

Fanfiction based on Stephanie Meyer's Twilight Series
Rated M for Mature

BREAKFAST AT TIFFANY'S

By KMonster4 & ProfMom

Summary: *Edward admires Bella from afar, until a chance meeting convinces him to send her messages in the Tiffany's window. Can their two worlds merge beyond the grand gesture? elaboration/continuation of the One Shot.*

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CHAPTER 1: SEPARATE WORLDS POP TART SOLILOQUY – VALENTINES DAY 2008

"Excuse me?" A blonde man tapped me on the shoulder. I tipped my head in acknowledgement. "Are you tired? Because you've been running through my mind all night."

I literally choked on my Cosmo, shooting pink liquid all over the front of Blondie's shirt. "Ewww, that is so not original. No thank you and goodbye!"

He walked away as Alice rolled her eyes.

"Sad, that isn't even the worst one I've heard tonight." I complained as I hoisted my glass at the bartender. "Nother round please!"

"Slow down, Bella! This isn't a race!"

"Alice, it's Valentine's Day. Men are dogs who just want to get laid, and I don't want to be a notch in someone's bedpost. My only objective is consuming more of these pretty pink drinks. It's my one sure thing for tonight."

Alice Brandon, best friend, confidant extraordinaire, had pulled me out of hibernation to celebrate a girl's version of Valentine's Day. Neither of us was involved in romantic relationships, having spent the last six months in the sixth ring of hell known as online dating. Our experimentation had turned up nothing but freaks, geeks, and more freaks. My personal favorite would have to be the guy who claimed to be 6'2, but was really 5'2 with really bad chest hair that was obviously dyed. He had been into toe sucking, and had inquired as to what size underwear I wore.

Not one to wallow in her lack of success, Alice insisted we go out to a bar on Valentine's Day. Her logic? That there were plenty of guys who were dateless, and they would be out drowning their sorrows. What better way to meet them?

Instead of meeting Mr. Wonderful, we spent the night laughing at the feeble attempts by clueless guys to pick us up. The lines ran the gamut from attempts at cute (Excuse, we don't not know each other, do we?) to innuendo laden (if I tell you that you have a beautiful body, will you hold it against me?) to down right crude (is your

underwear made of Windex, cause I can really see myself in them).

We finally gave up around 1 and headed home. It wasn't too cold, so we walked down Fifth Avenue, looking in the windows and admiring all the things that we could never afford.

"God, I hate Valentine's Day. I truly do. Look at these displays. Commercial, shallow, that's not love!" I protested sloppily. I had a habit of being rather verbose when I drank.

"Okay Cynic-rella Bella. I get that your love life sucks right now, but do you need to be such a downer? Maybe you don't believe in love, but that doesn't give you the right to ruin it for the rest of us!"

"I am not being a downer. And I do believe in love. I just want to be realistic about it."

"Okay then, what is realistic? Define true love for me."

I stood in front of the window at Tiffany & Company, studying the display. The wind picked up, carrying with it traces of my shampoo. Strawberries. That's it!

"True love is like a package of strawberry pop tarts." I started. Alice snorted. "Very lady like, Alice Brandon. Just hear me out."

I started pacing up and down in front of Tiffany's as I spoke. "When you first get a pack of pop tarts, you are all excited to open the shiny package. Once it's open, you find two perfectly matched pastries with simple pink frosting and gorgeous colorful sprinkles."

"Okay, perfect match who is gorgeous and doesn't dress too flashy. Maybe you should've had another Cosmo, Bella."

I was on a roll. "But there is more to it than looks, for inside lurks those amazing strawberry preserves that remind you of everything good and simple and wonderful in life. Kind of like these windows" I pointed to the Tiffany display

"Perfect match, gorgeous, simple, and good in bed. You want to date a supermodel!"

I stuck my tongue out at her. "But you do have to realize that pop tarts are totally processed and have a shelf life of forever, that way you don't ever have to worry about them going bad."

"But what if I want him to be bad?" Alice pouted.

"Then you buy him a Cosmo and ask him to be naughty. Let's go home."

"Say goodnight to the pop tart windows, Bella."

"Goodnight Strawberry Pop Tart windows. I love you!" I called over my shoulder.

We linked arms, and stumbled down Fifth Avenue singing the theme song to Laverne and Shirley. Who needed a man in your life when you have this?

Coming Home – September 2008

In college, I found the concept of Homecoming peculiar. It wasn't just that nothing about school ever implied

"home" to me, but something about the idea that everyone went all out to celebrate the return of people who had chosen to leave made no sense. Celebrate the people who stay, the people you see everyday. I thought the people who visited should be the ones doing the honoring, not the other way around.

Now, as I approached a small assembly at the bottom of the stairs by the baggage claim holding a large placard that said simply, "Welcome Home, E!" I found being on this side of homecoming rather pleasant.

Leave it to them. I'd done everything I could to avoid any attention today. I dressed down as much as I could and even wore a baseball cap, which I never do. I wore fake wire rim glasses to help alter my appearance just a bit. I knew I couldn't keep my return a secret for long. Come Monday, when I walk into the office, someone will tell their friend who will text someone they know at Page Six or TMZ.

I was hoping to get settled over the weekend without any cameras or unwanted phone calls. I let my mom pick out my apartment, and it was under her name, so that no less than discrete real estate agents could blast my house hunting expeditions across the news.

To my surprise, no one was paying any attention to the four of them. They blended in exceptionally well, seeming like an average family for all intents and purposes. An incredibly attractive family, mind you, but they didn't scream, "Hey take my picture and call the tabloids!"

Emmett, in particular, appeared almost pedestrian. He was in jeans and a t-shirt, with a Mets cap (a nice foil to my Yankees hat) pulled down low. The best accessory though was the baby he had tucked in close in some sort of a front pack. One hand was slowly patting the baby's bottom as he bounced slightly. Standing next to him was his stunning wife, Rosalie. She was peering at baby Haley, offering her a pacifier.

Then there was my mom, Esme, the epitome of class and substance. Superb posture and a smile that could melt the ice caps. She was holding the little sign, though the lettering looked like Emmett's handwriting.

Despite the near perfect scene, the absence of the patriarch of the family mellowed me to the point my pace slowed. I imagined him standing there with his arm around my mom, beaming at the thought of the prodigal son returning home. I blinked, and he was gone, replaced only with the reality that I was too late to make him proud.

My mom nudged Emmett who said something to Rosalie, and suddenly, all three of them were looking at me.

My mom met me half way, and threw her arms around me.

"What you are all doing here? I thought you were sending a car." I wanted to scold her a bit, but hugging her felt too good.

"Don't you spoil this for me. I have my boys home, and I am going to savor every moment of it." We hugged silently for a minute before she broke away and began to dab her eyes with a Kleenex I hadn't noticed she was holding. "I wish your dad were here for this."

And I understood both sides of Homecoming then. I'd been missed, so they'd come to rejoice my return, but I also knew I would have to celebrate the people who stayed. They had weathered the storm.

Yellow Wellies - September 2008

Fall is my favorite time of year. It hardly ever rains. The air smells crisp and clean. There is just a hint of the coldness that is to come. It reminds me of wonderful things like hayrides, apple picking, and Halloween.

Last night it rained, taking with it all the grime and pollution that you typically equate with New York City. I woke up this morning to brilliant sunshine and not a cloud in the sky. Mornings like this can't help but put me in a good mood.

I got dressed quickly, throwing on a short felted skirt, a cardigan, and my bright yellow wellies. I love my wellies. They remind me of my childhood, when everything was simpler. Alice teased me to no end, but I refuse to give them up.

I took the red line up to 53rd and Fifth, just like I did everyday. The people on the train seemed to be in the same infectious mood, actually smiling and not cutting each other off to get out the door.

I bounced up the steps from the subway and took a deep breath of the crisp air. I popped in my ear buds, and selected my 'happy' playlist on my iPod. Not many days do I enjoy this walk, but today was going to be different for some reason. I could feel it.

As I stood at the corner of 55th and Fifth, one of my all time favorite songs comes on. I started tapping my foot and lip syncing along. I didn't care if people look at me funny.

*Gotta try my best to break her spell
Before I burn in my own hell
And I find myself waiting
To sail that wave again
And as I'm falling deeper in
That's where obsession starts to reign
And it scares me to know
What I might find there*

I walked up Fifth Avenue, tapping the song's beat on the strap of my back pack. I got funny looks from people; I didn't know if it's the wellies or my singing. I didn't really care. Honestly, I'd rather them look at me and find me odd for my actions than look at me and immediately formulate an opinion based on my looks. Just for once, I'd like someone to see ME, the person, not the exterior.

I paused in front of my window, and continued to drum my fingers as I stared at collection of crystal and china. I love this window. It's my happy place. My Strawberry Pop Tart Window. I continued to sing along to the song, oblivious to the world around me.

*And as I watch the perfect dream
Get ruined by my inner fears
I'm been waking up knowing
that my love will begin again
And I tell myself I must be strong
Can't waste my time thinking I was wrong
Don't where I end and she begins*

I reached out to trace the glass and smiled. So beautiful. So classic. Definitely not the world I live in. Oh well, a girl can have dreams. In mine, I was Sabrina the confident, riding off into the sunset with Linus Larabie. Not Sabrina, daughter of the chauffer, looking down at the party from the branches of a garden tree.

Fortunately, I found as much comfort in a pair of yellow wellies as I did an unattainable dream.

I turned and, with a little skip, headed up Fifth Avenue. My wellies, my song, and my window buoying me along

for another day.

Inspiration – September 2008

I adore my brother, but the way he was going on and on and on made me want to plug my ears and tell him, "Nanny nanny boo boo, I can't hear you." And I'm pretty sure men dressed in three piece suits on their way to assume major positions in family companies did not do that.

He hadn't let up all weekend. Thankfully, I got some relief last night when Rosalie reminded him I would be here permanently now, and unless he wanted to move in with me, he had to get home to wife and child.

For much of the weekend, he filled me in on business; the actual accounts and issues in the hopper as well as the interpersonal side like what I needed to know about whom. Although I worked for Cullen, Inc. right out of college, I left to spread my wings and to get out from under my father's watchful eye. I'd been living a very different life in LA.

Toward the tail end of last night and now this morning, he moved on to my personal life. It was a warning of sorts. Fishing at best—trying to find out if my head was really in the game.

"You been going out a lot lately?"

"Not really," I replied curtly.

"So, who's the latest conquest?" I wondered if Mom or Rose had put him up to that.

"Love is not a conquest, Emmett." I'd been involved in enough hostile take-over attempts by women to know not everyone saw it that way.

"The Hell it isn't! I totally scored a victory with Rose!"

"That you did, big brother. She's a keeper alright."

"Hey, watch yourself." He put up his fists as if ready to fight me for her, and then chuckled.

He proceeded to cycle through a list of girls he'd seen me with in pictures in the past year.

"All old news, and besides, what are you doing reading those magazines?"

"It was the only way I knew what you up to out there. Some of those women were pretty hot."

"I never said they weren't. They also weren't the kind of women I'd want to settle down with."

"Careful now, you might have said the same thing about Rose."

"I don't think so, Emmett. She always seemed like the real deal to me. Not many are."

"And since when are you ready to settle down?"

"I never said I was. Be careful what you infer."

He gave me a dirty look and told me it was time to wrap up by looking at his watch.

"Time to face the music, Edward, my man."

"Thanks for meeting me this morning. I didn't want to walk in alone today."

"No problem. I'd never be able to get here in time for coffee though if it weren't a special occasion. The black sheep returns to the fold!"

"I appreciate all your help this weekend."

"Aww shucks. Now we just have to hook you up so you can settle down and be all domestic. Then Rose will have you over more!"

"All joking aside, Emmett, I don't see that happening any time soon. I'm not inspired by much these days."

"Well you better hurry up or you'll be left with someone like that. You'd have fun taking her home to Mom," he said pointing at an anomaly walking down 5th Ave.

Today was a perfect fall day. Bright sunshine, reasonable temperatures. It was the kind of day they put on postcards. Though not a single cloud was scattered across the sky, everywhere I looked I saw darkness. Not just the black and gray of every suit and overcoat that passed but darkness lurked in the murky scowls of disdain for the dawn of a new day of banality.

It took me a minute to see where Emmett's attention was drawn. A woman was sloshing down the sidewalk in the brightest yellow rain boots I'd ever seen. Her walk resembled a young girl on her way to school filled with anticipation more than the assembly line determination of the crowd. She appeared to be talking to herself, but I caught the hint of the wire connecting her ear buds to an iPod. She was singing as she walked. Chestnut hair bouncing behind her as she went.

I glanced back down to her boots, but I needed to move quickly because along the way her short skirt revealed creamy thighs, and I thought briefly how I would like to see them wrapped around me. I started to imagine pushing the skirt up higher when she veered away from the crowd.

She was moving fast, so I didn't get another good look until she stopped in front of the Tiffany & Company's window.

I smiled to acknowledge Emmett's twirling of his finger next to his ear indicating she might be a little crazy.

I didn't see what Emmett saw at all. She wasn't crazy. She was unique. All throughout history people had confused nonconformity with insanity.

Humanity disgusted me. My professional and personal world was populated by vampires, ready to suck the life from me at any moment. It was beyond incivility. Every day, I witnessed friends abusing trust, families torn apart, and business associates stabbing each other in the back.

My romantic encounters were no less parasitic. I was surrounded by women who had teased and tortured themselves into beauty. They were starved and over trained. They'd had fat sucked out and botulism put back in. They were sculpted to absolute external perfection, masking the deficiencies within.

But this woman was none of that. She radiated authenticity.

In fact, she was more than just a girl I would want to "take home," although the hint of skin made me believe that would be heavenly. She was exactly the kind of girl I could take home to Mom.

She reached out to touch the window, and as I watched her lips closely, a big grin spread across my face.

I found my happy place.

Quirky, energetic, real. So beautiful. So classic.

Emmett punched me in the arm to get me moving. I stole a final glimpse at the girl in the yellow boots, before picking up my pace.

*And as I watch the perfect dream
Get ruined by my inner fears
I'm waking up knowing
That my love will begin again
And I tell myself I must be strong
Can't waste my time thinking I was wrong
Don't know where I end and she begins*

Half way to the office, Emmett asked me what I was singing. I hadn't even realized I'd been doing it out loud.

Happy New Year – January 2009

Damn. I was going to be late because of a stupid bicycle. I mean, seriously, who leaves their bike in the middle of the hallway like that? The owner is lucky that I caught myself before I could flip down the stairs. No, can that. He's lucky I can't get into his apartment, or else he might end up with Nair in his shampoo.

"No, Alice, it was a train wreck." I protested into my cell phone as I dodged bodies on my usual path up Fifth. "He was obnoxious, he chewed with his mouth open, and he basically licked my face when he tried to kiss me goodnight!"

Alice was peeved at me for not giving my date a chance. She insisted that 2009 would be my year, and I needed to start dating. So like the lemming that I am, I let her talk me into going out with a guy that she works with. Total blind date equals total disaster.

"No, I am not being difficult! He was awful!" I rolled my eyes as she continued on her tirade. If this is the way my New Year was going to progress, I was going to join a convent to save my sanity.

"Alice, I have to go, I'll call you later, okay?"

I disconnected, and focused on weaving through pedestrian traffic. I knew that she meant well, but lately all of my dates ended up in disaster. At first it was funny. The guy that took me out and wanted me to foot half the bill for dinner. The thirty five year old lawyer who still lived at home with his parents. But after a while it started to get depressing. It was easier to go home and curl up with a pint of Ben & Jerry's Chubby Hubby and a good book than put myself out there for more disappointment.

A couple was walking in front of me, hand in hand. He would periodically lean over to whisper in her ear or kiss her temple. Normally, it wouldn't even register, but today, it made me feel like a huge failure. Why was it that everyone else had someone, and I was alone? I'm not bad looking; I have a brain, a well paying job and a good sense of humor. What is it about me that attracts losers?

I was down enough that I toyed with skipping my morning window visit. Some days the window brought happiness, an appreciation of the simple beauty and aspiration of what could be. Other days it was self-flagellation for all of my failures. I debated as I stood at the corner of 56th. It would be easy to turn here and go a different way to work.

But the window was like a beacon, summoning me to something better, simpler, ideal. I dodged the small man in front of me talking loudly on his cell phone, the group of gawking tourists, the two ladies who lunch.

Unfortunately, I must have pissed off someone, somewhere in life. The holiday decorations were gone, replaced by a display of pearls and engagement rings. All sizes, all shapes. There was something there for everyone.

Everyone but me.

I bit my lip and refused to let myself be pulled under by a stupid window display. It was time to grow up, time to let go. There is no such thing as Mr. Wonderful. It's time to settle, Bella. I brushed away the lone tear that escaped, and took one last look at the window. Why was I always on the outside looking in?

Winter Storm— January 2009

Some days I was convinced returning to New York had been a mistake. I'd tired of the half life I'd managed in LA, and I believed I was capable of finding meaning here. However, there were consequences to my years away. Though he'd been demanding my return for years, the best way to describe my relationship with my father was strained. His punishment for my rebellion had been a reluctance to welcome me back to the family business. Without my mother's persuasive influence, I might have been pounding the pavement looking for employment.

That may have been better, actually. The climate at Cullen, Inc. was chilly for me. Too many unnecessary worries about nepotism radiated from my colleagues. Ironically, I took a step down when I came back.

Despite the welcome home party at the airport, I'd seen less of my family than I'd hoped. Life had moved on in the years I was gone. People had routines and friends that didn't include me.

Six months ago, I would have escaped it all by hitting clubs every night. I'm sure there was no dearth of women here who would help a man like me forget about my sorrows for a few hours. A man like me, or rather who they thought me to be. Rich, handsome, successful, powerful. For most women that meant a means to an end. Being with me helped them achieve status or maintain it. Either way, they looked right through me.

I grew weary of those women. I gave up the whole shebang a few months before I moved back. Stopped going out. Stopped letting them in. I wanted more, and I wasn't going to find it in my usual company.

I had granted a few blind dates in New York. I thought perhaps dating was like business. Networks are more effective than cold calling. Turns out, it was just like business. I'd simply forgotten the connections you made there were no more legitimate than those formed in nightclubs. Same women. Different City.

I had one bright spot to every day. Yellow rain boots girl.

I came to the coffee shop every morning, though the atmosphere was thick with the impatience of the self important. It wasn't exactly a friendly corner shop.

But it was close to the window. She stopped at Tiffany's every single day. I'd come the second day just out of curiosity. And each day since I grew more, not less curious.

She was late today. By about 5 minutes. In six months, she'd never been late before, so I was anxious. I realized that at any time this could end. Just imagining my day without seeing her set off an alarm in my body. My heart raced, and my hands shook slightly. I checked the time again. 6 minutes late. What if she's gone?

If she didn't get here soon, I would be late as well. Reluctantly, I began to fold the newspaper I'd been ignoring, and I took a final drink of coffee from the cup in front of me. I inhaled my disappointment sharply, stood up, and made my way toward the front door.

As I stepped out onto Fifth Avenue, I caught a glimpse of dark chestnut hair rushing past me. Damn. I'd missed her face.

She was on a mission. Maybe she wouldn't stop today.

She was almost to the corner, when her head turned. She slowed her pace, waited for a break, and then cut quickly across the moving crowds.

She never disappointed me.

Millions of people passed the Tiffany window every year, hundreds stopped to examine its contents every day. She was special though.

In the circle I ran in, genuine, lasting, and unpretentious were rarely associated with beauty.

These were exactly the qualities that connected her to what was on display in that window.

And I coveted them. I coveted her.

She was sad today. I was used to women who hid emotions, save for lust and greed, or used emotions to get what they wanted. A woman who just felt and expressed was lemonade and a cool breeze in the concrete jungle in July. I'd been mentally cataloging her mood to window time ratio.

Every morning, yellow boots girl found peace in an otherwise chaotic scene. She lost herself on average for 3.2 minutes. I kept track.

She paused at the window more on days like today.

Her time at the window wasn't like anyone else's. I watched other women ooh and ahh and fawn over the jewelry.

What yellow boots girl sought was beyond the window, and in her moments of meditation, I would almost wonder if we didn't want the same thing.

~*~

Song: Cinnamon - The Storys <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6WntkLhJoE&feature=related>

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CHAPTER 2: TIME TO KILL

CHANGE THINGS UP

Sunshine and warmth are unheard of in Manhattan in February, but today was one of those fluke days where the temperature was going to be 60 degrees, not 20. Blame global warming if you must, all I know is that it felt heavenly not to bundle up.

After a disastrous January, I had sworn off blind dates and set ups. I decided it was time to take control of my own destiny, to change things up. Lightening wasn't going to strike. It was time to make my own luck.

I stood at the corner of 55th and Fifth twenty minutes earlier than usual. I had two choices. Go to work or stop and get a cup of coffee. There is a cute little coffee place that I walk by every day. Two years I have taken this route to work and I have never gone in. If I were going change the trajectory of my life, this would be a good place to start.

There was a line five people deep, and the shop was warm. I queued up and waited patiently for my turn. The longer I waited, the warmer it got. I could feel beads of perspiration form on my neck. I fanned myself, but it didn't make a whit of difference.

"It is a bit oppressive in here, isn't it?" A deep voice observed behind me. "Would you like a section of my newspaper? It might be a more effective fan than your hand."

I turned to acknowledge my benefactor, grateful for anything that will bring relief.

Standing behind me was the most breathtakingly beautiful man I have ever seen. Tall, fair skinned, hair that wasn't red or brown but somewhere in between. Shoulders to die for. He was absolutely stunning. My imagination went into over drive...him with no shirt...him in the...GAH! Stop it Bella!

When we made eye contact all inappropriate thoughts stopped. I couldn't get past his eyes. Not just the color, which reminded me of Central Park's Strawberry Fields in June, but the sadness that lurked behind them. Such sad eyes for a seemingly young face.

Something about him struck me as familiar, but I pushed it aside. If I had met *Him* before, I would most definitely remember.

"Umm...thank you..." I fumbled. He didn't acknowledge my thanks, merely looked at me as if trying to figure out a riddle. I turned back around, embarrassed by my inability to form a coherent sentence.

A whisper of air across my neck caused me to shudder, and I turned to see *Him*, leaning closer, talking to me. I knew that because his lips were moving. But I didn't hear a word he said. I stood there, mesmerized by those eyes. I wanted to get lost in them. Wanted, I already was.

I am not the type to be dumbstruck by a man. Struck by their dumbness is more like it. Why would I think that this one would be any different? What was it about *Him* that had me absolutely captivated?

"...shall I meet you there?"

I dug my nails into my hand, the pain a tool to shake myself out of my daze. "I'm sorry?"

He gave me a dazzling smile, and I think my knees literally went weak. "What were you planning on ordering? I'll get it for you and meet you outside."

I felt foolish admitting to a skim mocha, extra whip cream.

