued it all with reckless disregard. And now he had to atone for his mistakes.

"It was better for him," he muttered.

"I'm sorry?" There was a tiny smirk on Esme's face.

"It was better for him," Carlisle repeated more loudly. "I hurt him. I promised him that I would keep him from harm and I'm the one that hurt him. I deserve to lose him. I told him to run because it was better for him."

The words were like a sledgehammer. *I deserve to lose him*. Because he did, didn't he? For all the promises he'd made Elizabeth Masen, he was the one who'd broken her child. He hung his head again.

"Carlisle Cullen."

His head snapped up. Esme's tone was that of a mother, reprimanding her child for his misstep. Exasperated, yet loving.

She put her hands back on his face, her fingertips pressing gently into his temple. "Carlisle Cullen," she whispered, "You are a good man. A deeply flawed man. Maybe a confused man. But you are a good man. And I love you, and Edward loves you, and this will work out. Somehow."

Carlisle blinked, but said nothing.

Esme let go of his face with one hand, clasping his hand in hers and pulling them both to her bosom. She bent her head over them both as though in prayer, and then brushed her lips against Carlisle's knuckle.

The gesture sent a shiver down his spine, and he instinctively leaned in closer, so that their faces were close. Esme pressed her forehead against his. He leaned in, touched his lips to hers...

And then the front door swung open.

~||x||~

Edward looked skinnier somehow. He was drenched from head to toe, the water making his blue shirt look black against his pale skin. Water ran down the bridge of his nose and pooled there, dripping onto the floor in a tiny puddle.

Carlisle leapt back from Esme at once. "What—" *Why is he so wet?*

"Swimming was more direct," came the answer, along with a hard stare. Even though Edward had fed recently—Carlisle still insisted on it, even though Edward was more than two years into his new life—his golden eyes had a certain darkness to them.

If he was still so angry, why had he returned?

The couch cushion shifted as Esme rose. "I'm going to go out of earshot," she said quietly.

They both protested at once.

"It's dangerous out there."

"What if you run toward town? The humans—"

Esme shook her head and laughed. "Fine, then. But you two have your conversation. Privately. You say what you need to say where I can't hear you." When neither of them moved, she went to the door and held it open. "Go."

Carlisle nodded, and he'd no sooner had the thought than he and Edward were racing through the woods. They didn't say anything, just hit, feet on ground, their strides almost matching. Edward would remain faster than him for the rest of their existence, but Carlisle would always enjoy the feeling of running alongside him, watching his legs pumping and the way his body moved in the darkness.

He wondered how many more times they'd get to run.

"Was that the first one?" Edward muttered as they ran.

"The first one of what?"

Carlisle found himself on the end of a withering look.

"The kiss, Carlisle. Was that the first kiss?"

Oh. Carlisle's hand went involuntarily to his face, his fingers tapping his lips lightly. He felt again Esme's light lips against his own—so different from what he'd known before. But maybe it would change, their lips had barely brushed...

"Enough. I get it." Edward sped ahead of him again, and Carlisle had to run as hard as he could to catch up.

"I'm sorry," he called, when he closed in.

Edward began to slow, but it didn't take Carlisle long to realize this was because they were reaching the shores of the lake. When he reached the shore, he stopped, and it took Carlisle a few paces to catch up.

They didn't say anything, just stood and stared out. The waves came in little burps, sloshing at their feet. In the distance loomed the hulking ore dock, appearing as a massive black interruption in the quilt of starlight that was the sky and the reflection in the lakewater. Vampires could see in the dark, which had been one of the discoveries about his new existence which most surprised and delighted him. But they needed some light to see, and even under the starlight, there was a distance where he could no longer make out anything that sat on the water, or discern the horizon where the inky lake pressed up against an equally inky sky.

Ten minutes passed.

"Why did you come home?" Carlisle whispered at last.

Edward shrugged, and Carlisle heard him swallow. He didn't press, however, and a moment later was rewarded with a mumbled, "I missed you."

I missed you. Those words had held so much meaning—sexual passion, and friendship, and love...all of the loves espoused by Plutarch and Aristotle and Homer and all the writers they'd read with their chests pressed against each other's, under the covers in Carlisle's bed. All of the kinds of love—*philos* and *eros* and *agape*—rich, and complicated, and wrought with passion and pain and things Carlisle imagined his relationship with Esme would never need to be.

Edward nodded. "It's more straightforward, with her," he offered, still not meeting Carlisle's eyes.

"It is."

Carlisle didn't say anything more, and Edward stayed silent.

"I'm sorry I ran out," Edward said at last. "It was...foolish. I should know better."

Know better?

Edward turned away, scuffing his foot into the tiny bit of gravelly sand that was characteristic of all the shoreline here. With his body turned away and his shoulders hunched, Carlisle barely heard him when he muttered, "You're my best friend. Even if I lose you to"—he gulped, and didn't finish his sentence.