"Just black coffee, thank you." Normally, there was no way that I would let a strange man buy me a cup of coffee. I had spent my entire life having men try to 'take care of me,' whether it was my dad, my first boyfriend, or the guys I dated in college. They had always focused on the things that they thought I couldn't do because I was a woman. Tell me I can't do something, and game on. Do something for me because you are being considerate? That is what I am talking about.

I left the shop, and stood just outside the door to enjoy the warmth of the sun. I could see my window down the street, but for once, I had something better to do than day dream.

Mr. Tall, Green Eyed and Really Gorgeous startled me out of my sun worship with a cup of coffee. He made a cryptic comment about making it to my window, and asked me if I was walking up Fifth. Even if I had been going in the opposite direction, I would have never admitted it. Anything to get two more minutes with this man.

I had to think of something to keep the conversation going. Everything I could think of sounded totally corny, so I just gave in.

"At the risk of sounding cliché, do you come here often?"

He laughed at my query and introduced himself. Edward. A bit of an old fashioned name, but with his proper speech and clearly expensive suit and top coat, it was fitting. He almost seemed to belong in another era.

I introduced myself, and acknowledged that this was my normal path to work too. He made an enigmatic comment about breakfast when we stopped in front of Tiffany's

My window looked like someone had puked hearts and lace. They put up the damn valentines display. "Crap. I hate Valentine's Day."

"What do you have against romance, Bella?" Edward queried.

I wanted to sink into the pavement.

Fortunately, my phone chirped. I shot Edward an apologetic look and pulled it out of my back pack. It was a text message from Alice.

- *Checking out the strawberry pop tarts?*

I laughed as I read the message and typed back a quick reply.

- *Trying to take a bite of one now. Leave me alone!*

"Strawberry pop tarts?" I heard Edward inquire. I looked up to see his confused expression.

Shit. I must have read Alice's text out loud. I tried to flash a self deprecating smile, which probably made me look like an idiot.

"My friend Alice and I went out last Valentine's Day for a girl's only celebration. I consumed a few too many Cosmo's in my desire to eradicate any memory of the day, and well, I can get a bit philosophical when I drink." I looked down at my feet, embarrassed that I sounded like a lush. It was bad enough that I was telling him the story;

I didn't want him to think I was a total alkie too.

"Anyway, we passed by here on our way home, and I ended up spouting a whole diatribe about how strawberry pop tarts are the epitome of the true love. Ever since then, this has been known as the strawberry pop tart window."

Throughout my word vomit, he had never shifted his gaze away from me, a bemused look on his face. "I'm intrigued. Are you going to share your soliloquy?"

A knot began to form in my chest. Here I stood, in front of the window that I dreamed over everyday, with a man that brought out a myriad of physical and emotional reactions which I couldn't begin to describe. I was terrified of saying anything stupid, yet was even more afraid to miss the opportunity of something truly wonderful.

I took a deep breath and launched in, my eyes never leaving the display window.

"True love is like a package of strawberry pop tarts. When you first get it, you are all excited to open the shiny new package. Once it's open, you find two perfectly matched pastries with simple pink frosting and gorgeous colorful sprinkles. But there is more to it, for inside lurks strawberry preserves that remind you of everything good and simple and wonderful in life. Of course, it helps that pop tarts are totally processed, and therefore have a shelf life of forever, that way you don't ever have to worry about them going bad."

Silence. I didn't have the courage to see if he still wore the same bemused expression.

What did I expect? That my drunken ramblings would win over someone like him?

He surprised me by lobbing questions about my success in finding my own strawberry pop tart. I couldn't tell if he was laughing at me or genuinely curious, so I played along in an attempt to mask my embarrassment. I tried to sound light hearted. I was anything but. All my noble intentions to make changes in my life, yet here I was again. Same shit, different day.

But I didn't want it to be the same shit. Not with Edward. Yes, he was gorgeous, but there was something absolutely magnetic about him. I wanted to know more. His dreams, his goals, his favorite color, if he snored or talked in his sleep, what he liked on a hot dog. I wanted to know everything.

It was getting late and I had a nine a.m. meeting with a new author. But I didn't want to leave. I knew it would most likely be the last time I would see him. Scratch last, the only time. I wanted something to remember him by. I didn't want to regret not taking what I could, when I could. It was the story of my life.

I mustered up every bit of courage I had and stepped forward and grabbed his red silk tie. It forced him to lean forward as I balanced on tip toe.

"Thank you for the coffee and for rescuing me." I whispered, and pressed my lips to his. My intent had been to steal one quick kiss. I had to know what he would feel like. But one wasn't going to be nearly enough. I slipped my hand inside his topcoat to grab the lapel of his suit, and pulled him in closer. I darted my tongue out to trace his lower lip. God, they were so soft. He tasted like coffee and cinnamon. The softness of his lips was in direct contrast to the muscles I could feel beneath my hand. Soft was not a word to describe him. Virile. Masculine. Strong. Soft implied weaknesses. There was nothing weak about Edward.

My breath caught a bit as his lips parted. I desperately wanted to hold on forever, but the fear of rejection, of an 'I'll call you' or worse prompted me to release his tie, pivot, and shoot up Fifth Avenue as fast as possible.

It was bad enough to have horrible dates, to not meet the right guys and have to deal with letting them down. But to put myself out there for someone like him and not have him reciprocate, well, I simply wasn't capable of handling that right now. THE guy. We hardly exchanged more than 200 words, but I knew it. And he probably thought I was a dingbat, a girl who drank too much and made up stupid philosophical rants about junk food as a way to make fun of a concept that I wanted desperately to believe in.

My phone beeped again as I entered the building.

- Pink frosting on your chin?

Damn Alice. Goodbye Edward. God how I wish you could be my strawberry pop tart.

Damsel in Distress

A glimpse into the shop's window nearly persuaded me to forego my morning coffee. They were busier than usual, and I would risk still being in line when my daily dose of hope breezed by.

Caffeine and my brunette desire were the only drugs I ingested.

I knew that I could always find coffee on the next block, but I would only get one chance to see her today. I peeked at the time and realized I still had about 10 minutes, and there was nowhere inconspicuous to wait outside. On Fifth Avenue at this time of the morning, people didn't loiter; they hustled.

One of the things I appreciated most about New Yorkers is how little they paid attention to the people around them. I wouldn't be able to get away with such a simple routine in LA without ending up in the gossip pages every day.

I almost walked out the minute I stepped foot in; despite the unseasonable temperatures, they hadn't turned the heat down. It was stifling. The room was packed with wilting patrons. One was frantically fanned herself as she shifted uncomfortably from hip to hip. I could have mistaken her for any one of the pretentious customers whose impatience resulted in undeserved rudeness to the barista were it not for that hair. It was pulled back, which is what deterred me from recognizing her initially.

She was early; she was in front of me; she was hot. Quite literally. So, I offered her my newspaper, and she turned to face me.

I internally berated myself for speaking up. I wasn't ready for this.

Her reaction stopped me for a moment. I was used to that look—deer in the headlights. Did she recognize me?

Finally, I peered directly into her eyes, and their depth engulfed me. I was sure I now shared her ridiculously awed expression. Words eluded me. I attempted to find an appropriate follow up to her simple statement of gratitude:

"Lovely weather we're having."

"Hello, my name is Edward, and I watch you every day."

She turned back around when I didn't respond quickly enough. How rude of me. Abandoning my anxiety, I drew myself closer, and made her an offer I hoped she wouldn't refuse.

"You look positively flushed. Tell me what you plan to order, and I will bring it to you outside. Tiffany's is just next door; perhaps, you would enjoy a little window shopping while you wait. Shall I meet you there?"

She appeared flustered and didn't immediately respond. While I usually found that disconcerting, now it was endearing, as she'd just had the same effect on me.

Once she had gone to wait outside, my patience ran thin.

Why in the world did the people ahead of me all order something with 10 words in the title when all I needed were 2 cups of black coffee? Her request of black coffee had surprised me. I wished I could read her mind then because I had a feeling it wasn't her usual order. She may be simple, but she was also far too creative for such a mundane order.

She waited just outside the door. Her face was turned up toward the sun, as if in worship. I approached slowly. I hadn't been able to study her in detail. I'd never wanted her to notice me before. Like that first day, she was a rare catch in the sea of faces surrounding me. Up until now, I had never looked at her face so closely—only her eyes in the coffee shop. I'd been reacting to an overall image.

I thought of the face that launched a thousand ships, and then I remembered Poe's Helen, the one that *"The weary way-worn wanderer bore to his own native shore."* That was it exactly. It was a face for which I would do anything, go anywhere, but it was the kind of face that would bring me home again.

I was unsure as to how long she would stand revering the sun, so I stepped forward.

"You didn't make it to the window," I observed as I handed her the drink and gestured toward Tiffany's.

"Um, no." She was clearly perplexed.

"I'm headed in that direction. How about you?"

"Well, yes, me too"

We both sipped and walked silently. I wasn't entirely sure what to do next.

"At the risk of sounding cliché," she remarked, "Do you come here often?"

I laughed. "Every day. I come here every day. My name is Edward, by the way."

"Bella," She said with a smile. A sincere smile. "And me too. I come here every morning."

"I know," I smiled mysteriously. She looked shocked at first, but I quickly added, "Who could resist the allure of breakfast at Tiffany's?"

I should have bade her well and been on my way, but the window with Bella held the promise of something divine, and I hadn't been to church in a very long time.

The display had transformed overnight. There were hearts everywhere. All shapes and sizes.

"Crap. I hate Valentine's Day."

"What do you have against romance, Bella?"

As she told the story of her inebriated oratory on toaster pastries and true love, for the first time, she appeared self conscious. She was worried about my reaction. Her concerns could not have been more unfounded. I began to make a list of my observations.

Simple. Wonderful. Forever.

She healed me with that ridiculous metaphor. Suddenly, I wanted to sing "People pop up with Kellogg's pop tarts!" I would buy them in bulk from now on. Perhaps, I should consider increasing my stock in the company. The real commodity though, was her priceless idealism.

I thought about puppies, warm chocolate chip cookies, walking down the main streets of Disneyland, my mother's perfume, playing catch with my brother, and someday making love to this woman. All things that represented unadulterated joy.

A long strand of hair broke free of her pony tail, and I wanted to reach across, and tuck it behind her ear. Having my hand resting on the side of her head would merely serve as excuse to pull her head closer, to bring her lips in contact with mine. A soft quick kiss.

I knew I wouldn't be able stop with that though. It would turn slow and sensuous. From there, I couldn't be responsible for my actions. I didn't want to scare her away so I left the wayward strand alone.

"So, Bella, have you already opened your shiny new package of pop tarts? Have you already found your matching frosting?" Nothing could be done until I knew if she were single.

"I've had a few shiny packages, but they always ended up being the wrong flavor. Gotta be strawberry, and definitely with frosting."

"Hmm, so let me see if I follow . . . the pop tarts are true love, but the emotion implied in the Valentine window is not?"

She nodded in agreement. "Exactly. The Valentines display reflects commercialism, not emotions."

Then she did something so unexpected. She kissed me. The second our skin made contact, fireworks went off and sparks flew. My God, she even smelled like strawberries. At first I thought she was just trying to shut me up, but then she grabbed on to me with more force. I moaned when her tongue hit my lower lip. The surprise caught up with me, and I was about to respond to her kiss in kind when just as swiftly as she'd pulled me in, she let go. And she was gone.

I was too stunned to move. I stood there at our window feeling her lips on mine. I felt the effects everywhere, and I was grateful for my long overcoat. I took a moment to assess whether anyone had noticed, to see if anyone were holding a cell phone toward me, snapping a picture of this unusually public display of affection. Grateful to find no onlookers, I let out a small "mmm" before continuing on my way to work.

That kiss changed everything. That kiss beckoned me. I added to my list.

Simple. Wonderful. Forever. Beautiful. Brave.

These qualities, her love of Pop Tarts and the Tiffany's window. It was all I knew about her.

It was enough to know I loved her. But she ran, which bewildered me. Certainly, it was not something I was

accustomed to. I was usually the one being chased, and more often than not, I was faster. Pursuing her would require stamina, as well as speed.

That kiss. I needed to respond. She thanked me for rescuing her, but she had it wrong. She was no princess tucked high in a tower. She was a woman of action, a woman just as capable of saving as being saved.

A hint . . . a small gesture to begin . . . Something to complement the kiss. To say we can free each other from evil in the kingdom. I picked up the phone to call in a favor.

I didn't bother with the commercial phone number, opting to go straight to her personal line.

She answered with the professionalism I expected, but her tone faltered from the moment I said, "Jess, this is Edward Cullen." I went on to detail my plan. She protested heavily.

"Edward, you know I can't do that! You have to realize there are some things you just can't influence." She claimed the decorator would never allow for any window alterations, and she expressed fear for her job. I had little sympathy for her situation.

"As you well know, I am not accustomed to taking 'no' for an answer. And I'm quite certain, you owe me one. A big one. This is how I intend for you to settle your debt." There was a pause while she decided how to respond.

"Of course, Mr. Cullen," she said returning to a formal tone. "How would you like to start?"

They only had one item that fit my description. It would seem out of place in the current display. Only she would know why it was there.

It was a message.

"I am your strawberry pop tart."

~*~

CHAPTER 3: A CHARMED LIFE BALANCING

4.6 minutes. That's how long she stared at the window the next morning. She had to have seen the strawberry keychain. It wasn't placed conspicuously in the window, but its mere presence was noticeable. She had to know it was meant for her.

I waited and watched from my discrete location when realization hit her. She whipped her head around as if searching for me. I smiled from my perch. Everything was in motion now.

I followed her that day, and I didn't stop myself in the next block as I had in the past. That one kiss made this action sweet and romantic, not desperate and clandestine. I needed to know something more about her in order to complete the plan. She ordered a silly coffee drink at Starbucks. I chuckled at the irony of her anti-commercialism stance against romance. Apparently, that didn't apply to coffee.

Valentine's Day was now only 7 business days away. As I walked behind her, I formulated the rest of my plan.

I stayed far enough back that she wouldn't see me. I never worried about losing her in a crowd. She stood out. A rose among dandelions.

Once I had enough to move forward, I returned to my office to keep the plan in motion.

Jess protested feebly again when I called to verify the next phase. She met major resistance to the keychain alone. I had no intention of letting her off the hook. However, knowing her as well as I did, I assumed the blackmail would only go so far; ego stroking would be a necessary evil.

"I didn't call you merely because you owed me a favor, though you do owe not just me, but my whole family. I am also well aware that you are the person most capable of meeting such a challenge. I trust in your persuasive ability."

She sighed, and told me she would see what she could do. I knew that meant she was in. It wasn't as if she had much choice. I was prepared to make her life hell if she refused. It would have been justified.

My family would tell me I was reading too much meaning into all of this. That I would eventually discover Bella was just as imperfect as all of the women I had ever dated. In particular, my dad was highly critical of my romantic track record. He'd tried on numerous occasions to find me the "right" kind of woman to settle down with and make good on the family name. My time in L.A. and the way it had been portrayed by the press hadn't helped, especially considering the circumstances that led to my departure. As a result, he still wasn't talking to me.

They didn't understand though. I knew perfection as a concept was unattainable, but seeing my parents' deeply committed love convinced me that I could find someone perfect for me. My dad and I have many differences, but the one thing I cannot begrudge him is the model he set for Emmett and me. There were no doubts as to what a good husband should be. He is a perfectionist to the core; that included his marriage. He is faithful, loving, and animated with my mom. His eyes light up whenever she walked into a room. I'd never before been able to imagine having that kind of relationship, but with this woman, I could envision stolen glances over the Sunday newspaper. I could see hidden smiles across the room at a dinner party.

After following her all the way to work, I now had her full name, Isabella Swan. Even her name held the meaning of everything I was missing: beauty, freedom, healing and luck.

When she breezed up to our window Friday morning, I gave her a minute to take in the new addition to the window. It was more subtle. I couldn't be certain she'd understand the meaning. That tiny red bean was the start of something we could nurture together. Though it was a long shot, I had to start at the beginning.

I had an image of a scale in my head. I was balancing gestures. Grand gestures wow. They are the stuff of romance novels and movies. Grand gestures are what the women I usually dated expected all the time, but they didn't seem to care if there was any meaning behind the gesture, so long as they had a story to tell their friends. I value the little ones, the daily ones, the ongoing ones. I wanted this woman to have both, in equal parts.

With the first charm, I opted to turn my game up a notch. I talked to her on Friday. It wasn't merely a gesture for her benefit. I missed her.

I approached swiftly, circled my arm around her, handing her cup. "Skim mocha with extra whipped cream. You're giving me quite a sweet tooth, Bella" I whispered in her ear.

Only her hand moved when she took the cup. I could feel the rest of her stiffen in front of me.

"Thank you?" she responded. She was puzzled.

"Have a lovely weekend, Bella." And I turned to get lost in the crowd. I wanted to stay longer, but this plan would only work if I moved slowly. It took more willpower than I expected though to let my hand leave her side. It felt right there, warm and safe. And I managed to fill my senses for another day—sight, sound, touch, and hearing. Only taste was absent. I would have liked to kiss her again, but it was too soon. I did stop in the next block though to buy another mocha with whipped cream. I imagined what her tongue would taste like with these two delicious flavors assimilating with her minty toothpaste.

My weekend was long. Time passed far too slowly. I thought only of her. I remembered the taste of her lips, and I longed to feel them again.

On Sunday, I ran out for another mocha, and I had them add a little mint just to get me through until the next day.

On Monday, it was quartz; she could interpret the teardrop charm however she liked, but the stone itself carried healing powers which were transformative in nature. I was shedding the pain of the past. I didn't speak to her that day. I didn't think I could watch her attempt to decipher my intention. Of everything I planned, that little charm was my most personal revelation. I led a charmed life. I could not and would not deny it. I'd known what it meant to never want for any material item. I had family who loved me beyond measure, but that did not mean my past and even my present held no pain. I had baggage so to speak. With her though, I could unpack the bags. Together, we could put away what we wanted to keep and leave out all the rest.

Tuesday, however, I waited for her by the window. I had to know whether she would come to me. Was she with me on this journey? And what would she make of the lapis starfish?

Questioning

I grew up a romantic at heart. Idealized notions of what love should be, shaped by literature and popular media. I dreamed of the day that someone would make a grand gesture for me. Stereo under the window, say that if he had a personal conversation with God, he'd ask him to create me, or tell me that I completed him. Cameron Crowe had ruined generations of women thanks to Lloyd Dobbler, Steve Dunne, and Jerry Maguire.

But a strange thing happened. As I grew up, I found out that as much as I wished it, life didn't imitate art. There were no grand gestures. Guys that are 'looking for a dare to be great situation' just don't exist. After years of holding out hope, I had resigned myself to the fact that art and life don't collide.

That was last Valentine's Day. Hence the pop tart soliloquy as Edward had called it. An easy way to contain all of my hopes and dreams in one small, shiny package.

I never expected to tell any one about it. In hindsight, I guess it was a test. My initial reaction to him had been so intense; I needed to throw down the ultimate gauntlet to see how he would respond. He would either laugh at me or see my nonsensical ravings as a logical expression of my hopes and dreams.

I should have just walked away then. But no, I had to give myself something to remember the fleeting moment. My own attempt at the proverbial grand gesture. Who am I kidding, I wanted to kiss him. But I should have stopped while I was ahead. And now I couldn't get him, or how he felt out of my mind. That one single kiss was on infinite loop.

Smart one, Bella. Get caught up in a guy that is way out of your league. That is a guarantee for total heartbreak.

The next morning I held my breath as I walked up Fifth in the rain, constantly scanning the crowd. It was hard to distinguish people due to the umbrellas. I kept reminding myself that seeing him was most likely a one time thing.

I shouldn't fixate on it. Time to go on about life.

I paused, as usual, in front of my window. The pink and hearts of the display taunted me. It reminded me of everything that I wanted and how I would never get it. Even worse, it reminded me of the absence of Edward. My window had always been my safe haven. Now it felt incomplete; a half life.

Two ladies that lunch were standing next to me, ogling the cocktail rings in the display. I envied their confidence in their husbands' affections, their certainty of something lovely for Valentine's Day. Who am I fooling? I wish it were me reveling in the security of having someone who loved me.

One of the ladies was giving a running commentary on displays. "It's a lovely display this year. One of their best. I don't understand the keychain though. All these lovely rings and necklaces, why throw in the little strawberry bauble? It doesn't fit."

A strawberry? There had been no strawberry in the window. It had been filled with ridiculously expensive diamonds, sapphires, and platinum.

But there it was, tucked discreetly into the corner. A small enamel strawberry keychain. I stepped closer, my hand pressed against the glass as if the proximity to the window would bring answers to the questions that swirled in my head.

Stop it, Bella. Stop dreaming. It doesn't mean anything. Probably an oversight or something slipped in to appease those that couldn't afford the grander things. It couldn't be for me.

Could it?

I spun around to search the crowds up and down Fifth Avenue in the hope that I would see him standing there, watching me. Waiting for me.

But he wasn't there.

I slogged through the rest of the day. I couldn't tell you a single thing that happened once I walked away from the window. My head was at war with my heart in an effort to reconcile what I had resigned myself to and the mysterious appearance of a strawberry keychain.

The mystery grew Friday morning. In my window, a crystal martini glass had been added. The enamel keychain wrapped around the stem. Resting in the delicate V of the glass was a single, dark red jasper Tiffany bean. As I studied the window, scanning my memory for the meaning of jasper, Edward appeared at my side with a mocha exactly the way I would order it.

It had started snowing, and the fluffy flakes caught in his hair. His cheeks were flushed with the cold, his fair skin a stark contrast against the rich camel's hair top coat he was bundled in. He looked absolutely glorious, like a tourism ad for winter in New York. He delivered my coffee, wished me a nice weekend, and disappeared into the crowd. I wanted to chase him, grab his hand to stop him and to ask what it all meant.

Instead, I stayed rooted to the spot, studying the addition to the window. Jasper. Actors believe it brings luck. Others believe it brings courage to speak out.

Was it courage that made me tell Edward about the pop tart window? Was it luck? His showing up with my all time favorite caffeinated addiction couldn't have been a lucky guess, could it?

My entire weekend was spent full of wondering. 72 hours of questions. 4,320 minutes of anxiety. I stayed in my apartment, dodged calls from Alice. I watched chick flicks, searched fan fiction sites half hoping to find the next great author, half to see how they were perpetuating my authors, and ordered takeout.

Edward filled my waking thoughts. He filled my dreams too. It terrified me as much as it thrilled me.

3 days of not seeing him, of not knowing what all this meant. The weekend couldn't be over soon enough.

On Monday, there had been another charm in the martini glass. This time a clear crystal tear drop. All I could think of was the sadness in his eyes the first time I saw them

But no Edward. Had I misunderstood? Was I projecting my hopes on a gesture for someone else?

I went into the coffee shop and bought a mocha and the newspaper. I don't read the paper, but it reminded me of him. Everything reminded me of him, or what little I knew. I felt empty, like a part of me was missing. I was incapable of filling the void on my own. How was this possible? Two interactions and I couldn't get him out of my mind.

Tuesday morning I awoke with a familiar ache in my chest. Would there be something new in the window today? Would I see him today? Please let him be there today.

I stopped in the coffee shop again. He wasn't there. I bought a mocha and paper like yesterday. I folded the paper just like Edward had, nesting the USA Today inside the Wall Street Journal, and cradled it in my arm. It felt strangely comforting to have one of the only tangible memories I had of him close to my heart.

As I stepped out of the shop, there was a break in crowd. I saw a tall man with red hair standing in front of the window. Please let it be him. I'll donate to charity, I'll start recycling, just please let it be him.

I dodged the crowds and puddles, moving as quickly and quietly as I could. He either didn't hear me approach, or chose not to acknowledge me. I glanced at the window quickly; a blue starfish had joined the bean and the tear drop in the martini glass.

A blue starfish. Wow. I may not know one hundred percent the meaning of the bean or the teardrop, but there was no mistaking this one. Four years of a Jesuit higher education and a required course in religious symbolism had beaten it into my head.

Courage of speech, Bella. Remember the jasper bean. Ball is in your court.

"Did you know that in ancient Christian mythology, the image of a starfish was used to represent infinite love?" I smiled, proud of myself for not chickening out.

I slipped the folded papers under his arm, and had to fight the urge to slip my hand in along with them. "USA Today is hidden on the inside. We don't want anyone to know that you actually read that stuff. Have a good Tuesday, Edward."

This time, I was the one that disappeared. Where I found the strength or the will, I have no clue.

Putting it in Words

She did come, and she understood the meaning perfectly. She now knew I loved her, not in so many words, but symbolically. She tucked two folded newspapers under my arm, and as her hands brushed my elbow I nearly

turned around to grab her, to pull her close, but she was gone too quickly. I mustered all of my self control to keep from chasing her down and professing my infinite love to her with words right there on the sidewalk. However, she took all my coherent thoughts with her when she left. I remained at the window grinning like a little boy who just got an extra cookie for being good.

I pulled the newspaper up in front of my face, and inhaled as inconspicuously as possible. I caught the last bit of her scent that remained before the wind carried it away.

She had to know where all of this was headed. I was being obvious, but I believed that love could be passionate and predictable at the same time. Something about it must be constant and knowing. Without that, you only have lust which lacks the preservatives for a long shelf life.

But still a little spontaneity never hurt anyone. We were getting too close to the end; there had to be another gesture. A response to her action today.

Since I knew where she worked, it was easy to find her email address. I deeply regretted that I would not see her lips move as she read the note. I wished she would look away from her screen to see me standing there, ready for her eager embrace. But we were not there yet. I put "lapis" in the subject line. It would have to capture her attention.

My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, the more I have, for both are infinite.

-Shakespeare

You're very perceptive, Bella Swan.

E.

Once I clicked send, all I could do was wait.

Out the Window

I had blocked my day to focus on editing a manuscript. But my head was not in the world of clandestine spies and covert ops. Mentally, I was standing in front of a window, looking at three charms in a martini glass, hoping that my interpretations were correct.

I had spent the morning second guessing myself. The confidence and self assurance I felt had quickly been replaced by doubt and apprehension. What if I misinterpreted? What if it wasn't for me?

I tossed down the manuscript on my desk. It was hopeless. There was no way I could justify leaving early, but I couldn't get my head in the game today. I stared at my computer monitor, hoping for divine inspiration.

The envelope was apparent in my icon tray. I might as well deal with the tedium that is email. It would kill time until I had to go home to an empty apartment and more rambling thoughts.

An internal email about benefits renewal. Two emails from authors asking for status. Spam offering to enlarge my penis.

I reached an email from an address I didn't recognize. The subject line said lapis. Lapis? Was that Latin? A typo?

I opened it and read.

And read.

Sigh.

I don't know how he found me, but he did. Not just my name, my physical location, or my email address, but he found ME. Forget grand gestures. Forget semi precious jewels in a display window. He quoted me Shakespeare. And not just any Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet.

All the apprehension, all the doubt flew out the window. I had been right this morning. He understood me. He saw me. He wanted me. The whole package.

I sat and thought for a long time. How best to respond. To show that I understood his actions and intentions.

When in doubt, go to the classics.

I tapped out a quick email, and before I could second guess myself, hit send.

*All the Woulda-Coulda-Shouldas
Layin' in the sun,
Talkin' 'bout the things
They woulda coulda shoulda done...
But those Woulda-Coulda-Shouldas
All ran away and hid
From one little Did.*

- Shel Silverstein

I may be perceptive, but that will never trump the one little did.

B

After I hit send, I went back to read his email again. I had been so focused on the content that I hadn't paid attention to the digital signature. Finally, a chance to fill in some more blanks.

Edward Cullen
Vice President, Mergers and Acquisitions
Cullen, Inc.

Oh shit.

I thought back to the first time I saw him the coffee shop, he had looked familiar. I should have stuck with that gut feel.

I had been worried about out him being out of my league. Try out of my social strata. Forget that, try out of my world.

No way could a New York Cullen want little old Bella Swan.

I grabbed my phone and hit one of the speed dial buttons.

"Alice Brandon."

"Ali, it's me. Remember the texts last week about the pop tart? I need help."

Waiting

I was in a meeting where everyone talked, but no one said anything. I nodded strategically, and agreed appropriately, but I was not there.

Occasionally, I glanced at my phone hoping for a response. And there it was, "re: lapis." I couldn't top it, nor did I want to. This wasn't a contest to outdo each other. This was an exchange of souls. We could both win.

A Shel Silverstein poem. I must have read it ten times before I paid any attention to the electronic signature at the bottom of her email.

Bella Swan
Associate Editor
Little, Brown & Co

Though I'd known where she worked, I hadn't been aware of her actual job title. I wondered if she'd think I was trying too hard now, having quoted Shakespeare to an editor. I grinned and shook my head at myself.

Someone in the meeting room must have noticed when my demeanor changed. When the heavens aligned, and my heart sang.

My list grew longer . . . Simple. Wonderful. Forever. Beautiful. Brave. Perceptive. Smart.

I sent a quick text to Jane, my assistant asking her have a mocha with extra whipped cream and a shot of mint delivered to me. I was becoming addicted, and it wasn't to the coffee.

~*~

CHAPTER 4: REVELATIONS ALL ABOUT THE ATTITUDE

I gave Alice the full run down of the events leading up to the email. Our meeting. The window. The coffee. Edward's full name.

She squealed like a thirteen year old at a Jonas Brothers concert when I told her I kissed him, then immediately pulled up Google and typed in Edward Cullen.

"Holy shit! There are a ton of photos of him!"

"I don't want to know details, Alice. Nothing. Nada. Zlich."

"Hmmm, here is one of Emmett and Edward Cullen. Does he have a brother? Which one is he? Dimples or killer smile?"

"What color is killer smile's hair?" I asked as I twirled the phone cord around my finger.

"Looks red. Dimples is dark brown"

"He has red hair." I paused for a second, debating. "Send me the picture. Not the link. Just the pic."

Alice laughed. My curiosity always got the best of me.

"If that is him, then my hat is off to you for having the stones to lay one on him. I wouldn't have been able to move, let alone grab him and smooch him!"

The email appeared in my box. I opened the attached photo.

My god 007 doesn't have anything on Edward Cullen in a tux. "Yeah, that's him."

"Damn, B. If I'd have known that was what you could catch moping in front of Tiffany's, I would have taken it up ages ago."

"Haha, thanks Ali. But back to the topic at hand." I was looking for moral support and perspective, not to be the butt of her never ending jokes.

"Ah yes, you mean your little freak out once you realized you had one of People's Most Eligible Bachelors' after you? Get over it. The guy has been leaving things for you to find in the window at freaking Tiffany's. How could you not expect him to have money?"

"Please tell me you are joking on the eligible bachelor comment..." I pleaded.

"You said you didn't want to hear it, so I am telling you nothing! "

She was right, I had taken into consideration that Edward either had serious money or connections to pull off the window. But there was a difference between money and *money*. The Cullens were the latter. We weren't talking the Trumps here. More like Rockefeller, Getty, or Carnegie. A totally different world from small town Washington where my dad was the Chief of Police.

"Bella, what are you so worried about? He's obviously interested in you for something more than an easy lay. If not, why would he make the effort? I am sure there are women throwing themselves at him six ways to Sunday!"

She knew me so well. She anticipated my arguments, and countered before I could make them.

"Give him a chance. Get to know him. He deserves the same opportunity you would expect. Aren't you always complaining that people judge you on your looks or your gender, not what's inside? This really isn't any different."

Alice was right. She always was. I was doing to Edward exactly what pissed me off in others. It was a defense mechanism. I was afraid that once he got to know me, he wouldn't want me, or I wouldn't fit.

Yes, it was scary. I would be taking a leap of faith. But if I leapt and made it to the other side, it had the potential to so be worth it.

"My advice, be yourself. Are you supposed to see him tomorrow?"

"I don't know. He was at the window this morning, but he wasn't yesterday."

"When I doubt, wear the attitude suit, Bella."

Oh no. Not that. "No, Ali. That's for..."

"For when you need to crack out the big guns. I know. But girlfriend, the big guns are for you. Not for him."

"I know, Alice."

"So you'll wear it?"

"Yes." It was easier to give in than argue with her.

"Good. So tell me, does Mr. Too Good To Be True have any single friends?"

The next day I walked up Fifth Avenue in a mod black pants suit, a faded beastie boys fitted t-shirt, a seriously bad ass pair of pumps and my black trench coat. Alice had talked me into buying this suit last fall for when I needed to cop some attitude in editorial meetings. She swore that I radiated strength and attitude when I wore it, hence the name. I wasn't so sure about that, but I always felt better wearing it, my little bit of New York attitude that still let my own personality shine through.

Edward was standing in front of the window, his back to me. '*Attitude*' I mentally repeated to myself. "*Attitude. Attitude.*" He was here. He wanted me. Forget the last name. Give him a chance. Get to know *Him*.

"Hey." I went up on tiptoe and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. It was an extension. An olive branch, so to speak. I know who you are, but it doesn't change anything for me.

Someone Else's Perspective

I knew this moved us forward immeasurably. She now had my last name. A few strokes in a search engine, and she would know who I was . . . the *who* everyone else knew. It's happened often enough.

Just out of curiosity, I Googled myself. I cringed when I saw that what seemed to characterize the public me were terms like "playboy," "eligible bachelor," and "sexy millionaire." Ah yes, exactly the kind of description that forms the basis of a lasting relationship. I wasn't sure which fear was stronger—that she would not want me because of the titles or that she would.

I clicked on the tab for images. At first, I felt some relief. The first up was one of Emmett and me arm and arm at a charity gala from a couple of years ago. Several were solo shots of me at various events. But then there was the digital parade of women. If you didn't know the span of time between the photos, it would be easy to misinterpret my intentions.

Subjected to constant scrutiny, anyone's life would appear to be something other than what it was.

Though in this case, unfortunately, it wasn't as far off the mark as I would have liked. I had dated a lot. And it wouldn't matter whether the relationships were physical or not. Any way you looked at it the pictures fit the description—playboy.

I needed reinforcements, and Emmett was out of town on business for a couple of days. I'd offered to go since Rosalie didn't like him traveling now when Haley was so little, but it was a project he was intimately involved

with, and he was committed to the account.

I took off a little early, calling on the way to give fair warning. Rosalie was surprised, to say the least, but she didn't turn me away. I considered other options first, of course. I could have called my best friend, but Rosalie had perspective he didn't.

I got to their house in the 'burbs around 5:30. She was already feeding the baby some kind of mush. I don't know how much was actually going in her mouth, but it was all over her face and high chair.

Rosalie and Emmett were natural parents. I never would have guessed it about Emmett. I always imagined he'd be good with the older kids—when he could play ball or video games with them. And I assumed he would express some disappointment that his first born was a girl, but that never happened. He was as in love with Haley as he was with Rosalie.

"What's up, Edward?" She seemed tired and a little suspicious.

"I could use some advice."

"From me?" She ran her fingers through her hair, and some of the food she'd been feeding the baby got stuck in her blond locks. Even at that moment she was gorgeous, maybe even more so than in the days of cocktail dresses and club gear. Motherhood brought out her natural beauty.

"Yes, you are exactly the right person for this, but I would appreciate some discretion."

"You want me to keep a secret from Emmett? You know I can't do that."

"Not really a secret, but maybe employ a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

She thought for a moment. "I think I can handle that, but I have to reserve the right to change my mind when I find out what this is about."

"Fair enough." She continued scooping food in the baby's mouth and making faces at her to encourage her to open her mouth wider. "I met someone."

She raised an eyebrow, but didn't say anything else.

"I know what you're thinking, but she's different. This is special." She dropped her eyebrow, and faced me head on.

"And why does the great Edward Cullen need my advice?"

I was blazing a new trail here. Rosalie and I had never really talked about our past. It wasn't much of one really. In the end, it had been a night of misses. First we were misjudged. We were set up on a blind date. Someone assumed she was a gorgeous bimbo, just my type. When she'd walked into the restaurant and saw me there, she'd looked contemptuous. If someone thought she was my type, it would have to feel like an insult. People rarely thought highly of my relationship potential. We had a chilly dinner until the wine flowed freely enough to figure out the second miss. We'd just been mismatched. I set her up with Emmett for the next week. They've been together ever since.

"What did you think when you first heard about me?"

She laughed. "You don't want to know!"

"Actually, I do. She just learned my name today."

"She didn't know who you were?"

"I don't think so. She never gave any indication. I Googled myself today, Rosalie. How could anyone get past that?"

She sighed. "It's not that hard, Edward. If you stick around long enough let her get to know the real you."

Bella already knew *me*, though. Didn't she?

I told Rosalie the whole story. About the window, the charms, the kiss, and the emails.

"So you haven't even been on a date with her?" By then she was cleaning up Haley's face and the high chair tray.

"Not exactly. I want to work through the plan first."

"I don't know whether you're the most romantic man on earth, or an idiot for not jumping her," she laughed as she walked over to the sink to rinse out the dishes.

"Thanks, I think." I was laughing too.

"Seriously, it all sounds cute, but be careful. You know things could get dicey. Carlisle would not be happy if this ended badly."

"I know. That's why I asked for discretion from you. I just need to know whether my past ruins me for a girl like this."

"You're a good man, Edward. She'll see that. But at the same time, I hope you mean all this. These charms and everything. You could destroy a girl if you didn't mean it."

"Thanks, Rosalie." Haley dropped her toy, so I bent down to pick it up.

"You know, you might want to talk to Tanya about it." I hit my head on the high chair when I came up too quickly.

"You're not serious." I said while rubbing the top of my head. Haley had promptly tossed the toy back on the floor, and she giggled like crazy.

"I am. She might surprise you."

"You won't say anything to her!"

"No, just think about calling her. She's got a lot of insight on you."

I changed the subject quickly, by talking about Haley.

I felt better after our conversation, but I was still cautious on Wednesday morning. Bella greeted me with a kiss on the cheek. I slipped my hand in hers, looked her in the eyes, and said, "For you, Bella, I not only did, but I

always will."

"Shel knows his stuff," she said sweetly. I squeezed her hand lightly, and gently pulled her away from the window.

I walked her to work, still connected. I wished her a pleasant day with a kiss on her hand.

"Until tomorrow."

I made it sound easy, but those two words meant waiting. I had always prided myself on my unending patience, but I'd found its limit.

Getting to Know You

It used to be that I lived for the end of the work day. Now I longed for the beginning.

We had both made leaps of faith yesterday, exposed ourselves.

He knew who I was. I knew who he was. He tried to play it off with the silver E charm, the acknowledgment of who he was, what he was. He walked me to work keeping conversation light, but I could tell it was a challenge for him.

When we arrived at my building, he placed a single, innocent kiss on the back of my hand. His eyes never left mine. I think it was the single most intense and magical moment of my life.

Once I was settled into my office, it would have been easy to pull up my browser and type in his name. News stories, society photos, and press clippings weren't going to tell me what I needed to know.

So I swallowed my curiosity. Instead I pulled up the photo that Alice had sent me. Edward and a man that I assumed was his brother. I studied his face; the easy smile was at odds with his eyes, which had the same look that I saw in the coffee shop last week. I had interpreted it as sadness, but with a chance to look closer, they seemed almost empty.

I couldn't suppress the nagging thought that I needed to do something. All of his wonderful, lovely gestures made such an impact. What have I done? I gave him the newspaper one day. Classy, Bella. If this was going to become something, it needed to be equal. Both giving, both receiving.

I sat in my office for a long time, staring out the window, lost in thought. If he was concerned about what I might find, he needed to know it didn't matter. Question issued, problem solved.

I popped up my email, typed past in the subject line, and tabbed to the body. He put himself out there. I needed to meet him halfway.

Edward -

When I was ten, I stepped on a rake and had to get ten stitches in my foot

Freshman year of high school I got a D in geometry

I am allergic to cashews

You won't find that out if you Google me. That's what matters.

I never liked mornings before I met you. Now I hate the rest of the day, because it's not morning.

B

Not five minutes later, a reply hit my inbox.

Bella -

When I was 10, my brother broke my nose with an errant baseball.

Freshman year of high school, I got a 3 day suspension for skipping too much school. I thought it was a reward.

I have no allergies, but I cashews disgust me.

You are my life now. No matter the time of day.

E.

I wanted to pinch myself. I closed my office door, and danced around like a giddy teenager. The man in an office across the street paused in the middle of his office pacing to give me a funny look. I didn't care.

I wasn't sure where this was going, but it felt absolutely amazing.

I settled back into my chair and tapped out another message.

I always wished that I had a brother or sister. It was lonely growing up an only child of divorced parents. Are you guys close?

I am horrible at sports, but I love football. I think my dad is still living down the shock of the first time I shouted 'hit him, hurt him!' at the television set. He was afraid to introduce me to baseball for fear that I would cheer when a batter was hit.

B

I hit send and sat back to wait for what came next.

We swapped emails all day. We started by talking about our families. I told him about my parents divorce when I was little. How my mom had basically bailed out on us to go live her own life. I tried to play off the impact, but the more we 'talked', the more I opened up. In return, he told me about his family, especially his brother, sister in law, and niece. It was clear that he loved them all dearly.

He didn't speak much about his mom, but it was clear that she hung the moon. He hardly mentioned his dad. There was something there, but I respected his boundaries and didn't probe. He would tell me what I needed to know in due time.

As we reached the end of the day, we were both getting punchy, venturing into goofy questions like favorite books, music, food, that sort of thing.

The last email that hit my inbox was a doozy.

What are you afraid of?

What is your biggest regret?

Name the best Mel Brooks movie ever.

E.

Best Mel Brooks movie ever? Good lord, I love this man.

I typed out a quick reply.

What am I most afraid of? Not leading a significant life

My biggest regret? Letting my mom hurt me so much. It was mine to control, but I chose to let her have the power

Hands down, best ever – Robin Hood Men in Tights. 'Blinkin! Fix your boobs; you look like a bleedin' Picasso!'

Your turn. You can't lob questions like that over and not reciprocate. I'm headed home, so you have time to think through your answers. And I'll throw an extra one on for you to lighten things up. Watcha wearing :p ?

B

I hesitated for a second. We were still feeling our way through this, learning each other. Humor was a huge part of the equation for me. I had to know if he could roll with my droll approach to life. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. I hit send, and powered down my laptop. I'd know one way or another in about an hour.

Jonesing

It was a rare day. I had no meetings. I intended to work on returning phone calls and emails, and playing catch up with paperwork. I would probably be up very late now as I spent the majority of my day engaged in an email exchange with Bella. When I wasn't writing, I was reading and re-reading what she wrote. I may have spent a chunk of the day determining clever questions I could ask which would tell me the most about her.

We digressed rapidly from innocent stories about our families to questions which tended to go deeper into our hopes and dreams. It felt like a first date.

She amazed me. The spirit she had, the grab life by the seat of your pants attitude. Fearless. Given how lonely her upbringing must have been I couldn't imagine where it came from.

I'd known women scarred for life because their mothers sent them to school with the wrong brand of jeans. Hers had abandoned her.

I sent off the last few questions at the end of the day, feeling rather proud of myself. I'd lost track of time, and Jane buzzed to remind me that I had a dinner meeting in a half an hour. Grudgingly, I logged off and took a moment to make sure I didn't look terribly disheveled.

Before I stepped into the restaurant, I took a minute to check my messages on my phone.

Her first two answers floored me. God, this woman had depth. And then I literally laughed out loud, as I read her

Mel Brooks response and follow up question.

I was anxious at dinner. I wanted to be somewhere else. Anywhere she was, even if it was virtual. I tapped my foot rapidly under the table. I fidgeted with my napkin. I wasn't the kind of man who had excess energy. I didn't know what to do with myself. I began to think I wasn't all that far off with calling her an addiction. I was jonesing.

When the dinner finally ended, I flew home. I grabbed my laptop, and sat down in my leather recliner.

Bella,

I just got home from a dinner meeting. Sorry for the delay. I don't know if you check messages in the evening. Perhaps I'll see you before you get a chance to read this.

What is your biggest regret? Letting my relationship with my father deteriorate.

Name the best Mel Brooks movie ever. 'tsk, 'tsk, Bella. Never underestimate the power of the Schwartz!'

Watcha wearing :p? Ignoring the meticulous grammar of the question, right now I'm wearing a silly grin because I love "talking" with you. I leave the rest to your imagination . . .

E

Give as Good as You Get

There was no email from Edward when I got home. I tried to distract myself by menial things. I went out to pick up my dry cleaning. I decided to stop and rent *Robin Hood Men in Tights* from the local video store. I picked up some take out.

I got home around 8:30, and threw the DVD in. While it queued up, I quickly changed clothes and grabbed a pair of chopsticks out of the utensil drawer in the kitchen. I quickly lost myself in bad dialogue and hideous green tights as I demolished my dinner. Only then did I allow myself to power back up my laptop.

Edward had replied. And he gave as good as he got. Interesting, he hadn't answered his greatest fear. I wonder if that was intentional or an oversight?

It was getting late, and the movie was winding down. I typed out a quick reply.

I notice you didn't answer the first question. Too much to drink at dinner, an intentional oversight, or too afraid to tell me?

As for my meticulous grammar, I spend all day lecturing people on dangling participles and run on sentences. Cut me some slack.

You didn't ask – but I'll offer anyway. Boxers, t-shirt.

I am signing off for the night. I meant to tell you earlier, what you said about being your life. Thank you. No one has ever cared enough to say something like that to me. Not my parents, not my friends, definitely not a guy. Anyway, thank you.

See you in the morning

B

I turned off the movie, and tossed the take out carton in the garbage. I was about to power down my laptop when one more email appeared in my box.

These days, the only thing I seem to fear is that one day I'll get to the window and you won't be there.

Sleep tight; dream well. Mine will be about you.