"You're my best friend, Carlisle," he repeated.

Finding himself engulfed in a sudden desire to throw his arms around Edward, Carlisle kept still, instead shoving his hands into his pockets.

"You're mine, too," was all he said.

Edward didn't answer, and when he did, he addressed his comments to the lake.

"It is more difficult to control love than anger," he quoted.

"For whatever love has a fancy to, it will buy even at the cost of life and reputation," Carlisle finished for him. He inched closer to Edward, and when he slid his hands around the thin waist, Edward didn't run.

"More Plutarch?" Carlisle whispered, a bemused smile appearing on his face.
"He made the best argument."

Somewhere in the distance, a pulsing light indicated a lighthouse, maybe somewhere on one of the islands. They watched it make a few circles—on, off, on again.

"I've still never seen the ocean," Edward muttered after a while.

"I'll show you the ocean," Carlisle whispered. "From both sides if we can. And I'll take you to see the others as well...there are seven of them, you know."

Edward leaned against him, his back pressing against Carlisle's chest.

"That will take a lifetime," he said.

Carlisle's arms tightened so that the boy's body was pulled tight, and he placed his lips at Edward's ear.

"We have so much more than a lifetime."

They were the same height, matched stride for stride, shoulder for shoulder, torso for torso. And so Carlisle rested his chin on Edward's collarbone, and they watched the gentle ebb and flow of the water until the sky grew light with dawn.

~||x||~

FORKS, WASHINGTON—2005

It wasn't long after Edward left before Carlisle found himself exiting the low slung building that was Forks Community Hospital, and making his way out to a small, silver Volvo.

How far had Edward gotten, he wondered? Would he take Carlisle's advice and go to Alaska? Alice would have told the family what was happening; Esme would be expecting him, and ready to comfort him as she had so many times before.

He had been right to choose Esme and her soft caramel locks and her bosom and her curves. She unlocked something that made him less selfish, more sure, less worried. It was good, and perfect, and he knew he couldn't trade that for anything.

Less complicated. That was what this was. As "father," married to "mother," with five "children" attending school. Less challenging. Less eye-opening. Less likely to get them in trouble.

But sometimes, it was still...less.

Edward had grown. Not physically, of course, but through the trials that followed—the gut-wrenching years when pretending and jealousy had finally gotten the better of him and he stormed out in search of some strange, vampiric salvation.

Finding only pain, however, he returned for Carlisle's forgiveness.

Carlisle and Esme both had given it freely and in abundance. And it was this, Esme's forgiveness, which Edward found easier than Carlisle's to accept, that finally allowed him to see her as Carlisle's partner.

He had grown.

Edward threw things when Carlisle turned Rosalie Hale, and when he realized what Carlisle's hopes were for her.

But then he stood by her like a brother as she worked through her own demons, and rejoiced when she found her partner two years later.

When the clairvoyant and her taciturn mate appeared, he accepted them as they were, even though it meant giving up his place as the only gifted one.

He had grown.

No longer was Edward the carefree eighteen-year-old that Carlisle had tackled in the Wisconsin woods. He was wiser. Darker. Lonelier. He shared the scars that came to all of them in time, as the human world they knew fell away and eternity stretched menacingly before them.

And he bore the scars that Carlisle himself had inflicted, literal, of course, but the figurative ones as well.

It wasn't a long drive home from the hospital, and Carlisle briefly debated walking—the air would be good for him. He liked this area, with the national forest and the mountains and the tiny, peaceful town. Over the years, they'd lived all over North America: New York State, Calgary, New Hampshire, Tennessee.

But it was locations like Forks that Carlisle preferred. The Washington coast. Maine. Newfoundland. Esme indulged him, finding house after house—she was a carpenter, he learned, who stitched walls instead of samplers. She never suggested they live further inland. And even though she knew exactly why he moved them from one edge of the country to the other, she said nothing, relishing for herself the beautiful sunsets and the waves.

Carlisle chose homes which kept Edward near the ocean. So that he could see it whenever he pleased.

The briefcase bounced on the passenger seat as Carlisle slid behind the wheel. The seat was positioned perfectly for him; the right leg length, the mirrors at the right height. But what caught him, of course, was the scent. Spice, earth; his scent, but transformed and mingled with that sweet cardamom-nutmeg that had once tormented him, then captivated him, then entranced him, and then ruined him. Like the scent, Edward's question swirled around him:

"Has any one person ever smelled better to you than the rest of them? Much better?"

Carlisle closed his eyes and inhaled, letting Edward's essence soak in from the nooks and crannies of the car. Then he stepped on the clutch, put the key in the ignition, and turned. The engine roared to life.

But before he put the car into gear, he dropped his head to the steering wheel, with his hands grasping on both sides next to his ears.

"Do better, Edward," he muttered, not lifting his head. "Please, please do better than I did."

Then Carlisle slid one hand to the gearshift, and pulled out of the parking lot to drive home.

~fin~

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