. E

I smiled, typed out a quick reply, and powered down my laptop.

Mine too, Edward. Mine too.

B

~*~

CHAPTER 5: DREAMS COME TRUE DAYDREAMS

The first thing I did in the morning was grab my phone from the nightstand to see if Bella had replied. It was a short, sweet echo of my own sentiments. I hadn't exaggerated. All of my dreams were about her, even during the day.

I would have to find a way to focus at work soon, because I'd begun to consider meetings an excellent excuse to spend an hour thinking of Bella. I revisited a few scenarios often in my daydreams. Sometimes, we took a walk in the rain. She was always wore those yellow boots. In my daydreams, she never took them off. Ever.

I doubted an occasion would ever arise when she would be standing outside in the rain naked save for those boots, so I moved the daydream into the shower. Of course, that made actually taking a shower a challenge. Everywhere I looked, I saw her wet hair or her smooth skin.

I forced myself to think about mergers and paperwork in order to speed the morning routine. I didn't want to leave her waiting. I was giving her my heart today. She'd taken it from me ages ago, but now she would see it floating with my steadfast love.

I checked the time when I saw her bouncing up the sidewalk toward me. It was a good thing I got out of my apartment early, because she seemed to have sped up her schedule lately too. I had to admit it was quite the ego boost. We both wanted an extra few minutes with each other in the morning. Though for me "want" had turned to "need."

She briefly peered into the window... 2.1 minutes. It seems what was in the window was becoming less important than what was happening right in front of it.

I smiled at her, and she wordlessly grabbed my tie. This time, I knew what was coming, and I wasn't going to let her run off.

I gave as good as I got, and there's no doubt it was good.

I walked her to work again. We didn't talk much. I slowly massaged her palm with my thumb, and we looked at each other every so often. Those exchanges always ended in a smile, the kind you couldn't control. The kind that made you want to laugh for no reason.

I brought her hand to my lips again. We were still navigating the waters. I didn't want to assume too much with a kiss goodbye. We locked eyes, saying nothing and everything at the same time.

With a nod, she went into the building, and I turned to begin my walk to work.

Before I got far, I heard her yelling for me. I turned, wondering what prompted her return. She was winded, and her cheeks were flushed, a beautiful complement to her fair skin.

"Thank you. It feels like such an insignificant way to acknowledge this. But thank you."

And she gave me a proper goodbye. A goodbye she thought was insignificant. It could not have been less true. Her gesture inspired me. Caught me off guard. I hadn't planned the action that followed.

"I've said it several different ways, but not yet directly. I love you, Bella." I kissed her gently on her forehead. I wasn't as brave as she, and I turned away before she could respond, tossing "Check your email later," over my shoulder.

I may have teased her just by waiting until later in the afternoon to write.

Monday is too far away. Would you like to talk a walk after work?

E

As if she were refreshing her email constantly, I received a near instantaneous response.

Yes.

B

We re-traced our steps from the morning, stopping by the window where one more charm had been added, indicating my intent to love her for eternity.

She had to know what tomorrow was, and it was possible she already had plans, but I hadn't wanted to ask until all the pieces were in the glass.

"Bella, would you meet me here for breakfast tomorrow?"

Insignificant

I dashed out of my apartment on Friday morning. 24 hours of not seeing him was far too long. All the way up Fifth, I kept replaying that last email.

He stood there, waiting for me in front of the window, face stoic as I studied the addition to my martini glass. A sterling silver floating heart.

He gave me his heart.

I didn't trust myself to speak. Instead, I pulled an old page from my playbook. I grabbed a hold of his tie, and pulled him down as I went up on tiptoe. This time, he kissed me back. It was slow and sweet and I felt it everywhere. My imagination had been sorely lacking.

We walked to my office again, hand in hand. My mind raced the entire time. I felt absolutely complete and yet utterly insignificant. He had everything. I couldn't give him anything that he didn't already have.

I stood just inside the lobby as he walked away. I felt like I needed to do something, to say something.

That's when it hit me. There is a difference between having and needing something. What if it was really that simple? There was one thing that I had that he didn't, that he quiet possibly needed. Me.

I bolted out of the building and ran after him, calling his name. He turned with a confused look on his face. When he saw me, he smiled and held his arms out to me.

"Thank you. It feels like such an insignificant way to acknowledge this. But thank you."

I kissed him again, and there was nothing sweet or slow about it. He lifted me off the ground, bringing us level so that he could kiss me back with the same intensity. His tongue grazed mine and I gasped. I felt him smile in response before he tightened his arms a bit more. It was heaven, and I never wanted it to end.

But the real world has a way of creeping in. Bills to pay, authors to publish. We broke apart, both smiling sheepishly. Two adults, making out on a street corner in Manhattan.

Edward sat me back down on the pavement, arms tight around me to make sure that I had my balance. And then he pulled the rug right out from under me.

He told me that he loved me.

He said something more, but I didn't hear it, so caught up in the shock of his declaration.

I got through the day, although I don't know how. Alice called before lunch. I told her I was tied up, and I would get back to her later. I knew she would be happy for me, but this was mine, and I wasn't ready to share it yet.

I spent the day with one eye on email in the hope that I would hear something from Edward. I wasn't capable of going into another weekend of not seeing him, of not knowing what would come next.

Late that afternoon, he emailed to ask if I wanted to take a walk after work. It felt like the weight of the world had been lifted from my shoulders. I would get to see him one more time today.

Edward met me outside the building, an air of confidence and, dare I say it, smugness radiated off him. We followed our normal route back to Fifth Avenue. He stopped me in front of Tiffany's. One more charm had been added to my martini glass. A jade circle. Circles are infinite. No beginning, no end.

What had started as an innocent flirtation had grown into something more. He gave me his heart and told me that he would love me forever. It was time to start letting down the walls to allow each other into our respective worlds.

I had been worried about what would happen when the weekend arrived. But I should know better than to bet against Edward. Instead of saying goodbye at the window, he asked me to meet him for breakfast in the morning.

Tomorrow was Valentine's Day. Neither of us acknowledged it, but it lurked on the periphery, taunting me. I was afraid of what came next. That all the hopes and dreams that I had started to form over the last week and a half would fall short of reality. So I did the adult thing, I swallowed everything but my desire to see him. That was enough to sustain me.

Use What You've Got

By the time I delivered Bella to her subway stop and walked back to Tiffany's, they had already begun to dismantle the Valentine's window display. Jess waited for me along with the window decorator.

Lately, I'd avoided playing the rich and powerful card. But there were times like these, when the benefits were just too good to deny.

In the end, the window decorator was surprisingly more helpful than Jess has led me to believe. Turns out, he was quite a sucker for romance.

Jess had even brought the box of strawberry pop tarts, since I knew I couldn't hide it inconspicuously in my briefcase or top coat pocket.

She handed it to me as if it were a bomb about to explode. The look of disgust on her face was comical. Her disdain may have been for the box or me or a little of both.

I opted to kill her with kindness.

"Jess, I can't thank you enough for how well you have orchestrated this. It's been impressive."

She gave me a short smile.

"Do you want *these* back?" she asked with repulsion holding out the actual contents of the box.

"No," I replied. "Is someone scheduled to be here before hours tomorrow?"

"You know there is, Edward," she practically growled. I gave her the infamous Edward Cullen grin, the one that often made the news, and took the kindness out, opting just to kill her.

"I trust *this* time, you've been able to manage more discretion. I'm sure if any of this..." I said waving my hand toward the window, "got out to reporters, your superiors would be unimpressed. Imagine the impact if Tiffany's were to lose a major client and be publicly humiliated by negative press."

"You don't have to worry. No one knows a thing."

I nodded and turned to the window designer to discuss the new display.

Once all the details were in place, I went home and tried to turn in early. I was unsuccessful. At first I was just too excited to sleep, too anxious to see the final details played out. Then, of course, another of my favorite scenarios crept into my thoughts. This one was about how Bella would want to thank me for her Valentine's Day present. In this one, she was wearing two items: the boots and my bracelet.

I thought about taking Rosalie's advice and giving Tanya a call, but I decided I didn't want to bring anyone else into this yet. Just having Rosalie and Jess know I was in full courting mode was almost too much.

Like a child waiting for the first day of school, I thought morning would never come. But it did, and it greeted me with another kiss from Bella when she met me in front of Tiffany's as promised.

"Mm. You'll be the death of me."

"Don't go dying on me, I'm not done with you yet." she quipped.

I led her over to the window where a single signature blue Tiffany package sat in the middle of a reworked Valentine's display.

I watched her scan the window for any sign. I caught a hint of disappointment.

"Bella, I spend my life surrounded by things that are pretty on the outside, but there is no substance within. We've been admiring this exquisite display for days. Would you like to go inside with me?"

She bit her lip. "I'd love to, but they aren't open yet."

"I know some people," I said with a shrug.

We entered the store with all the reverence of a Cathedral. We wandered aimlessly and silently for a while.

"I've been wondering. Are you still opposed to romance?"

"I never had anything against romance, just the way everyone wants you to believe in it versus how it really is."

"I'm pleased to hear it. Come over here. There is something I want to show you."

She was still taking in the store. I had a feeling she'd never actually stepped foot beyond the front door. Her wide eyed innocence was refreshing.

We walked up to the counter, and I nodded to clerk at the counter. "I believe you have something for me." Bella looked confused, and she watched in shock as he walked to the window and pulled the blue box out of the display.

"Open it," I commanded.

She followed my direction, and her hands shook as she removed the ribbon.

She seemed relieved when she saw the familiar lettering, and she laughed out loud.

"I told you we were having breakfast at Tiffany's. Shall we dig in? I'm hungry." I said slyly.

She had no more caution as she hurried to get to her pink frosting. She stopped quickly when she saw that instead of silver foiled pastries, there was another box inside. She looked to me sharply, and I nodded for her to continue.

She opened the lid slowly, and her eyes lit up when she saw the familiar charms attached to a simple silver chain bracelet.

"Am I awful if I say I wanted this?"

"No, you're merely honest."

"Thank you, Edward. I don't know what to say."

"Bella, say you'll be my Valentine?"

My Way

"No."

Edward's eyes went wide, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"I have a much better idea." I grabbed his hand and pulled him out of the store.

Once we reached the street, I stepped out onto Fifth Avenue and held my hand out. Pedestrian traffic was light, and it only took a few seconds to hail a cab.

"2nd and 10th please." I requested of the driver. I was almost giddy as I formulated the plan in my head. Let Edward have his version of a Valentines Day declaration. I get mine.

"Bella?" Edward queried, confusion written all over his face.

I felt bold, fearless, and absolutely confident as I put my finger to his lips. "Shhh. Trust me."

We made excellent time downtown, and ten minutes later the cab pulled up in front of the local market I go to every week. I paid the driver, and pulled Edward out of the car after me.

"Bella!" Marcus, the owner greeted me as I walked in the front door. "Happy Valentines Day!"

"Hi Marcus! Any chance you can hook Edward and me up with some coffee?"

I had been coming here since I had moved into my apartment a few years ago. Marcus and his wife had taken me under their wing, and were constantly inquiring as to the state of my love life. They had offered to set me up numerous times,

"Sure thing, the usual?" Marcus eyed Edward curiously.

I turned to Edward. "Want some coffee?"

He gave me a dazzling smile. "I'll have what you are having."

"Two of 'em Marcus." I called over my shoulder. I looked back to Edward. "Stay here, I'll be back in two."

I walked quickly to the back of the store. There at the end of the aisle was exactly what I needed. I grabbed a box and walked back to the counter.

"That should do it. Thank you." I paid for our purchases, handed Edward his coffee, and nodded towards the door.

"Come on." Once outside, I handed him my coffee to hold while I tore open the top of the box.

"Want to share a pack of strawberry pop tarts?" I held up a foil package, fighting back a smile.

Edward's face lit up. He grabbed the package from my hand and ripped it open. The smile and the speed at which he moved sent shivers down my spine.

"Best offer I think I've ever received." He pulled out one of the pastries and handed it to me. "Want a bite?"

Did I ever.

I guided Edward up Second Avenue. He had made his Valentine's declaration. I made mine. I couldn't rival what he had done from an economic perspective, but when it came to originality, I definitely scored some points.

By the time we reached my apartment building, the pop tarts and coffee were gone, and I was freezing.

"You want to come up?" I tried to sound nonchalant, but the prospect of Edward in my apartment, in my world, terrified and thrilled me at the same time.

He looked up at my building, a turn of the century five story walk up. "This is you?"

"Yep, you coming?" I started up the steps to the building, using my key to unlock the door.

"No doorman?" I laughed as soon as he said it.

"I live in the Village, Edward. People don't have doormen down here."

I guided him up the two flights of steps to my floor. "This is me." I unlocked the door and pushed it open.

"Welcome to all 600 square feet of Chez Swan." I pulled my parka off and tossed it on the coat stand. I turned to take Edward's. He was looking down at the foot of the stand at my wellies, a smile on his face.

"Yes, I own wellies. Childish, but it's one of those little things that always makes me happy." He shook his head and handed me his jacket.

"Come on, I'll give you the grand tour." I grabbed his hand and pulled him through the apartment.

"My gourmet kitchen is through there." I indicated as we walked past the tiny galley.

"Living room slash office." I swept my hand to indicate the couch, coffee table, over stuffed chair and entertainment center.

"Through here you have bedroom and bathroom."

I turned to see Edward standing in front of the couch, staring up at the montage of framed photographs that hung on the wall. The photos represented my life. My family, my childhood friends, college and life there after.

He pointed at one photo. "Is this your dad?"

I sat down on the arm of the couch, my feet resting on the seat cushion. "Yeah, his name is Charlie. That was taken a few years ago when he and some friends went on a fishing trip in Alaska."

"You look like him."

"When I was younger, that would have upset me. Renee, my mom, is really pretty. But I have the perspective now to know that it is a compliment."

"Are you guys close?"

I studied the photo for a moment, considering how best to explain.

"My relationship with both of my parents is complicated. Renee left before I started kindergarten, so it was always just Charlie and I. He was at a loss for what to do with a little girl. He's most comfortable in the land of sports, fishing and American beer." I paused, thinking about the last time I saw him, "He's a good man; we just don't have a lot in common other than being incredibly stubborn."

"You, stubborn? I can't imagine that."

I rolled my eyes in mock indignation. It was nice to joke around like this.

"What about you? Who do you look like?"

Edward gave a small laugh and sat down on the couch. "The milk man."

He reached out to take my hand. His bracelet slid down my arm and to rest just above his fingers.

"I am amazed that you can talk about your mom so easily. It would be natural to be angry."

"For a long time I was. I blamed myself for driving her away. It wasn't until the last few years that I realized it had nothing to do with me."

Edward turned my hand over and ran his thumb along the inside of my wrist. The light touch sent a shiver up my arm.

He bowed his head, and brushed a gentle kiss along the path he had just traced. "You are an amazing person."

We were in such uncharted waters that every interaction, every little step forward kept the butterflies swirling in my stomach.

He lifted his head to look up at me. His face was unreadable for a moment before breaking into *that* smile, the one that always gave me chills. He gave a quick tug on my hand which pulled me off the arm of the couch and straight into his lap. One of his arms cradled my shoulder, while his free hand slid into my hair.

"Much better." He whispered, his face only inches from mine.

I couldn't move. I stared at his lips, waiting.

"It's really hard to kiss you when you bite your lip, Bella."

"Oh, I..." That was all he needed. As our lips made contact, he tightened the arm around my shoulders, which brought me in closer to him. His kissed me slowly, as if to gauge how I would respond. But it was time that we were past all of the tentative exploration. Neither of us needed to figure out where the other stood anymore.

I slipped my right hand up his chest to wind into the back of his hair as I pulled him in closer to me. Like that first

day at the window, I traced my tongue along his bottom lip, secure in the knowledge that this time, he would kiss me back.

It was like a switch flipped. Suddenly I was on my back on the couch, one hand still secured in Edward's hair, the other clutching his shirt. His tongue swept over mine, sweet from the pop tarts we had eaten earlier. I slipped my hand up around his back, tugging at his shirt. Once I had it free, I slipped my hand up underneath, lightly tracing my fingers down Edward's back. He paused, his breath hitching in reaction.

The sensation of it was so overwhelming. Edward. Here, in my apartment, me pinned to the couch. Kissing me. I felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest. I wanted this to keep going, to not stop, to give into the moment, to give into everything, but the rational side of me shouted to slow down, to not move too fast.

Euphoria

Oh. God. I have never wanted anyone as much as I wanted this woman underneath me, waiting for my next move.

From the moment she invited me up to her place, I felt like a damned teenager. And I seemed to regress with each passing minute. At first, it was as if we were stealing "alone" time while parents were out of the house. There was palpable tension, as she gave me the grand tour of her cracker box apartment. I stopped cold when I saw the boots. I don't think I hid my smile very well.

If it had been anyone else, I would have felt claustrophobic. But it was Bella, and her apartment was quaint; it reflected everything I'd come to love about her.

That only made the tension worse.

As I took in her apartment, I occasionally caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of my eye. She was nervous again. She kissed me the first day we met in the most public place imaginable, but being alone with me made her nervous. I knew exactly how she felt.

I sat down on the couch, and put my hand out for her to join me.

For six months she was my hope. In the space of 8 days, she became my dream. At this exact moment, she was my fantasy.

Go slow, Edward. Rosalie's warning echoed over and over in my head. I had to mean this. She had to know I meant it. I didn't really want to go slow though.

Sitting on that couch brought back memories of so many firsts—kisses, loves, and lovers. This wasn't our first kiss, but it held all the promise of one just the same. This is the most perfect feeling in the world. An absolute euphoria. It's the emotion we all seek. In pure desperation, we attempt to re-create it in so many ways. The reason people drink or do drugs. The impetus for most of the entertainment industry. The motivation for infidelity. We chase this moment. But it doesn't come in a bottle, a romantic comedy, or even a good lay. It's an utterly intangible thing. It only exists in the space between.

So, I prolonged the moment, knowing this memory would outdo all the others, afraid it would disappear when the anticipated kiss had been realized.

All the poets and novelists in the world, and not one of them has ever found words to describe what happens to your stomach—not really your stomach or your chest or your throat, but another space between. It's not a flip or a wave or a lump.

Whatever it is, I could live in it.

Or maybe not, because something always moves you beyond the space between, to the physical contact. The connection.

And I brought her into my space, to my lips. *Go slow, Edward. Show her you mean it.* And I tried to, but then her tongue slid along my lower lip like it had that first time, and all of the desire I had that day combined with the sexual tension of my teenage self sitting on a couch with the hottest girl in school, and I pounced.

But that feeling in my not quite stomach didn't go away; it got stronger. *Go Slow, Edward.* I ignored the warning as I slid one hand to her waist. I didn't expect the warmth. It sent tingles everywhere. Her shirt had ridden up the slightest bit. I rested my hand right there, circling her soft skin with my thumb while our tongues continued a slow waltz. We stayed in that suspended state. *Should I, or shouldn't I? Will we or won't we?*

I felt her sigh before I heard it. The sigh that says, *I want this, but I can't.*

Our kisses slowed to a stop, but her fingers were still moving on my back. She didn't open her eyes yet. I could feel her chest rising and falling heavily below me. I moved my hand back up to her face, and traced her lips. Her eyes opened then, and I assured her with my smile.

"It's okay, Bella. This is only the beginning."

The Devil on My Shoulder

I thought I was doing okay. While fragile, I still had a slight grasp on my self control. My mind and body were at war with each other. *More. Stop. Please. Wait.*

I have never been so conflicted in my entire life.

And then his thumb traced across my stomach.

God I want this. I want him.

But there are two types of want. Both had benefits, but the longer term had more potential.

We had to stop. I didn't want to.

As if sensing my mental struggle, Edward drew back and skimmed his finger across my lips. If he was trying to rein this in, it wasn't working.

"It's okay, Bella. This is only the beginning."

He meant it. This wasn't about instant gratification for him. He wanted me; that was apparent. But he *wanted* me too, in a different way. And that made this all difference.

"Why do I feel like we are back in high school, and my dad is going to walk in any minute?"

Edward laughed as he nuzzled into my neck. "Did your Dad ever pull his gun out on one of your boyfriends?"

"No, but he never caught any of them trying to steal second."

I could feel his breath warm against my skin. "I didn't try to steal second."

"Not yet...."

His fingers slowly trailed up my stomach, slowly circling higher and higher.

"Batter up..."

~*~

CHAPTER 6: WHAT HAPPENS NOW CONTINUATION?

The teenager theme continued as we made out on the couch all afternoon. It was a perfect combination of naughty and nice. Completely exhilarating. Acknowledging it would be too soon to make love took the pressure off. Our kissing became playful. We laughed a lot.

At one point, Bella hit a sensitive spot on my side. I flinched and let out a little yelp.

"Ticklish? Did I find your weakness Cullen?"

"Don't even think about it," I warned.

"You should know better than to throw the gauntlet with me. I am the fearless one, remember?"

And for the next half hour, it was an all out tickle war. We tried to sneak up on each other with in the typical locations: underarms, behind the knee, the sensitive site right on my waist. I pulled out the big guns and pinned her to the couch again, testing her willpower, and I hit those spots over and over.

"Uncle!" she gasped. I let up slowly, not exactly trusting that she wouldn't attack when my defenses were down. We were quietly studying each other's next moves, when my stomach growled loudly.

"Damn, we need to feed you, but that would require leaving the couch," Bella lamented.

"It's inevitable, isn't it?"

"Pizza would delay the inevitable." She had moved in close, and started rustling her fingers through my hair. "Can you reach my phone on the table next to you? I've got a place programmed."

A half an hour later, the inevitable came. I got up to answer the door when the pizza was delivered.

I carried it toward her kitchen table.

"Hey, where do you think you're going? I didn't want to leave this couch today," she protested.

So, she sat cross legged on the couch, facing me, while I leaned over the small coffee table, trying not to make a mess of myself.

As the day grew long, reality began to sink in. There was a world outside of this room. As cramped as her apartment was, I never wanted to leave. We were safe; we were happy; we were us. After the pizza, we lay back on the couch, facing each other. Starting at the top of her head, my index finger made its way around her face, down her neck, her shoulder, and her arm. I followed the same trail over and over, until she fell asleep. I listened to her breathe.

I'd had a much different plan for the day. It would have culminated in being wined and dined. There would have been no cab rides, no pop tarts, no couches, and no pizza. It would have been Hollywood's version of a romance. But this was better. We were at the point where I'd been stuck in my own plans. When would our date end? I considered the possibility that it didn't have to. We could order everything in, never leaving. It would be the perfect day over and over again.

Of course, that wasn't realistic. And what good was contemplating forever in this tiny room if I didn't even know if I should leave for the night?

Bella didn't nap long, but it was enough for a miniscule drop of drool to form at the side of her mouth. She woke with a start seemingly for no reason. She was embarrassed as she wiped her mouth.

"Oh my god, I fell asleep? I'm so sorry!"

"I must be boring you." I winked. "Should I have tried for third base?"

"No," she answered quickly, but then she re-thought. "I mean, you're not boring me. And as for third base, well um, is the game over yet?"

"I don't know, Bella. It is getting late, and I don't want to overstay my welcome."

"You couldn't," she said as she leaned in for a kiss. She meant it to be chaste, but I opened my mouth to deepen it, and she pulled back.

"Ewww I must have dragon breath," she declared as she covered her mouth.

"I don't imagine I'm a walking breath mint myself."

She still stood up and moved toward the kitchen. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Actually, water would be great," I responded, and I looked at her pictures again. They were all candid, no posing. People just living. .

She pulled two glasses out of a cabinet and a pitcher from the refrigerator. When she'd poured the water, I went to the kitchen where she handed me a glass. I drank half of it on the first gulp.

"Bella, I think I should go." She had a slight pout, so I reached out to her waist and pulled her close. "I don't really want to. I've seriously considered staying here forever, but I think we've both tested our willpower enough for today. This has been the best day I can remember, and I don't want us to regret anything that might happen if I stayed..."

She sighed. "I know. Still can't help thinking it would be nice to wake up with you."

"Soon. I promise." And we kissed. It was long and slow and neither of us mentioned pizza breath at all.

I knew we were both avoiding reality while she walked me to the door, but she brought it up first. "So, what comes next Edward? A matching necklace so we can still see each other every day?" And she winked at me.

"Oh please, secret messages in the window at Tiffany's are yesterday's news." I flipped my hand up snobbishly, and she smiled. "Seriously, I do have plans tomorrow with my family, and something tells me you might not be ready to join me in that, so I probably won't see you until Monday morning. I'll call you tomorrow though if you like."

"Yes, it is proper to call a girl after you feel her up."

"Is that in Emily Post?"

"Mmm hmm, and I'm sure you have impeccable manners."

"Manners have nothing to do with why I'll call tomorrow. " I held her in a hug and kissed the top of her head. She looked up at me then.

"Thank you . . . for everything, Edward. I feel like I'm doing that a lot lately." She looked back down. "I hope I didn't steal your thunder or ruin any plans."

"Today was perfect. You're perfect." I insisted. I pulled her chin up so her eyes were on me again. "I love you."

She kissed me again, and before she closed the door, I remembered to add, "Oh and Bella? Happy Valentine's Day."

Throw Pillow

After Edward left, I was at a loss for what to do. It was late, and I should have been tired.

I looked around my apartment. It had always been my refuge, the one place where I could be myself, escape the world and find some peace. My own personal little haven. Now every where I looked, I saw him.

Standing in the hallway smiling at my silly wellies. Looking up at the photos on my wall. Leaning against the counter in my kitchen with a serious case of make out hair. Hovering over me on the couch.

I was shaken by the evolution of the past two weeks. I entered February resigned to the fact that Mr. Wonderful didn't exist, and it was time to settle for Mr. Okay. And then that fateful day in the coffee shop, I met Edward Cullen, and everything in my world changed.

Was it possible to fall in love with someone in less than two weeks? How could it have only been two weeks? It felt like we had known each other for ages.

At first blush, it would be easy to chalk Edward's declaration of love up to something purely physical. Most people would. Yes, the physical attraction was always there between us, a constant temptation.

But it ran deeper, more spiritual than that. Something that pulled me to him. Fate, kismet, who knows? One simple action, one small change in my daily routine had re-routed our entire lives. I might not be able to fully identify what it was that I felt for Edward at that precise moment, but I did know that going forward, I couldn't fathom what my life would be like without him in it

I focused on straightening up my apartment. I took the pizza box down the hallway to the trash chute.

It reminded me of how he had twirled the cheese around his finger as he talked.

I washed our glasses and put them away.

It reminded me of what it felt like to kiss Edward.

I picked up the throw pillows that had been knocked off the couch during our tickle war.

It reminded me of what it felt like being pinned underneath him on the couch.

With such a small space, picking up doesn't fill much time. Within fifteen minutes, I was back at odds with what to do. I dropped down on the couch and grabbed the remote. 200 channels, there had to be something to watch.

I leaned into the arm of the couch, and wrapped my arms around one of the throw pillows in an attempt to fill some of the void that Edward left. The pillow smelled like him, and I pulled it up to my face, taking long, slow breaths. The scent of his cologne and shampoo on the pillow was enough to bring the longing, the want, and all the emotion back full force.

Could I have fallen in love with him in eight days?

Abandoning the hope of television as a distraction, I turned it off and lay in the dark, my face buried in the pillow as I recalled the events of the day. The look on Edward's face when he gave me my bracelet or opening the package of pop tarts. How it felt to kiss him, to have his hands roam over my body. Him staring in my eyes and telling me that he loved me.

It was mental masturbation at its best.

I sat up, and grabbed my laptop from where it was propped against the couch. I brought it out of hibernation and pulled up my email.

Edward –

You've only been gone for a little while, but it feels like forever. I've actually spent the last hour lying here in the dark hugging a pillow because it smells like you.

The last eight days have been amazing. There are so many feelings that I am sorting through, physical, intellectual, emotional, that it's almost overwhelming at times. At a base level, I know that I want to spend every minute of every day with you. It scares me, it thrills me, and it takes my breath away. Thank you for that.

Love you

B

I closed my laptop, and returned it to its resting spot by the couch. Then I went to bed. I would have Edward with me, even if it was only the smell of him on a throw pillow, and the knowledge that today, for the first time since I met him, his eyes had sparkled, and not once looked sad.

Wayward Son

I left her apartment feeling fantastic. I forgot to ask Bella the best place to find a cab, so I wandered for a while. It

was Saturday and Valentine's Day, and it seemed my options were slim.

I gave up and opted for the Subway instead. I considered calling for a driver, but after spending the day in Bella's apartment, it was too big a contrast, somehow. Too unnecessary. Riding the subway wasn't entirely new. Emmett and I used to ride for entertainment; we observed the people whose lives were so different from ours. For them, the subway was a mode of transportation. For us, it was something to do on a Saturday afternoon. The first time, it was a crazy adventure. I think I was like 12, and Emmett dared me. Of course, my mom went into shock when she found out, and as usual, I was the one blamed. My dad argued that just because Emmett dared me, I should have had more common sense.

Tonight, the subway was filled with a typical menagerie. A few people gave me sideways glances—no idea whether they recognized me or wanted to rob me.

The thing about my kind of fame is that most people just think they've seen you somewhere before. They wonder if they've met you at a party or seen you in a movie. Once in a while, they stop and ask you why they know you. As a teenager, it happened a few times, and even in college. I was such an arrogant little shit. I remember responding with things like "You should know me because my family is richer than God and we could own you 100 times over." My dad still sees me like that—I may never grow up in his eyes.

When I was younger, I didn't really show up on anyone's radar. My name and pictures were pretty much only displayed in the high society pages. It would be a blip or a blurb. I was always able to blend in fairly well. So, thankfully, the approaches of strangers were few and far between.

Then everything changed. It's clichéd to say it, but it all happened almost overnight.

Just out of college, I was young, cocky, and working at CI. Emmett and I were two single guys enjoying life, with the means to do it well. My dad was annoyed with it, but not to the extent that he raised much stink other than constantly trying to set me up. Not always directly. Often, it was "a friend" who found someone for me.

That was how I met Rosalie. And the reason I had dated Tanya.

I felt a little like a cheater thinking about Tanya when I just had the best day of my life with Bella.

So I stopped thinking about the reason I moved to LA and reflected on my stupidity there. Two Christmases ago when I was home, my dad had said, "You are not Paris Hilton, and while they may be happy to have their name turned into an embarrassment, we are not they. Please stop acting like a fame whore, Edward. It's not becoming."

He was right to an extent. It wasn't becoming. I didn't really crave the fame so much, but I was on a power trip. After everything that went down to make me leave New York, I needed to control something. I felt large and in charge out there in the club scene.

My dad's words always hit me harder than anyone else's. I hadn't intended to be a disappointment to him. Quite the opposite. I grew up wanting nothing more than to please him. I worshipped him and the water he walked on. By the time I was ten, it became clear that satisfying him would not be an easy task, something only attained by complete submission to his designs. For the most part, I went along with his long term plan to have Emmett and me by his side in the family business, with Emmett, the eldest, eventually taking over. Maybe I displayed weakness or doubt, but attention shifted exclusively to Emmett by my late teens. He was in college; and dad went up to Cambridge frequently. They started getting together for weekly tennis matches and frequent lunches when Emmett graduated and started work at CI.

It all made me bitter, so I rebelled. Went to Dartmouth. Claimed it had a better business school, which US News

and World Report backed me up.

My mom gasped when I told her. "Generations of Cullen's have gone to Harvard, dear." I just nodded at her.

I only need two fingers to count how many times my dad came to Hanover. And we sure as hell never played any tennis.

Ultimately, it was that Christmas conversation though that led to me change my lifestyle cold turkey. No more clubs—pretty much no women. I wasn't parading them anyway. I went to the events that were necessary for work, and I typically had an escort. No more big smiles for the paparazzi or public make out sessions with super models. None of that was me anyway, but it was the way fame and power worked. You had to give them something to get in return.

When I reached my building, I was going to breeze right up.

"Good evening, Mr. Cullen," the night doorman said. "You're home early on Valentine's Day. No plans?"

I laughed. "Hardly, my date started this morning, so it's actually late."

I realized I didn't even know his name, so we chatted for a while. I probably should be more careful about what I say given my history, but you didn't get to be a New York doorman if you couldn't keep your mouth shut, so I didn't worry too much.

When I got up to my apartment, I debated calling Bella. I kept picking up my phone and putting it back down. I couldn't believe how much I missed her already. My own apartment, probably 5 times the size of hers, felt enormous, but not in a good way. There was too much dead space; it wasn't cozy and safe. It felt cold and empty. It wasn't really. At least it had never felt this way before. It was decorated to the nines, so maybe it wasn't the furniture or décor; maybe it had nothing to do with the space or what furniture was here and everything to do with who wasn't.

One of the times I picked up my phone, I checked my messages. I had an email from her. I sat up straight to really focus on it.

"Love you." It hadn't escaped my attention that she hadn't said the magic words yet, but it had only been 8 days for her. I had fallen so hard, but I'd been aware of her for much longer. I didn't expect that she would be at that point yet. This was a good sign though. Maybe it would come.

Bella

I always used to order cinnamon lattes, but now I can't go a day without a mocha because they remind me of you.

I miss you.

E.

Reflecting on her message, I spent a split second considering inviting her to my parents' house tomorrow. Like she said, I wanted to be with her every minute. If we weren't going to stay in her apartment 24/7 that was going to mean that we'd have to meet the people in each others' worlds.

I hit send before adding the invitation. I had some progress to make with them myself first.

Not Strong Enough.

I slept horribly. I tossed and turned. I couldn't get comfortable.

When I did sleep, it was shallow enough that I recalled every flicker of every dream. I'd start awake, not wanting the dream to be over, frustrated at how my body and mind betrayed me.

I looked at the clock. 5 am. Too early to get up, too late to take anything. I lay in bed on my back, studying the shadows that played across the ceiling. As I shifted, I felt Edward's bracelet slide a bit on my arm. I reached over to turn on the table side lamp and studied the charms. I probably shouldn't wear it to sleep, but I couldn't bear taking it off. It's not the type of jewelry designed for everyday wear. It wasn't strong enough to take that.

At that moment, I felt the same way. I wasn't ready for the everyday wear yet, the gaps in time where the real world set in. I needed to see Edward. I felt absolutely and utterly bereft at the thought of another 24 hours without him.

I got up and went into the living room to grab my laptop. Five in the morning and I was checking my email in an attempt to calm myself down, to get one more fix. He had replied back. It was short, it was sweet. It was so him.

God I missed him.

It was too early to call. I didn't know where he lived, or I would show up in a few hours with bagels and mochas before he left to see his family.

I couldn't take it anymore. I gave in. I pulled up my browser. My fingers hesitated over the keys for a moment, before I typed in 'Edward Cullen' and clicked go.

I went immediately to the image tab. The first photo was the one Alice had sent me of him and Emmett. Their coloring was night and day, but you could tell they were brothers.

There were photos of him at different events. In a tux, in a suit, my personal favorite was the one of him in a navy blazer, crisp white polo shirt and faded jeans. In almost all of the pictures, his hand was in his hair, pushing it away from his face. I had come to know him well enough to know it was a nervous habit.

Then came the photos of him with other women. I knew they would be out there, but it would be a lie if I didn't admit the hurt. Yes, they predated me, but to know that he had kissed someone else, had made love to someone else, was like a knife through my heart.

I returned to the search results page. I was about to close the tab when a name caught my eye. I clicked on the link to display a webpage from *The New York Times*. A short snippet accompanied a photo of Edward with a striking couple. The title of the photo was 'So much for the spare to the heir.' It was a short blurb about Edward accepting a position with a venture capital firm in Los Angeles after a falling out with his father, Carlisle. The photo had been taken of Edward and his parents prior to the decision, an indication of better time.

I thought back to Edward's comment about his regret over letting things deteriorate with his father. He was going to see his family today, yet he had been cryptic about whom. Was it everyone, or simply his mother, his brother? And then I thought of his comment about my attitude towards Renee, how it would have been natural to have been angry at her for abandoning me.

Maybe he wasn't really talking about my relationship with my mother. Maybe he was talking about his with his dad.

I jumped up off the couch and ran into the kitchen where I had plugged my cell phone in to charge. I brought it back to the couch, and pulled back up email to find Edward's mobile number. As much as I wanted to see him, he might actually need me more.

What time do you have to head out this am? Can I bring you a mocha and moral support before you go?

~*~

CHAPTER 7: THE WORLD CLOSES IN BREAKING IN

The yellow boots were the last thing I saw when I left her apartment. I couldn't get them out of my head so I decided to lose myself in one of my Bella fantasies rather than face the very real fears I had about seeing my father the next day.

Sleep came more easily than I anticipated. Thoughts of Bella always seemed to calm me.

I woke up way too early though. My subconscious had finally decided to process what was to come today. I saw everyone else in my family regularly, but somehow my dad had avoided all but one situation that brought us together socially for over six months. He conveniently planned a business trip to Japan for Thanksgiving. We were in the same house at Christmas, but not a single word passed between us. Of course, I saw him at work, mostly in passing. We'd been in a few meetings together, sitting on opposite sides of the room. I'd received some memos and even a phone message, but all were professional exchanges. He hadn't once said, "Welcome back," or "Let's have coffee," or even, "Hi, son."

Nor had he scolded me, or made me promise to work hard. I think I could have handled him being a controlling dad more than I could handle being ignored. I drew parallels to Bella's situation with her mom. How could she be so strong? How did she not harbor deep resentment about being abandoned? Perhaps her example could help me eradicate this cloud of bitterness.

As I lay in bed, feeling disappointed that I wouldn't see her today, I heard my phone buzz. I reached for the nightstand, and I saw the text from her. How the hell did she know? She was exactly what I needed right now.

But I had to make a decision. She asked to come here. It was only fair. She let me into her world yesterday; I would have to open up mine. I still held the fear that she was too good for my reality. Lately, I hadn't even wanted to be a part it; how could I expect her to understand?

She could come here though, to my apartment, where we didn't have to face anyone else—just us. Testing the water so to speak. Damn, I couldn't start the day thinking about Bella and water.

I swallowed my concerns, and I pulled up her number. I'd programmed it in days ago when I saw it in an email.

She answered instantly.

"So, what's the verdict?"

"I could never resist breakfast with you."

"Tell me when and where."

"I can be ready whenever you can get here." I gave her the address and told her what to say to the doorman. "And Bella, it's my turn to thank you."

"No need for thanks. I'll see you in a few."

I called down to the front to let them know I was expecting someone. Then, I rushed to get showered, shaved, and dressed. I stood in my closet for a while deciding what to wear today. I had to figure out what would work for both for seeing Bella and for going to my parent's house.

I chose khakis and a white button down. I put a white t-shirt on underneath and I only buttoned the oxford halfway up. I remembered an old girlfriend ogling a picture of Matthew McConaughey dressed in a similar manner. She said there was nothing sexier. I wasn't afraid to make Bella little weak in the knees. God knows what she was doing to me.

I figured it would be a while yet if she were coming from the village and stopping for breakfast, but I'd barely gotten plates out when I heard the knock at the door. It was tentative.

I didn't even check the peep hole before I opened it.

She was breathing a little heavy.

"Did you run here?"

"Maybe a little," she answered. "It got me here faster, didn't it?"

She was still holding the bakery bag and coffee tray, so I set them on the hall table in the entry. I took her coat and hung it in the closet. When I turned around she had walked to the end of the hall and was starting into my apartment.

"Whoa, you were really slumming at my place yesterday."

"Nonsense, no place is a slum if you're there," I said, purposefully bumping into her as I carried the bag and tray toward the kitchen. "Eat first or tour first?"

"Tour, definitely."

My apartment had a very open concept living, kitchen, dining area. It was a large space with high ceilings, and a wall of windows overlooking the park. "Well this is the main living area of course. " She was already walking around, looking at pictures and decorative items as I pointed things out. "My mom did the decorating. It's a hobby of hers, but she tends to pick up on peoples' personalities well."

"I love this picture, the colors are amazing." I felt like I'd learned her life story from hers the day before. But mine weren't alive. They were either artistic or staged. I wondered what the narrative of my pictures revealed.

"Thank you. Most of the artwork I had in L.A. She designed around what she liked best about my place there."

"How long have you been back?"

"A little over six months." I continued working in the kitchen, setting out cups and utensils.

"Why did you move?"

"Which time?"

"Either? Both?" She paused. "I am such a crappy liar. I got curious, and, well, I might have read something about you going to a VC firm out there."

I took a deep breath on that one. I wondered what else she'd been curious about, but she was being honest, and I would be as well.

"My dad and I had a fight. It's a long story, but suffice it to say I went through a rebellious period. He got mad at me, and I charged off to forge my own path. I made a lot of mistakes, Bella. He wasn't necessarily wrong at the time, but he doesn't seem to be able to let go. Today will only be the second time I'll see him outside of work since I came back."

"What made him so angry?"

"I'd rather not get into it right now." And I put my arm on her waist to lead her down the hall toward the bedrooms. I led her to the room I knew would impress. I paused and let her take in the scene before stating the obvious. "This is my office."

"I don't give up that easily, Cullen. I'm just letting you off for the minute because I have the hots for your book collection."

"I thought you might like it."

"This is one of my ideas of heaven, but I'm getting hungry. Wanna finish the tour?"

"This way, my lady." I took her hand to lead her down the hall.

The last room was my bedroom of course. It had the same wall of windows with the magnificent view. "My mom did very well when she picked this place."

"You didn't see it first?"

"No, she sent pictures, but I bought it sight unseen."

"Wow, you must really trust her."

"I do. She's amazing." I felt guilty talking about my mom, considering Bella's lack of a relationship with hers. "Well, that's everything."

"It's gorgeous here Edward. It's very...you..." And she got up on her tip toes and pulled me to her. I was getting very used to that move.

"I thought you said you were hungry."

"I am, but you never greeted me properly. We really need to update your copy of Emily Post."

After her proper greeting, I grabbed a plate and was about to sit down at the table, when she stopped me, "Don't

you want to break in your couch?"

I have a feeling my eyes got wide. Eating wasn't the only thing we did on hers yesterday. She took her bagel and coffee and plopped down exactly as she had on her own sofa. Feet tucked under her.

I shrugged and made my way over. I didn't usually allow myself food on the couch, but I doubted I could deny her much. We focused on the bagels for a while, and I flipped the TV on for background noise. When my bagel was done, I took my dishes to the kitchen.

On the way back to the couch I asked, "So are you against tables or do you just have a thing for couches?"

I sat down on next to her, but left enough space for her to eat without feeling like I was breathing down her neck. She set her food down on the coffee table, ran her hand up my leg, as she moved to close the space between. "I just think couches are more comfortable."

I closed my eyes and let her roam, but I didn't have to be patient for long. She took control today, pushing me down on my back. She lay at an angle with her back against the couch, half on top of me. Our kisses and touches were becoming more familiar, but that didn't mean they were any less exciting.

We'd sufficiently broken in the couch with another make out session by the time I had to leave. As I stood to tuck in my shirt, she smiled at me impishly.

"The white oxford is hot, but it looks better after I had my way with it."

"I could say the same thing about yours. By the way, you missed a button" She turned bright red as she scrambled to adjust her shirt. How could she be so bold yet flustered so easy?

"Bella, I really appreciate you coming over. I needed you today. I wish . . ." I paused thinking I shouldn't say anything more.

"What?"

"I wish you were going to be here when I got home. "

"I will if you want me to be."

"I'll be gone a long time. You'd be bored to tears."

"Edward, have you been in your office lately? I'll be like a kid in a candy store. I bet there are a few first editions in there."

I didn't acknowledge that, but she had no idea. I argued with myself about whether I asking her was the right thing to do before responding.

"You would be welcome to make yourself at home. You can use whatever you want. Eat anything you like. I'll leave you a key, and I can let the people downstairs know, so they don't stop you from coming back in. We're at my parent's place in the city today, so I shouldn't be too late, but I expect I'll be gone at least five hours. And I would completely understand if you change your mind and go home."

"I'm a big girl, Edward. I'll be okay. And I promise I won't go through your underwear drawer."

Personal Space

When I texted Edward, I had meant to bring him coffee and some bagels and provide a shoulder if he needed it. I hadn't anticipated that he would want me to stay. Then again, he never did what I expected. Maybe I was being unfair to him, expecting him to act like every other guy I had dated, when it was clear that he was anything but.

He was worried that I would be bored. The furthest thing from it.

After he left, I wandered back into his office. I wasn't joking with him when I said I was in a candy store. I had a full wall, fourteen feet high, filled with books. I began scanning the titles, pausing periodically to pull out a spine, study the cover, or read the fly leaf.

Needless to say, my personal library and Edward's were a bit different. I had mostly paperbacks, well read, and well loved. Edward's were almost all hard back, all in pristine condition. He had a whole section of first editions. *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Brave New World*. He even had *1984*.

Interspersed amongst the books were clusters of photos. Edward and his brother. Edward and his mom. Numerous pictures of an infant girl. That must be his niece, Haley. There were no pictures of Edward's father.

There was one lone candid in the group. A faded photo of four kids at the beach, they looked to be eleven or twelve years old. Three boys and a girl, their arms draped around each others' shoulders. On closer observation, it was clear that two of the boys were Edward and his brother Emmett. Even at that gawky tween age, Edward had a smile that could stop traffic.

The little girl in the photo was gorgeous, with long strawberry blonde hair. The other little boy had golden blonde hair and blue eyes. There was something oddly familiar about him that I couldn't place. Maybe they were cousins.

I went back to scanning the titles, mentally salivating over the literary gold mine in front of me, when I stopped cold.

No way.

I pulled a book off the shelf. Did I find Edward Cullen's dirty little secret? A whole row of Jack Hale books. They were hard back, but still, you didn't get any more mainstream brain candy than Jack Hale.

I pulled the first of the series out, smiling as I remembered how we had fought over the cover art. Oh this was just too priceless.

I opened the book. On the inside cover, written in black ink, was a short note:

Thanks for believing in me, and not outing me to the crowd. You always have my back. JW

What the...

...the blonde boy in the photo. Sonofabitch.

I carried the book back out into the living room, and dropped it on the coffee table. I retrieved my cell phone from the pocket of my coat and pulled up the number that I had called every week for the last six years.

"Dizzy Izzy! To what do I owe the honor?"

"How many times have I told you, Jasper Whitlock, you keep calling me Dizzy Izzy, and I will publicly call you Jack Hale often in front of people you don't want me to..." I let my voice trail off, waiting for him to rise to the bait.

"Touché, touché. You've kept my little secret. I have to respect that."

"So tell me, Jasper, who else knows your secret?"

"You, my mother, my two best friends and my accountant. Why?"

"Because I am holding a signed copy of your first book. The message thanks the recipient for 'always having my back'. The initials in the book are JW, not JH."

He was silent for a moment. "Where are you, Bella?"

"Where do you think I am?"

"I only signed one book with my real initials. If you are at his apartment, I want to know what the hell you are doing there. If you are not where I think you are, I want to know how the fucking book got there."

"Why are you worried about where I would be?" I asked, truly curious.

"Because you are a wonderful woman, Bella. I love Edward like a brother, but I will not let him put you through the wringer like he's done to all the other women in his life."

And there it was.

"How do you know Edward?" He queried cautiously.

"We have been...involved for a few weeks. How do you know Edward?"

"We grew up together. He's the one that encouraged me to start writing in the first place." I heard a chime in the background. Jasper cursed under his breath. "That's Maria. I need to go deal with this once and for all. I will call you tomorrow and we *will* continue this discussion."

"Fine, Jasper. Good luck with Maria."

I sat my phone down on the coffee table and studied the cover of the book I had carried out of Edward's office.

Jasper Whitlock and Edward were childhood friends.

Jasper was my first author. He came from an old family with a lot of name and no more money. He had written a number of scholarly books on political theory, but desperately needed to make some money to help keep the family estate up and running. I had been given his first book as my first assignment. It was a western that harkened back to the early days of Louis L'Amour. It had great potential, but Jasper was insistent that it go out under a nom de plum. Apparently his family barely tolerated the literary bent. Mainstream 'schlock' would not fly.

It was the beginning of a great partnership. In six years, we had put out five of his books. The last one was an immediate best seller, and at last tally was in its fourth reprint.

He was also a wonderful friend.

What are the odds?

I settled into the couch with the book. I hadn't read it in ages, and it felt like curling up with an old stuffed animal. Comfortable and familiar.

I spent the afternoon reading. I had forgotten how fabulous the book was. Get past the cowboy posturing, and it really was lovely. So full of imagery.

Around three, I started to get tired. The poor sleep from the previous night had caught up with me. I would have loved to curl up in Edward's bed and take a nap, but that felt too presumptuous. It was enough that he left me here alone.

As comfortable as the couch was, I had started to get a crick in my neck. I wandered back into Edward's room to grab a pillow off his bed. As I was walking out I saw a zip front hoodie draped over the treadmill in the corner. I grabbed the sweatshirt, and slipped back out into the living room. Curled up on the couch with his sweatshirt pulled over me like a blanket felt like small slice of heaven. It smelled like him. That smell and the warmth were just enough to relax me into sleep.

Home

"Fuck!"

I usually found profanity unnecessary, but right now they were the only words coming to mind.

"Fucking asshole!"

I hoped there weren't any cameras in the elevator as I made up to my apartment. It was good to get my anger and frustration out. I was hoping Bella would be in there when I opened the door, and I didn't intend to unload all of this on her.

Time with my dad had gone badly. I knew it would. My mom was insistent that we all try to get together. Even Emmett didn't think it was a good idea, but we all went because no one would say no to Esme.

"Bullshit!"

For the first hour, everyone was engaged in pleasantries. We oohed and ahed over everything Haley did. The night before my mom and dad had babysat while Rosalie and Emmett went out. Well, I think the nanny was there too, but mom liked to pretend she was a normal grandmother. My mom told Emmett and Rosalie everything that Haley did the night before. Emmett talked about his business trip, and Rosalie shared the story of their Valentine's date. They had the kind of night I'd originally planned with dinner at the latest hot spot and dancing after. It sounded nice, but I couldn't help but gloat internally. Mine was better.

Dad started slowly. "So, Edward, did you have Valentine's plans? I haven't read any tabloids lately so I'm not sure if you're seeing anyone."

That one wasn't unexpected, but it still stung. I felt possessive of my relationship with Bella, and I didn't want to share any of it with them. However, our relationship was escalating, and it was only a matter of time before we were public.

"I am seeing someone, but to my knowledge I haven't been in the tabloids lately." I didn't know for sure, but I

hadn't seen any photographers or anyone following me lately.

"I don't suppose you could keep it that way." He bore a hole in me with his gaze.

"Son of a Bitch!"

"Carlisle, let's have a nice afternoon, shall we?" my mom interrupted before I could complain. "Edward, you're seeing someone? You should have brought her today."

I looked at Rosalie, hoping she'd give me courage to continue. She just shrugged and raised an eyebrow as if to say I was all on my own here. I was used to be left to fight my own battles, so it didn't faze me.

"It's all very new, mom."

"It always is with you, Edward," my dad threw out.

"Damn him!"

I whispered under my breath that things aren't always what they appear, when Emmett chimed in to try to salvage the afternoon.

"Hey Dad, you should see what Edward's been doing in his department lately. He's got them eating out of the palm of his hand." Emmett looked at Dad almost with warning in his eyes, but my dad didn't heed. Emmett typically took the diffusion approach rather than the direct attack.

"Yes, well, Edward came to us with plenty of experience, so he should be able to handle our little firm after his years dealing with the big names." It was a complete farce to imply CI was a "little firm." His intention was merely to humiliate me for jumping ship.

I was going to speak, but Emmett stepped in again. "As long as he's putting that experience to work for us now, I'm happy. Hey mom, these appetizers are great. What's in them?"

She'd actually had them catered, so she didn't know, but the subject had changed, and we didn't return to it. I watched as my dad interacted happily with everyone but me. He bounced the baby on his lap and made funny faces, like a typical grandfather.

I couldn't reconcile that with the image I had of him as a cold hearted snake right now.

He didn't even acknowledge me when I left.

"Mother fucker!"

When the elevator reached my floor, I took a deep breath, trying to relieve some of my tension.

I turned the corner and was about to call out to see if Bella were still in the apartment when I saw her asleep on the couch, curled up in a ball. She'd wrapped herself in one of my sweatshirts. I noticed she'd picked one of Jasper's books to read. I wouldn't have expected her to go for the trashy Western, but then again, Jasper could definitely turn a phrase. I'd have to remember to be careful to use his pen name when I teased her about the book.

I didn't want to wake her up just yet. I sat down on the edge of the couch and studied her more. Her breathing was deep. Her lips were slightly parted, and she had a few strands of hair covering them. She seemed so small and

innocent. Such a contrast to the bold woman I'd come to know. I liked the idea that she had vulnerabilities too. It always worked better when there was balance in a relationship. Not that I had any real relationship experience, but I've observed others well.

I was about to lift her legs and rub her feet when she said my name out loud. I looked back up to her face, assuming she'd awoken. But she was still fast asleep.

For the longest time, I just watched her sleep. Her presence here made my apartment feel intimate, warmer. My official homecoming may have been a half a year ago, but it wasn't until this exact minute that I truly felt at home.

I had a feeling I'd never feel at home again unless I were with Bella.

Promises

It was faint at first. Just the slightest pressure, over and over again. As I shifted back into consciousness, the pressure became a little bit stronger. It started at my temple, trailed down my cheekbone, and then started all over again.

I opened my eyes. It must be late; the apartment was dark. Weak light filtered out from the kitchen.

Edward sat on the floor in front of me. The back of his hand the cause for the pressure.

"That feels good." I whispered as I closed my eyes, reveling in his touch. "Have you been home long?"

"About an hour."

"You should have woken me up. Although if that is what you are doing right now, please don't stop."

His knuckles ghosted over my lips before repeating the path back up over my cheek. I leaned into his hand, not wanting him to stop.

"You looked so peaceful. I just wanted to watch you for a while." His knuckles skimmed across my lips again, and I managed to brush a quick kiss on one before they resumed their path.

I opened my eyes and looked up at him. I could only make out his silhouette in the dark. His head was propped up with one arm.

"Did your mom have a special tutor brought in to teach you all the right things to say to girls?"

His hand paused for a moment, not completing its circuit.

"I hope you're paying attention to my actions because I'm not just saying I love you, Bella. This isn't some silly little diversion for me."

Something wasn't right. I tried to sit up, but was twisted up in Edward's sweatshirt. I struggled for a moment, untangling myself so that I could slip down on the floor beside him.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I mirrored his posture, my legs curled up underneath me, my arm resting on the couch. I traced slow patterns on his knee as I waited for him to speak.

He reached out to the table and retrieved a wine glass. He took a long sip before offering it to me.

"It's merlot."

I took the glass and took a sip, still waiting for him to open up.

"Let's just say it didn't go well today and leave it at that." He sounded so tired, so lost. The concern bubbled up in me, immediately followed by anger. I didn't know what was said, and I didn't need to. Edward had walked out of here nervous but hopeful. Now he was anything but that.

He barked out a bitter little laugh. "I can see the righteous indignation welling up in you. You'd go over there and tell him off right now if you could, wouldn't you?"

"It sounds like someone needs to kick him in the ass and since no one else in your family is willing to stand up for you..."

He cut me off. "Emmett tries, but it falls on deaf ears. "

His free hand began tracing the path along my cheek again, slower this time. I couldn't help but close my eyes in reaction.

"You think you are a tiger, Bella. But to him, you'd be an angry kitten. He'd bat you out of the way without a second glance. I won't let him hurt you like that."

"He can only hurt people if you let him, Edward. Stop giving him the power."

He was quiet for a moment as he absorbed my words. Then he pushed up off the couch so that he could lean in toward me.

"You are right. " The hand that had been tracing my cheekbone slipped into my hair, and he tugged a bit, forcing me to tilt my head to the side. He trailed a line of kisses along my neck and across my jaw, before leaning his forehead against mine.

"Just you and me, okay? That's all that matters. Just promise me you are in this with me?"

He sounded so vulnerable, so exposed. I hated that his father had the power to do this to him. I hope there is a special place in hell for Carlisle Cullen.

I slipped my arms around his neck, and hugged him as tight as I could.

"Just you and me. I promise."

~*~

CHAPTER 8: INTENTIONS NAVIGATING

There was a flaw in the "just you and me" plan. It was Sunday evening, and we both had to work the next day. I wanted to take her all the way home, but she put her foot down.

"Edward, I'm a big girl. I've been getting around the big city for a long time now. Nothing's going to get me."

"I know, but I'd just feel better."

"And I'll feel better if you just stay here. I promise I'll call as soon as I get home. I'll even call you along the way."

"We could just stay on the phone the whole time."

"Tempting."

This day's ending was proving no less difficult than the day before. Our time together was so easy, so comfortable. No pretenses. I didn't worry about the past or the future. When we were together; it was all about the moment. I wanted to be in that moment as long as possible.

"Bella, I don't really know what the week is going to bring. I've grown rather used to our little bubble." I hesitated. I wasn't sure how she would take my offer. "I was wondering if you'd be willing to spend next weekend with me."

"Are you asking me on a date?"

"Sort of, I mean like pack a bag and give the whole weekend over to me."

"Do you have plans there Casanova? Or are you just trying to get to third base?"

"It wouldn't be very romantic if I told you all about it, now would it? Just let me seduce you properly."

"Aren't you Mr. Confident? At least give me some clues about what to pack?"

"I'll take that as a 'yes.'" We held on to each other, not wanting to say goodbye. "Bella, next weekend is solely about wanting to avoid this moment. I don't like letting you go."

It was so hard to watch her leave. I still didn't feel right about her going alone, but Bella is not someone I could or would try to control.

I waited five minutes before sending her a text:

Be safe

Her buzz back was quick.

Yes dad.

She set me up for that one.

I'm not thinking very paternal thoughts toward you right now.

Tease. Could have told me while I was still there.

Come back and I'll show you.

Shoot. Just tripped. Can't text and walk. Call you later.

When my phone rang a while later, I assumed it was her, so I didn't even look at caller ID before answering, "That was fast. Miss me much?"

"Hey Edward, it's not Bella."

"Jasper?" It didn't register for a second, and then realization came swiftly "How do you know about her?"

He filled me in on the back story, and I gave him an abbreviated version of my relationship with Bella. She and I hadn't given ourselves a label, so I hesitated before calling her my girlfriend.

It explained why she'd had his book out earlier.

"It's an odd coincidence isn't it?" I mused.

"I suppose it is." Though his tone didn't seem curious at all. He was on a mission "So, Edward, I've known you for a long time, and I know my loyalties should be toward you, but Bella's special, and I'm warning you not to mess with her. She's not the type of girl you can love and leave."

"I know that Jasper. Give me a little credit." My tone verged on annoyed. I knew where he was coming from though, and if the situations were reversed, I'd probably give him the same warning. Still, I was tired of the static perception everyone had of me.

"I'll try, but I've had front row seats to an awful lot of your almost relationships. You're a charming guy. It's hard for women not to love you when you lay it on."

"What if this is different? What if I mean it?"

"Are you sure?"

"Never more certain of anything."

"Just be careful please." He paused again before changing the subject. "So, how are things with the Cullen clan?"

Growing up as we had, families were meant to be private. We most certainly did not air dirty laundry publicly. I cringed whenever I thought of my dad's feelings on that issue. Jasper and I had been friends forever. He, Emmett, and I were inseparable on the beach in the summer. We played pirates and army and searched for shells, just like any other kids would. For years we were the "three amigos" until the summer Tanya infiltrated the group. None of us particularly wanted to add a girl or to turn into the four musketeers, but my parents were adamant that we be nice to Tanya because her parents were very good friends of the family. But as the years went by, none of could remember what it was like before she joined the circle. Eventually, she was just one of us.

So, Jasper was among a select few I had ever trusted outside the family. He also understood my family dynamic, the good and the bad.

Bella had called while I was on the phone with Jasper. She left a message that even though she napped, she was still groggy, so she was going to turn in early, but she wanted to let me know she was home safely. I didn't want to wake her, but I sent her a quick message.

I miss you. You know where I'll be waiting in the morning. Always.

Monday morning was both the continuation of a routine and the start of a new one. Previous boundaries were

down, and expectations were different. We met at the coffee shop, and stopped by our window. She was wearing her bracelet, and she touched it lightly while we examined the new display.

As it had been since the first day I saw her at the window that simple touch wasn't about the jewelry, but what it represented. Alone, the bracelet symbolized my feelings for her. Clasped around her delicate wrist, it was our constant connection to each other.

The window was forever ours. I would never be able to stand in that spot again without remembering what it felt like to fall in love, I mean really fall, for the first time. But the display had moved on, so our pause there was brief.

We continued with the pattern we began the week before. I walked her to work. We messaged each other throughout the day. I walked her to the subway stop after work. We both wanted to spend more time together, but we were still merging our lives, negotiating a balance.

Admittedly, being with Bella outside of our routine made me nervous. Clearly the sexual tension was growing. I knew it wouldn't be long before we moved forward physically. Maintaining some boundaries this week was helping keep my overwhelming passion at bay.

I was amazed by what that woman did to me. I've been with a lot of women; a couple were even listed among the most beautiful people in the world. But Bella redefined beauty for me. Animated it. No longer an objective quality you could measure by features lining up perfectly. Beauty breathed, laughed, comforted, and did this amazing tongue thing.

After spending the weekend on two couches with beauty personified, I was a little pent up.

Reality kept dialing my number or knocking on my door all week, preventing me from truly losing myself in her.

First thing Monday morning, I received a call from my mother.

"Hi Edward, dear. I just wanted to call to thank you for coming over yesterday. I enjoyed having everyone in the same place again."

"Mom, it was a disaster."

"I know there were some rough spots, but I think we should keep trying. It's the only way for things to get better."

"I don't think I can do that right now."

"Are you taking your new lady friend to the symphony this weekend? I thought perhaps we could share the box . . ."

"Stop, Mom. It's not going to happen."

"But if he sees that you've matured so much, maybe it will open things up. He loves you, Edward. You both have a lot to work through, but it's not hopeless."

"You saw how he treated me yesterday. I will not subject anyone else to that. He's being unreasonable. He was a cruel bastard."

"Edward, he is your father. And I won't have you talk about him that way. Besides, you may not be seeing the

whole picture, here." Of one thing you could always be certain. My parents would show a united front. She would not talk badly about him even if she disagreed with him.

"What part of the picture am I missing? Certainly not the part where he can talk about me however he wants because that's showing up vividly. Are you all enjoying the exhibition?"

"It isn't like that. And you know it. This has not been easy for any of us."

"Sorry. Listen, I really do have to go, but maybe we can have lunch sometime this week."

"Could we make it a lunch for three? I'd really like to meet this girl. What did you say her name was?"

"I didn't. Nice one, mom. And maybe not this week, but we'll see. By the way, she admired your handiwork at my apartment."

"She must have good taste then." My mom could deadpan with the best of them.

"Sure of yourself aren't you?"

"I learned from the best, now didn't I? The Cullen men are nothing if not confident. We all just have to watch how quickly confidence can turn to arrogance."

I didn't know whether she was referring to me or my father.

For two days, I grappled with what our weekend should entail. I entertained jet setting off to a Caribbean island, but I didn't know if Bella had a passport, and asking her would ruin any surprise.

Jasper called it right on this one. I knew how to bring a woman to her knees. This was all so new to me though. I hadn't been with a woman in a long time, but in the past, a trip like that had always been sure to impress. And there would have been no question as to the outcome. But Bella wasn't like anyone else. I couldn't pull out the old playbook when she'd changed all the rules.

I was interrupted from my travel search by a buzz from Jane. "Your brother is here, and he would like a few minutes if you're free."

"Send him in." After my conversation with my mom yesterday, I had a feeling I knew where this was headed, but he'd given it more effort on Sunday than anyone else.

"Hey man, how's it going?"

"Fine, Emmett, but do you want to cut to the chase?"

"I should have come by yesterday, but I was swamped. I'm sorry about Dad."

"I appreciate your trying. Can you believe mom thinks we should get together again?"

"Yeah, I can, she wants Rosalie to host a dinner party."

"I'm busy that night." I said with a straight face.

"I had a feeling you'd say that," He chuckled lightly in response. "Will I see you tomorrow night?"

"That's the PAC Northwest dinner right? No, I'm not on that account."

"I know, but it would be a good show of face for you to be there."

"No, thanks, Emmett." The truth about all these events was that I wasn't ready to subject Bella to the maelstrom that was sure to follow, and if I couldn't take her, I didn't want to be there. We didn't even have plans for tomorrow night, but somehow being alone was preferable to going anywhere without her.

He was thoughtful. "Listen, I know Rose wasn't supposed to tell me anything, and she didn't really. Just that you came to talk to her about the girl you mentioned on Sunday. Don't get mad at her, okay. She was just confused. She didn't want to say too much, so she didn't say anything."

"It wouldn't make a difference anyway."

"He's got to come around sometime, Edward."

"Everyone keeps saying that, but it's been years, Emmett. I don't think it's going to happen until everyone is willing stand up to him. And I don't mean just change the subject. I mean really tell him he's wrong."

"You're going to need to make an effort too, you know? He's not always as bad as you've been making him out to be."

"Emmett, do you guys still play tennis every week?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Nothing, just . . ." How could he possibly understand? He knew his father loved him, wanted to spend time with him. He understood what it meant to have his father's pride. It wasn't his fault. I tried not to blame Emmett, but some days I resented him more than others. "I don't feel as confident that he's just going to change."

He noticed my computer screen at that point. "Going somewhere?"

I closed out quickly, and borrowing one of his standard moves, diffused the discussion.

By Wednesday, my decision about our weekend had been made. There was really only one place I wanted to spend a couple of uninterrupted days with Bella.

I called Jane in to help me out with some of the final details. She took diligent notes and seemed genuinely interested as she asked me about how long I'd been dating this girl.

I told her a little about the Tiffany's display, and she gushed about how romantic it was.

"How in the world did you pull something like that off?" She oozed.

"I had a little inside help. Wait, you used to know Jess Stanley didn't you?"

Her head snapped up from her notes, and she put on a sickeningly sweet smile. "Sure, I remember her. She helped you out huh?"

"She didn't really have a choice now did she?"

Jane looked back down at her notes. She was here then. She knew what happened.

"Never get on my bad side, Jane. "

"I'll take care of these things right away," she said as she scurried to the door.

Just two more days. The anticipation was all consuming. I replayed our conversations from the previous weekend. I didn't want to be presumptuous, but everything seemed to be leading toward sex. I promised her seduction, and I wanted to deliver. Ultimately, hadn't the last few weeks been one giant seductive scene? That was how I planned to approach this. I would set the stage, but she was the star. I'd follow her lead. As much as I desired her, I didn't want to move forward until it was for the right reasons; until I knew she loved me.

I pulled up the weather forecast and saw that snow was in the forecast for Friday. I wondered if Bella would wear her boots.

Make Love, Not War

I fished all week for details. I got nothing.

I begged. I flirted. Still nothing.

Edward wouldn't even tell me what to pack. All he said was 'casual.'

On Wednesday afternoon he shot me a text.

Can you bow out at noon on Friday?

It had been a quiet week, and I had a ton of vacation time accumulated. They wouldn't miss me for a few hours.

Yep, but only if I get one hint.

He must have been waiting for me to reply

Dress warm

Some hint.

Alice had been chomping at the bit since I filled her in on Monday a.m. At first she was envious, then amazed. By the time I got to the heavily censored details of Sunday night, she was concerned.

"B, you know I am happy for you, but please be careful. You have a habit of going for the wounded puppies. This one might not be any different; he just might be purebred as opposed to a mutt."

Jasper had called with words of caution as well, yet his were more optimistic.

"I've known him for a long time, Bella. When I spoke to him the other night, he didn't sound like the Edward I know. I can believe if anyone could change him, it would be you. Just please be careful, okay? The world that he and I live in has a different set of rules than what you are used to."

I know that they meant well, but this was different. Edward was different. Honestly, I should hook Alice up with

Jasper. They could 'worried mother' me to death together.

Thursday night was spent tearing my wardrobe apart. I had no clue what to pack. All Edward told me was comfortable and dress warm. That could cover anything.

I also had to deal with the inevitable. What the hell would I sleep in?

I am as liberated as the next girl, but when it came to sleeping attire, it was pretty much boxers and t-shirts. Function reigned supreme over form. My lingerie drawer was just as bad. Lots of simple cotton, all very comfortable and classically appealing, but not, well...weekend away or seduction worthy. Alice had been after me for ages to 'broaden the spectrum,' but it just wasn't me.

I spent more time dissecting what to pack for a weekend with Edward than most people did on solving world peace. I toyed with a panic shopping run or calling Alice, but that would only make me more nervous. In the end, I gave up and decided to stick with the usual. Why pretend to be something I am not, even if it was to impress Edward. Big picture, Bella, think big picture.

In all honesty, my focus on packing helped me keep at bay the myriad of thoughts that swirled. I would be spending all weekend with Edward. That included two nights in, what one would assume would be the same bed. That, coupled with his comment about 'seducing me properly' clearly indicated intent.

I have always been incredibly rational, and not much of one for spontaneity. If you told me that one small deviation in my daily routine would turn me into a tie grabbing flirt who was soon to be spending the weekend with Edward Cullen with a very high likelihood of 'something' happening, I would have laughed. Sure, I'd had sex this early in a relationship before. But as much as I am a planner, sex for the first time had always been spontaneous, totally unscripted. As strange as it might sound, plotting this all out felt right. I was nervous, but in a good way. Anticipation of what might be, not doubt.

That might have had something to do with the effect he had on me. I had almost jumped him on our first real date, and again on his couch the next day. Self control and Edward did not exist in the same worlds where I was concerned.

The snow had started to fall over night, wrecking havoc on the city. They were calling for at least eighteen inches in Central Park before evening rush hour.

Friday morning I donned jeans and a fitted cashmere cardigan. It was the closest thing I could find to warm that didn't make me look like frumpy house frau from an LL Bean ad. I bundled myself in a parka and hailed a cab in lieu of schlepping my back pack and bag on the subway. Edward had gone into the office early to wrap up some things, and made me promise to be out in front of my building at twelve on the dot.

At five 'til twelve, I was shoving things in my bag when I heard Eric Yorkie, one of the editorial assistants, talking loudly in the hallway.

"You will not believe who I just saw in front of our building! Edward freaking Cullen...." He paused, which led me to believe that he was on his cell phone. "Yes, you know, that hunk of man meat that always used to be on Perez Hilton..." Another pause. "Yep, that one. He must be waiting for some lucky bitch. He's out in front of my building, leaning against a black Mercedes like sex on legs. God what I would do to change his orientation!"

I slammed my hand to my mouth, desperately fighting laughter. It might be the only time I ever got to hear my boyfriend ogled by a gay man. It was hysterical.

I was already giddy at the concept of spending a full weekend of interrupted time with Edward, which might have made a little bit cocky. I slipped on my parka, threw my backpack and bag over my shoulder, and stepped out into the hallway.

"Excuse me, lucky bitch, coming through."

I half wished that I could stop to see the look on Eric's face to match the "NO WAY!" exclamation, but as he had mentioned, I had sex on legs waiting for me downstairs. A much better offer if you ask me.

I drummed my fingers against my backpack strap as the elevator descended. As soon as the doors opened, I was out, flying through the lobby to the revolving door.

And there he was, leaning against a black Mercedes just like Eric had described. A black parka, faded jeans, Sorels and a Yankees cap to keep the snow out of his eyes. Was there anything he didn't look good in?

"What are you smiling about?" He asked as he leaned in to kiss me.

"I just got to listen to one of the assistants go all gaga on the phone about an Edward Cullen sighting. I think the term used to describe you was 'man meat' and 'sex on legs.' waiting for some lucky bitch."

Edward rolled his eyes and opened the back door of the car for me. "Great. Hopefully you put her in her place."

I laughed and smiled innocently at him. "I bumped HIM out of the way and said 'lucky bitch coming through.'"

Edward coughed at the realization that it was a man, not a woman who had been admiring the goods.

"I guess I shouldn't tell you what he said about changing your orientation..." I slid into the car, making room for him in the backseat.

A man sat in the front, biting back laughter.

"Bella, Demetri. Demetri, Bella." Edward introduced.

"I like her, Edward, she's a feisty one." Demetri quipped from the front seat.

"If you only knew." Edward pulled the door shut behind him as Demetri pulled out into traffic.

I turned to Edward. "Okay, enough secrets. What's the plan?"

He smiled and leaned his head against the seat. Nothing. I snuggled into his side and closed my eyes. Edward slipped his arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head. This was heaven.

Demetri didn't speak as he navigated through traffic. The snow caused knots of traffic just south of the park, which caused us to sit in limbo for a good twenty minutes. We didn't move, didn't speak. We didn't need to.

When we finally pulled up in front of Edward's building, he handed me a baseball cap and a pair of gloves.

"What's this for?"

He didn't answer. "Demetri, can you make sure Bella's bags get upstairs before you take off?"

"Sure thing Edward." Demetri gave me a big smile. "Nice to meet you, feisty one. Have a good weekend."

Edward grabbed my hand, and pulled me across Fifth Avenue. Traffic was still snarled south of us, so there were only a few cars to dodge. Once we made it to the other side, he led me through the gates and into Central Park.

"Edward, what are you..." a snow ball nailed me square in the gut. The snow was soft enough that it didn't hurt. Lucky for him.

I bent down and scooped up a huge handful of snow.

"You are so going to regret that!"

He gave me a devilish smile as he walked backwards, his hands up in a 'bring it' gesture. I took off running after him, at a massive disadvantage because of the depth of the snow.

"Come on, Bella. You can't dish it if you don't follow through."

"I'll show you follow through Cullen!" I tossed the snow in his direction, bowing down again to ball up another handful.

We spent the next hour chasing each other around the park, throwing snowballs, playing tag, and generally acting like ten year olds. I wanted to build a snowman, but the snow was too dry, and wouldn't stay packed. I made due with snow angels instead.

It felt amazing, like nothing else in the world existed. *Just you and me.*

The snow started to pick up again, big fat fluffy flakes that reminded me of something out of a Currier and Ives print. I pulled off my baseball hat and stuck my tongue out to catch flakes.

"That's a look." Edward quipped.

"What can I say, snow makes me happy." I pushed my hair back out of my face, sticking my tongue out to catch more. Next thing I knew, I was flying backward into a snow bank, squealing with laughter.

Edward's arms were around my waist as he rolled us over so that I came to rest on his chest. His baseball hat had flown off at the impact, snow flecking his hair.

"You make me happy." He whispered. His eyes were bright, back to the way they had looked last Saturday on my couch.

I rested my chin on his chest, studying his face. I had almost become accustomed to the way he looked. But out here, in the snow, cheeks flushed, smiling; there were no words to describe it. As absolutely breath taking as he was, the external was no comparison to what was hidden deep inside.

A knot began to form in my chest, like my heart was literally being squeezed. I couldn't imagine him being more flawless than in that moment.

"I love you Edward."

He didn't say anything, just smiled and traced that familiar path along my cheekbone.

"Infinitely, Bella. Infinitely."

We stayed like that for a long moment as the snow fell. It was perfect.

But as with all perfect moments, reality has a way of setting in. In this case, reality was cold, wet denim.

"Hey, you're shivering. Come on, let's get you inside and warm."

Edward got up, pulling me along with him. By the time we were in the building, I was freezing and couldn't stop shaking.

"God, I am so sorry Bella, I wasn't thinking about how cold it would get." He kept his arms around me as we waited for the elevator.

I didn't speak, just burrowed closer, trying to extract as much warmth as possible.

Once the elevators doors opened, he pulled me down the hallway to his apartment. The door was unlocked, I would assume from Demetri dropping off my bags.

"Is it okay if I take a shower?" I asked as another tremor hit my body. "Maybe the warm water will help."

Edward didn't respond for a second, his arms still wrapped tightly around me. It almost felt as though he sighed.

"Go ahead. There should be plenty of towels in there." He stood in the hallway with my coat as I fled for the warmth of the bathroom.

I cranked the shower as hot as it would go, and shed my wet clothes. I couldn't stop shaking, and welcomed the sting of the water as it helped generate heat. As my limbs warmed up, my brain shifted from self preservation to where I was.

In Edward's apartment.

For the whole
With no clue of what he had planned for the weekend.

And I had just told him I loved him.

As if I hadn't been nervous and excited enough already. I immediately started second guessing everything. What I packed, what would happen when I left this bathroom, what Edward had said about 'seducing me properly.' I could feel the anxiety creeping in. I took a deep breath, focused on reining in my nerves. I wanted this. I love him. We were all that mattered. Everything else would fall in place.

When the water started to cool down, I shut it off and climbed out of the shower. My bag sat just inside the door. Edward must have slipped it in. Knowing him he would be apologetic about entering without me knowing. I may tease him about it, but some of his old fashioned perspectives really were charming.

I dried off, and dug through my bag. Nothing seemed appropriate. I didn't want to throw jeans back on. And it was only 3 in the afternoon. Too early for pajamas.

That's when I noticed one of Edward's dress shirts hanging on the back of the door.

It was presumptuous. But what the heck, I couldn't always let him have the upper hand. He knew the effect he had

on me. Turn about is fair play.

I hung the towel up, and slipped his shirt on. It still smelled like him, and I held the collar up to take a long breath. It helped calm the butterflies that decided to have a garden party in my stomach.

Edward was a good foot taller than I was, so the shirt hit me just above the knee. I buttoned it up, and slipped on a pair of boxers.

I took a deep breath, and opened the bathroom door. Ready or not, Edward, here I come.

~*~

CHAPTER 9: FANNING THE FLAMES

HEAT

Bella was in my shower.

It was only mid-afternoon.

She said she loved me.

In my shower. Wet.

I almost asked if I could join her, but she really was cold, and it was only three in the afternoon.

If she'd been wearing those boots, I wouldn't have been able to resist.

I distracted myself by heating hot chocolate and preparing a plate of cookies.

It wasn't actually enough of a distraction. I kept going back and forth between the two images: Bella in the snow completely winded and flushed, looking me in the eye and saying the three little words that made it all so real.

The other image was Bella in the place I'd spent the most time fantasizing about her. I could see the drops of water trailing down her back. Her chestnut hair made even darker while wet, laying against her milky skin.

The images were two halves of a whole. I hoped this weekend we would put the pieces together—emotional and physical. I wanted it. I wanted her. I chose to stay at my apartment for one primary reason. I knew we could be ourselves here. *Just you and me, I promise.* The rest of the world didn't exist. In that mode, we had never once struggled with the right course of action; the pieces had always been a perfect fit. I'd never handed over control easily, in any context. And it wasn't that I was ceding power to Bella. Neither of us was entirely in charge of the situation; it was more that we trusted each other. We trusted *us*. As long as that held true, I could handle whatever else happened this weekend.

Ultimately, only one thing was an absolute . . . I would wake up next to her tomorrow morning. My bed would know her warmth. My sheets would be saturated with her scent. I would have my dose of hope before I even saw the light of day.

Of course, she was naked in my shower, and I would love to be there with her at some point this weekend.

I had just pulled the marshmallows out of the cupboard when I heard her pad into the kitchen. I looked up and froze.

She was wearing my shirt. The sleeves were rolled up, and the top three buttons were undone. My gaze scanned down to see that she wasn't wearing pants. I hadn't seen her legs like this in months. Not since the weather turned. I'd forgotten just how sexy they were. I was struck by the contrast of her perfect curves and her long wet hair, the epitome of femininity with my completely masculine shirt. I had no way of knowing what was underneath. I probably stared too long, but then again when a woman walks around your apartment looking like that, she's hoping you won't stop looking. And I couldn't.

"You've been busy," she said while grabbing a cookie from the plate on the counter.

I handed her a mug of hot chocolate. I turned one corner of my mouth up in a sly smile, and asked, "Didn't I tell you to dress warm?"

"Strangest thing. It felt hotter when I got out of the shower." She hopped up on the counter top, and crossed her legs.

"I turned the heat up." I said as I walked over, and uncrossed her legs, so that I could stand between them. "And so did you."

I planted soft kisses along her neck, pulling away the collar of my shirt for better access. I could feel her swallowing the bite of cookie she'd taken.

She set her mug down on the counter beside her. "Did you know chocolate is considered an aphrodisiac?"

I used my tongue to trace her collar bone. "I believe I may have heard that somewhere."

She had one hand resting on the kitchen counter, while the other was tangling itself in my hair. She turned her head, indicating I should move to the other side.

My hands were busy massaging her thighs which felt like silk. She'd been leaning back so I could fully explore her neck, but she sat up straight, and I raised my head. Both of her hands went to the sides of my face. My knees were shaking so I braced them against the cabinet. I gripped her hips tighter for leverage. "You look amazing in my shirt," I whispered.

"I bet you look amazing with no shirt," she answered. I took it as a cue. I slid my hands under her bottom and lifted her up. She hooked her legs around my waist and brought her lips to mine. When she did her signature move with my bottom lip, I growled.

As our tongues greeted each other, I began the slow walk down the hall toward my bedroom.

Flame

As soon as Edward sat me down on his bed, the nerves came roaring back full force. I wished to god I had never Googled him. I would have been okay if it weren't for the pictures of him with those women. Tall, blonde, perfect. I am not any of that. How could I ever compare?

I pushed the images of Edward with super models and starlets to the back of my mind, and focused on unbuttoning his shirt. My angle of attack and the fact that I was working backward were a disadvantage, so I gave up on subtlety and tugged, which might have ripped a few buttons loose.

He inhaled sharply against my neck.

"Impatient?"

I didn't answer, concentrating instead on pushing the shirt down his arms. He shifted, withdrawing one arm, then the other.

"Better." I whispered as I ran my fingers slowly up his back and across his shoulders. Just a few weeks ago I had fantasized about doing exactly this. I could feel him shiver as my fingers passed lightly over his ticklish spot. His reactions gave me a little more faith, like a physical declaration that he wanted to be here, that he wanted me. That I was good enough.

He loves me. Stop being mental.

Edward began working on my shirt, slowly trailing his hand inside the placket as he popped each button free. Every touch made me quiver. Every time he withdrew made me want more.

He had all the buttons undone now, and was tracing slow paths across my body. Around the hollow at the base of my throat, down, between my breasts, across my abdomen, along my hip bone. Innocent, slow paths that tied my heart up in knots. They were in good company with those butterflies in my stomach.

Edward pushed the shirt away from my shoulder, and resumed tracing. Along my collar bone, down my arm, to my side, back up my body again, just barely glancing my breast. It was like he was trying to memorize every part of me. I kept my eyes closed. I didn't want to see him studying me. I didn't want to misinterpret an expression. With my eyes closed, I could enjoy the sensation and close out the apprehension of how I compared to every other woman.

He continued tracing, periodically kissing a spot along his path. It was a slow form of torture, but it felt like heaven.

"I don't know if I can handle this," I whispered as he repeated the circuit. He immediately paused.

"We can stop, Bella. It's okay."

"That's not what I meant, Edward." I pulled in a ragged breath. "Enough with second base. Hurry up and steal home, would you?"

Fade

"I have to get to third before I can steal anything." I continued trailing her breasts with my hand, but I dipped my head down to run my tongue along her stomach. Tasting her bare, sweet skin sent that place in my not quite stomach into over drive. I stole a glance up at her.

She was leaning back with her eyes closed.

"Oh God, You have absolutely no idea how long I've wanted to do this." The minute it came out my mouth my eyes flew to hers. They were open and confused.

I sighed.

I sat up and then leaned down on my elbow next to her. I kept one hand just below her breast so that my thumb was resting up against it.

"I should have told you this before, and it's for the best that it came up before we go any further."

"Edward? What?" She actually looked a little worried. I couldn't imagine what was going through her head.

"That day in the coffee shop wasn't the first time I saw you."

"I don't understand. I would have remembered meeting you."

"We didn't. But I saw you. Every day. At the window."

Her brows furrowed in consternation. "For how long?"

I looked down, away from her intent look. And I saw her body, completely vulnerable to me. It forced my eyes back to hers. "Six months."

She bit her lip. And waited for more.

"The first day I saw you, it had rained. You were wearing those yellow rain boots of yours. You mouthed a song as you stopped in front of the window." I couldn't help but smile even now at the image. "You just . . . I don't know. You're so beautiful, Bella. I don't think you have any clue what you do to me. I came back from L.A. very jaded, but you were a bright spot. You're so different from this world I live in. You're alive. You're real. You're everything I've wanted and a lot of things I didn't know I needed. And it scared me. It still does sometimes."

"Why didn't you talk to me sooner?"

"There were a couple of reasons. The first I've since discounted. I worried that you wouldn't live up to my fantasy, that you weren't as good as I thought. I was wrong about that. You're better." I couldn't help glancing down at her exposed form briefly. "You're too perfect for my world, Bella. I was afraid we'd ruin you."

"You thought *I* was too perfect?"

"I still do."

"You have a warped perspective Cullen."

"Eye of the beholder, Swan." I let it soak in a minute before I said what was most important. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"I'm not." She paused, running her hands through her hair and laughing at something, although about what I was unsure. "I mean, yeah, it's good to know, but it's a bit intimidating hearing that you've been idealized for the last six months."

I'd never known anything quite as trustworthy as "*us*." It was as if those three magic words were a shield, making us invincible even against our own mistakes.

"I love you, Bella."

"I love you too," she said as she pushed me back on the bed. "Even more so when you crack out crazy things like

that."

Combustion

He had been watching me for months. Afraid to approach me, or at least the idealized notion that he had of me.

He thought I was too perfect for his world.

There is an absolute irony in the fact that I had been second guessing myself on exactly that detail.

Deep down I had been worried that this would be some frivolous, throw away thing for him. That I might not be able to live up to his expectations, or to the women in his past.

My fears couldn't have been further from the truth. He loved me. He wanted me. He needed me.

All the nerves, all the worries about not being good enough, pretty enough flew out the window. For the first time in the short tenure of our relationship, I felt like we were on equal footing, neither of us having the advantage over the other.

I trailed my fingers over Edward's stomach, following the same tracing patterns he had used on me, with very similar reactions. It made me feel even bolder, more of an equal. It was my turn to explore, to learn, to memorize.

I am comfortable with sex, but this was a whole new world. Sex had always been a carnal interaction, the effect tied to how good a touch might feel as it ultimately led to a physical release.

But now, here in this room, it was more than that. It was about how Edward responded to me. About how he made me feel emotionally as much as physically. For once, it was about more than my enjoyment.

Sure, I'd had sex before. But I don't think I've ever made love to anyone. Definitely not 'with' anyone. That is what I desperately wanted here, with him.

I traced lower, grazing the top of his jeans. I had to laugh when I noticed the logo on the button. I gave a tug to pop the buttons free as I stretched up to whisper in his ear.

"Lucky's Edward? Do you think you need luck?" I teased.

"Oh god what you do to me, Bella" He hissed. My confidence grew with every reaction.

He. Wanted. Me.

He had been watching me for six months. He had fantasized about me. No one else. Me.

"I don't think you need luck." I continued tracing as I nuzzled into his neck.

"I think we make our own luck." He drew in a sharp breath as my finger skimmed under the edge of his boxer briefs.

"Off please." I whispered in his ear. He laughed and shifted his hips, helping me push his jeans off.

"So what was that you were saying about third base?" I inquired as I continued tracing, lower and lower. My hand shook a bit, the only betrayal of my nerves.

"It's..." he broke off as I slipped my hand up behind his neck and tugged him back on top of me. I needed the contact. I wanted to feel the weight of his body. There was too much space between us.

His hands braced on either side of my shoulders, holding himself slightly elevated, as if he were afraid to crush me. He continued to hold himself above me, studying my face.

"What?"

He broke into one of his stop the world smiles. "I never thought I would see you like this. I want to hold onto the image for as long as I can."

Slowly bending his arms, he closed the distance between us.

He skimmed his nose along my jaw, followed by a slow trail of kisses down my neck and onto my chest. His hand slid back inside my shirt, slowly tracing the outline of my breast. The sensation was unbelievable, and I found myself arching into him, trying to bring him closer, trying to prompt him on.

Please want what I want.

His touches became less hesitant, as if my reaction to him was enough to remove the doubt. He resumed his exploration of my body, tracing and stroking, his breathing becoming as erratic as mine.

When his fingers began trailing up the inside of my thigh, I instinctively shifted my leg a bit to the side. He hesitated at the motion.

"Oh god, please don't stop now." I gasped. He was teasing me, and he knew it.

"Hmmm." He whispered in my ear. "Looks like Coach is waving me home."

Inferno

Only I didn't feel much like sprinting home. Bases were loaded; the player at bat had the highest average. It was a walk. I could take my time.

I liked where things were going before my confession. So, my mouth found its way back to her nipple, and my hands went lower, sliding the boxers she was wearing down. She lifted without being asked and shook them off.

I couldn't help but take time to enjoy the view. She was lying on my bed. My shirt still on her, but barely. Her legs hanging over the edge. One hand gripped my arm, and the other was holding on to the duvet. Her lids were heavy, but not from sleep.

"I feel like I've never done this before." I breathed into her ear. In a way, I hadn't. I'd never made love to a woman, not like this.

With that, we exploded. A symphony of sensations rang through the room as we touched and tasted, inhaled each other and moaned with pleasure. We bumped noses and laughed. I can't remember how or when but there were no more clothes, no barriers between us.

Our explorations were no longer tentative. I learned her body's secrets, and she discovered mine. Lips on necks. Tongues on legs. Hands in all the right places. Fingers entwined. A myriad of sensation. Her mouth found a spot I

didn't know existed, and I hummed, "Bella . . ." We were desperately aroused, but thoroughly enjoying the wind up. I wanted . . . I needed to bring the halves together, to know what it felt to be whole.

I was burning from the inside out. I knew only one thing would put out this fire. I waited until she said it.

"I'm ready, Edward, We're ready," she urged me softly.

I reached down to my pants which had been discarded to the floor.

"Aren't you the good little boy scout? As long as you kept your pants near, you were prepared." I ignored her teasing, but I flashed a knowing smile. Why pretend I didn't hope for this?

I stood at the edge of the bed dragging my hands down her legs. I hooked my arms under her knees and pushed them up toward her as I leaned in to kiss her. Our lips made contact at the exact moment I finally slid home.

Embers

"Edward..." I was incapable of forming a coherent thought. He pulled my leg further up, bringing it to rest against his hip. His fingers trailed back down my thigh, and I gasped in reaction. It was like sensory overload, and I never wanted it to stop.

"I wanted you from the first time I saw you..." he breathed in my ear.

He pulled back so that I could see his face. He never broke eye contact as he pushed back into me. My instinct was to close my eyes, give into the feeling of him inside me. But I couldn't look away from him, I couldn't break the connection.

Oh dear god. That recognizable knot began to form in my stomach, an allusion of what was to come. But that was nothing familiar about what he made me feel. What he did to me.

"Pure..." he withdrew again, never breaking eye contact. "...Joy." And he thrust back into me.

That one effortless statement, combined with the intensity of our physical connection, brought everything crashing together. Our emotional bond had become so strong so quickly. The sexual attraction was as ferocious as it was passionate. His declaration intertwined the two. Nothing would ever be the same after this. I would never want, need or love anyone like I do him.

Want was no where near strong enough of a term. I couldn't get him close enough. I couldn't move fast enough. Every action, every motion he made brought about a similar, just as violent reaction from me. I had spent the entire week trying to imagine what this would be like. How could you ever begin to imagine what you've never known?

"So perfect..." he whispered.

And with that, any grasp I had on control was surrendered. Nothing else existed but the two of us. I wrapped my arms around his neck, holding on as tightly as I could as I lost myself. Edward wasn't far behind.

We lay there in the aftermath, struggling to catch our breath, incapable of speech. Words would not have done the moment justice. We both knew that.

We started as a spark. A frisson of attraction, which ignited into the brilliant, bright burn of first love. But that

bright blaze is short lived, and the heat it provides is shallow. It will either move into a slow, progressive smolder, or flame out all together.

The blaze of first love is wonderful. With Edward, it was breathtaking. But embers lead to a greater heat, a longer, slower burn. I willingly let go of the bright flame, happy to settle into the warmth, the duration, the completion of what I felt in this moment.

I brushed a lock of hair away from his forehead so that I could kiss his temple.

"Thank you." Edward whispered.

"Why are you thanking me? I think that was a joint production." I teased, trying to lighten the tone as I heard the questioning, the doubt that had crept into his voice. This should make us stronger, not raise questions.

I felt him exhale against my skin.

"Edward, look at me."

He didn't move. His head was burrowed into the bend of my neck. He began to trail slow kisses along my shoulder, and it felt wonderful.

"Edward, look at me." I shifted my hips, forcing him to roll us to the side. I kept my leg wrapped around his waist to prevent him from pulling away.

His eyes were guarded, and I could see him starting to pull back into himself. What had happened to him to make him so distrustful?

"Don't go getting all mental on me now. Last time I checked, I was the girl in this relationship."

He gave me a low chuckle, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"I love you Edward. Not an easy, fleeting kind of love. I really love you." He started to lean back into my neck, but I pulled back, my hand on his chest. "No more hiding, no more doubt, okay? You and me against the world. That's the way it works. You have to believe in that."

I watched his face, waiting for it to sink in. It had to sink in. He had to believe in us. It was the only way we would work.

Warmth

"Bella, that was just . . . I've never . . . I don't know . . . it won't be easy when we go public, and that's what scares me. I want to stay like this forever—just us, but people are so shallow and cruel; even my own father. I don't want anything to come between this, between us." I brushed my lips against hers. I needed to feel that connection. "But I think I can handle anything if you are with me."

She sighed loudly, in relief. Then she stretched and her wrists cracked.

"Do you need anything?"

"I wish I didn't. I don't want to leave the bed, but I am feeling pretty hungry. We never had lunch."

"Don't move. I'll be back in a flash."

Opting for simplicity, I pulled my boxer briefs off the floor and slid them on.

"Oh, now that's a look," Bella called out. I turned around and winked at her.

I had a tray of cheese and fruit already prepared in the refrigerator. It was supposed to be an appetizer, but it would work for now. Before I went back in the room, I took a minute to catch myself. I stood in the kitchen, hands braced on the counter trying to put together some reaction to what just happened.

But all I felt was calm. It was the complete absence of fear, of anger, of worry about whether Bella would fit in. There was nothing to process or try to understand; I didn't have to figure anything out. For once, I just knew.

I added bottles of water and wine to the tray, balanced it on one hand, and pulled two wine glasses into the other.

I'd much rather be in bed with Bella, not having to think about anything but feeling damn good.

"Wow, you really are a boy scout aren't you?" I noticed she'd put my shirt back on.

"Nah. No scouts in prep school. I hurried because I expected you to fall asleep. You do have a pattern."

"Well I might not last long tonight either. You wore me out today." She had a sheepish grin.

"We can just relax tonight. No plans at all. We could watch a movie or something."

"Maybe, but I was kind of admiring that Jacuzzi tub of yours earlier. How about a bath first?" She bit her lip again.

I nearly choked on my own breath. When I was capable of coherent thought, I brought out the big guns smile, "Any chance you brought those boots of yours?"

Happy

I talked a big game, but I never could resist when he turned on that smile. The Jacuzzi tub. The couch. You would have thought we were in our teens, not our late twenties.

About midnight, the phone started to ring. We were on the couch at that point. Edward chuckled a remote at the phone, knocking it off the table.

"That solves that..." he mumbled before turning back to me.

We finally gave in around 2 in the morning. The best part of the whole day was curling up to go to sleep with him. And that's saying something. The exhilaration, the sex, the euphoria was amazing. The emotional connection, the sense of completion was indescribable.

Edward fell asleep before I did. There was enough light streaming in from the park to see the outline of his features. In sleep, he lost some of the tension that he carried day to day. He looked younger, more carefree. Like he had in the park earlier today.

No more, I thought to myself. No more worries, no more doubt. I'd take on the world for him. He deserved to be happy. We deserved to be happy.

I slipped my arm around Edward's waist and closed my eyes. We would be happy.

~*~

CHAPTER 10: REAP WHAT YOU SOW

GOOD MORNING

"So then what did you do?"

I pulled the pillow over my head to block out the question.

"Come on, Bella...finish the story." Edward tugged on the pillow, "Come out or else..."

I could feel his hand sliding my leg, tightening right above my knee cap.

"No! Do not start with the tickling again!" I squealed. He had taken to using tickle torture whenever I tried to dodge the incredibly embarrassing questions he had been lobbing all morning, and my sides were starting to hurt from laughing.

"Fess up..."

I sighed and dropped the pillow. "Fine. I stood up, brushed myself off, threw my arms out and shouted 'Ta-Da!'"

Edward tried valiantly to keep a straight face, but I could see him losing it.

"Go ahead, laugh at me. Everyone else did AND I got a standing ovation."

That was enough to send him over the edge. He howled in laughter, so much so that tears started to form.

"Leave it to you to fall off the stage at your own graduation," He gasped.

"Go ahead and laugh at my humiliation. It stunted me for life. I won't set foot in any building that has a stage, dais, or any other type of raised flooring."

Waking up together had been great. Beyond great. But spending the morning lying in bed talking about anything and everything was even better. Nowhere to be, no commitments or obligations. Just us in our own little world.

I rolled over on my stomach and propped myself up on my elbows. "Come on, it's not like you were always Mr. Perfection. You had to have done something stupid or embarrassing in your life."

Edward thought for a moment before breaking into a smile. "If you want truly embarrassing, then there was the time I over slept for class..."

I rolled my eyes, "Oh come on..."

"No, wait, it gets better. I went out with a few fraternity brothers, and we broke the cardinal rule of liquor then beer, never fear; beer than liquor, never sicker. I woke up five minutes before class, completely hung over. I pulled on jeans and a baseball hat, threw a Coke in my backpack and ran to class. I got there, sat down, and

reached in my backpack to pop open my Coke. I pulled it out ready to take a sip, and it was a beer."

I started giggling. "I can't imagine you doing that. It seems so...normal!"

He tossed a pillow at me, laughing. "I am normal. I just didn't qualify for a Pell Grant. Anyway, my professor was not too far off his hippy days, and laughed it off. Of course, just the scent of beer was enough to cause me to throw up in the trashcan at the back of class, but my prof was empathetic."

"You tossed in class? That is disgusting!" I had a vision of Edward, hiking around campus in shredded jeans, stubble, and a backwards baseball cap after a night of drinking. Mmm. Nice visual. "So you were wild and crazy in college, Mr. Fraternity Boy? A la Animal House? I could totally see you as Otter."

"Not too far off, or at least that was my father's perspective." All the mirth, the lightness of Edward's features evaporated.

"I stepped in something, didn't I?" So much for a great morning in bed.

Edward sat up and ran his hand through his hair.

"Am I really that transparent?"

"No. I'm just getting really good at reading you." When in doubt, lighten things up..."As a perfect example, I think you have a little bit of a water fetish, Cullen."

That got the response I wanted. It also got me pinned to the bed.

"See what I mean? All I have to do is say water!" I teased as he grinned wickedly down at me.

"No," He leaned in to trace the hollow at the base of my throat with his tongue. "I have," He planted a kiss where he had just been tracing. "A Bella boot fetish; water is just part of the total equation. And you are evil."

"I try, and obviously you do too." I answered in as saccharine a tone as I could muster. It was a bit of a challenge as he continued to move further and further down my body.

But, in typical me fashion, my stomach decided to growl in protest.

"I'm also hungry." I admitted sheepishly.

Edward laughed, let go of me and stretched. "Come on, I think we might be able to find something."

Ten minutes later, we were raiding his kitchen. I had slipped back into his shirt. It was the easiest thing to grab, and I had developed a bit of an emotional attachment to it.

"Remind me to thank Ralph next time I see him." Edward mumbled against my neck as I focused on buttering a croissant. "I'd tell him I have the next concept for Purple Label, but I don't know if I want to share."

I dropped a light elbow in his stomach in mock protest and climbed up on the counter.

"As much as I love pop tarts, it doesn't get much better than warm croissants and strawberry preserves." I broke off a bite and popped it in my mouth.

"Shouldn't that be considered blasphemous, Ms. Swan? And while we are at it, what is it with you and abuse of eating surfaces? You eat on couches and sit on counters. That's backwards."

I crossed my eyes at him as I sucked some of the preserves off my thumb. Edward laughed and shook his head at me.

"What? Why waste the good stuff."

"You and your strawberry preserves."

"Yeah, you are just hoping for a justification to get me in the shower. I know how your brain works, Cullen."

He stepped forward to take the croissant out of my hand and slid his hand into my hair.

"Déjà vu moment." He whispered as he tugged the collar of his shirt to the side and leaned in to kiss my shoulder. "Have we been here before?"

He was about to say something more, but was interrupted by a knock on the door. He growled in irritation.

"Hold that thought." He started for the door.

"You might want to put on a shirt, Edward." I called.

Surprises

"I could ask for that one back," I teased, pointing at her. "I'll just be a minute. It's probably my assistant checking to see if we need anything."

I quickly threw on a sweatshirt I had hanging in the hall closet.

One glance through the peephole stopped me dead in my tracks. If there were any way not to open the door right then, I would have, but I'd have to explain it to Bella anyway.

I slipped the deadbolt, and opened the door slowly. I barely got out, "Tanya. . ." before she forced her way into the room slamming the door behind her.

"You've got a problem, Edward," she said walking down the hallway.

"What are you doing here?" I chased after her.

"I tried calling several times, but you never answered,"

"I've been busy."

"I gathered," she called out before turning the corner. "I hope you're decent Edward's girlfriend!"

I rushed around the corner myself to see Bella buttoning my shirt.

The two women's eyes met. Bella was in shock, confused. Tanya smiled. "Hi, I'm Tanya," she offered walking toward Bella with her hand held out.

Bella choked out her name, and gave Tanya's hand a light shake.

"So, what's the problem that couldn't wait?"

"Have you been out of the house since your snowball fight yesterday?" Bella had been studying Tanya, but with that question, her eyes flew toward mine. I walked toward Bella, crossing in front of Tanya who sat down on a stool next to the kitchen counter, waiting for a response.

"How did you know about that?"

"TMZ."

"Shit," I mumbled while glancing down to see that Bella was playing with the buttons on my shirt and shifting uncomfortably. I put my arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. She looked up at me, and her expression was muddled—filled with uncertainty and embarrassment. I hated that I had done that to her just by loving her.

I pulled her in close, hoping that the *"us"* shield would take effect. "At least there are no stages or beers here huh?" My attempt to lighten the mood garnered a weak smile.

"It gets worse," Tanya continued. "TMZ broke the pictures online late yesterday afternoon. Probably not a big deal—looked like fun by the way. Anyway, some others are starting to run with the story. Digging things up. I don't think they have your name yet, Bella, but they will eventually. Right now, they're probably dredging up a lot of the past."

She looked down and got quiet when she said it, but then she directed her gaze toward me.

I knew which past she meant. For Bella's sake, I didn't want to lose control, but not hitting a wall or letting loose with a string of profanities was proving very difficult.

"How did you find out about it?"

"Don't laugh. I was surfing the web." She shrugged her shoulders up and smiled.

I looked down at Bella again. She was frozen. She'd cut herself off from the conversation. I didn't know which part of all of this was causing her to panic. I tried rubbing her back to offer reassurance.

She looked up at me and whispered, "I think I'll go get dressed."

"No, listen, I'm not trying to interrupt, but I just wanted you to know. Anyway I doubt Carlisle or anyone would know yet because it probably won't hit mainstream media until tomorrow, but some of the inner circle may be getting calls fishing for information soon."

"I appreciate the head's up. Are we surrounded?" The thought of having to escort Bella through the gauntlet of photographers that I'd once lived with regularly sent bile into the back of my throat.

"Pretty much. If you don't have to go out, I wouldn't. You still have Demetri around?"

I nodded. "Good, he'll be a big help." She smiled at Bella again. "I wish we could have met under different circumstances."

Bella smiled weakly, "Me too."

Tanya glanced down then and something caught her eye. "Is that an Elsa Peretti? From Tiffany's?"

"Yes, it was a Valentine's present from Edward," Bella announced standing a little straighter. I gave Bella's shoulder a gentle squeeze, and I moved to escort Tanya to the front door.

When we got to the hallway, she turned and whispered, "Tiffany's, Edward?" And raised an eyebrow.

The thought had already occurred to me but I didn't want to say anything in front of Bella. I didn't want to tarnish the memories of our window or the importance of that bracelet. I threw my hands up to Tanya and sighed.

Tanya turned toward me. "Those pictures were amazing, Edward. I've never seen you look happier. Don't mess this up." She opened her bag and pulled out a hat, sunglasses, and a scarf.

"Thanks, Tanya. As awkward as this all was, I really do appreciate your coming. Will you be okay getting out?"

"I'm good. I can always exit out the secret bat cave if needed." I didn't laugh, so she shrugged. "I've done this before. I can get out undetected."

She waved in acknowledgement, and then she was gone.

I took a couple of deep breaths before heading back into the room to face Bella.

Cornered

Pictures. They took pictures of us playing in the snow.

The minute Edward left the kitchen, I fled to his office. His computer was on. I pulled up the browser and typed in the website Tanya had mentioned.

There we were, front and center.

Three photos composited together.

One of us playing tag, me lunging out to grab at the back of Edward's parka. He was laughing.

One of him throwing a snowball at me, my arms crossed in front of my face, which was turned directly into the camera. My eyes were closed, my nose wrinkled, smile huge.

And worst of all. One of us laying in the snow, my hand and chin resting on Edward's chest. His hand on my face.

The first two made me mad. The third one broke my heart. I knew exactly when it was taken. What gave them the right?

As bad as the pictures were, the copy was worse.

Heir a Spare No More?

Out of the limelight for over a year, Edward Cullen and a mystery 'friend' were spotted frolicking in Central Park Friday afternoon. Sources close to Cullen revealed that he was, in fact, serious about this mystery woman, so much so that jewelry might be in the picture. Then again, we've heard that one before, haven't we?

I felt sick. I dropped my face in my hands, scrambling desperately to collect my thoughts.

"Bella?"

I hadn't heard Edward enter the room. I didn't look up, too frayed to trust myself to keep it together.

"Why are there photos of us on some trashy gossip site?" I whispered, amazed that my voice sounded as steady as it did.

"Bella, listen we need to..."

"Damn it Edward, why?" I lifted my head, but I couldn't look at him. I focused on the wall of books, scanning and counting, anything to anchor myself. "Who the hell are you, and why are they so fascinated with you?"

I was shaking as reality set in. Alice would see this. My co-workers would see this.

Oh my God, my dad might see this.

I drew in a deep, shaky breath. I had to get it out or I would explode.

"What gives people the right to follow us around, to watch us, to dig into our personal lives? So what if you have the money and the name. I am a nobody. No one cares. It's not important. Why the fuck are they doing this?"

Confessions

I sat down on the reading settee on the opposite side of the room. I rested my head in my hands, hiding, gathering myself.

How the hell did this happen? I knew the answer to that, but how could I not have prepared Bella for this?

"Bella, first of all, you are a very important 'somebody' to me, you hear me?" I waited until she looked at me before I continued. "As for the rest, well, it's my fault. God, I was such an idiot."

"Why?"

"Why what? Why do they care about us?" She nodded. I exhaled to control my anger. "More than one reason probably. They've always been interested, just because of my name. They would still take the pictures. But the rest? The fact that people are digging up info now, and the entrance to my building is surrounded by people ready to snap our picture from every angle, that's pretty much all me."

"I don't understand." She wasn't looking at me. Her tone was desperate.

"This is exactly what I didn't want to happen. It's just so fucking wrong! Why couldn't we get one fucking weekend!" I pulled my hands from my hair and punched down on the settee with balled fists, and I stood up to pace the room. I'd been reduced to profanities for the second time in a week, and I was not happy about it. I attempted to calm myself for the rest of the story. "For a long time, I fed them. I liked the attention or the power or something that came from being wanted. They're like stray dogs that way. If you give them a treat, they keep come back for more. It's been a long time . . . I'm not that man now, and while I expected we'd eventually be talked about, I thought I could control it."

"Who's Tanya?" her voice was a little shaky. I walked over and knelt down in front of her. Our eyes were nearly even.

"Bella, Tanya is an old family friend. I trust her completely, but you should know that if you type our names in that search engine you'll find plenty of pictures of Tanya and me together," I paused, swallowed, and continued, "And you'll find stories of an engagement that were never more than fictitious rumors."

This time she stood up, and moved over to a bookshelf, running her fingers along the spines as she paced. She paused in front of the old photo of the four musketeers, and I hoped it would lend credibility to my plea for understanding.

"Her parents and mine are very close so we grew up together. Anyway, she and I were sick of all the pressure to settle down; it was right out of college, so we went out together . . . frequently . . . to make it appear that we were committed to each other. She was a friend, and we had a good time. We tried to make it more; it would have been so easy if it could have been, but neither of us felt it." I paused there. I didn't know if this was the time to get into the rest of it.

"Did you have sex with her?"

I hadn't been in a serious enough relationship to know how to talk about women from my past. There were far too many ghosts to avoid ever running into one but I could see why having one in my kitchen after the first time we made love would be difficult at the very least.

"No, it wasn't like that." I hedged here because honesty was important, but it wasn't directly related. "Well, we messed around once when we were sixteen, but it wasn't anything. It was kind of gross actually, like kissing a sister."

"This is all such a mess," Bella sighed sounding dejected. She was still looking at the books.

"I'm so sorry. I should have done something to prepare you for this eventuality."

"Does being with you mean I'm on display all the time now? I don't like attention, Edward. . ."

That's when fear overtook me. I stood back up and pulled her into my arms.

"You won't be alone."

Her chest rose and fell and she made a sound that almost sounded like a snort. Then she didn't say anything. The silence was deafening. I was tense waiting for her reaction. When she spoke, the build was rapid.

"Edward, I don't want my picture out there. I don't want people staring at me. I didn't know it would be like this. Oh my god, my mom reads this kind of crap! I don't know if I can handle it!"

My own reaction was instantaneous.

"Goddamn it, Bella. Screw them! They are not going to ruin us!" I said, placing emphasis on *us*. "Not a fucking chance. You and me against the world right? You promised."

Putting it All Together

Looks can be deceiving. People put on a good game face, preventing you from ever knowing what goes on just

below the surface.

A few days ago, if someone had told me that Edward would basically melt down in front of me, I would have asked them what they were smoking, and if I could have some.

Yet here we were. Photos of something that should have been private, just the two of us, splashed all over the internet for people to see. Photographers waiting in front of the building to catch pictures of us together. All because Edward came from old money and had sown his proverbial wild oats.

If it were anyone else, I would have laughed at it. How clichéd. But this was my life.

"I guess you going out there and telling them that I have horrid stage fright and a raging allergy to cameras won't make them leave will it?" I asked quietly, my head resting against Edward's chest.

He let out a cynical laugh. "No, it will only make it worse."

I had a choice to make. I am an incredibly private person, always have been. The thought of people following me around, trying to take my picture, hoping to find out information about me was terrifying. So was the thought of walking out of here and not seeing Edward again.

I had to make a choice. Either learn to live with the scrutiny, or give this all up.

While strong, I am not that good. A month ago, with anyone else, I could have walked away. But I don't think I could walk away from him.

I took a deep breath and looked up at Edward. He immediately brought his hand to my face, tracing his thumb along my cheek bone.

"One of these days, you need to tell me why you do that."

He froze, eyes narrowed. "Do what?"

"You pull back into yourself and shut down. I want to play poker with you sometime, because I can see the wheels turning, and I know your tell. You always do this." I leaned my cheek into his hand.

And it was like the clouds broke. The doubt, the fear, the apprehension fell away, and he relaxed. Not the happiness from this morning, but that would come back in time.

"I never really thought about it." He paused, skimming his thumb along my cheek again. It never failed to stir up those butterflies. "Maybe it's because I had to make due with not being able to touch you for so long. When I get angry, or if something is on my mind, you are the one thing that can calm me down. I guess that would make you my own personal goddess of peace, wouldn't it?"

"Um, as flattering as it is to be compared to Eirene, I really don't think a toga is my personal style..."

That managed to draw a smile out. "I forgot. Never quote anything literary to an editor. Leave it to you to know there actually is a goddess of peace, let alone her name."

I had to laugh. We were both trying to make light of the situation, and it was necessary in the moment.

"Okay, so how do we deal with this? What do we do? I mean, I have had press training, but somehow I think

handling a book tour is a bit different than dealing with hordes of paparazzi."

Edward drew in a long breath. "First things first, I guess I have to take you to meet my family."

"We, Edward. No more me or you. We." I chuckled him under the chin, trying to keep the mood light, to keep him relaxed. "No man is an island, you know."

"True, but being stranded on one with you wouldn't be bad." He paused, "Especially right now."

"Sounds nice and all but remember that I like the snow too... Now if you could find one that had a mountain and a beach, we might be able to negotiate."

"I have money, Bella, but I don't think I could afford to buy New Zealand for you." He quipped back at me, the smile finally reaching his eyes.

We joked around for a bit more before I left to take a shower. I flipped up the back of my shirt at him on the way out, not intending so much to get a rise out of him, but to keep him laughing. It worked too well. I made him snarf his coffee.

Seeing him laugh like that stirred an idea in me. I turned, walking back towards Edward. He frowned at me, as if to ask what I was up to. I grabbed the front of his sweatshirt and yanked him down. He laughed but didn't stop me; he knew what I was doing. Going up on tip toe, I kissed him like I did that first day in front of the window. Before he could catch me, I darted out the door with a shout of 'love you!'

His laughter followed me down the hallway.

Maybe there was something to his analogy about me being his goddess of peace after all.

Us vs. them

I was sure Tanya was right. Leaving would be a challenge. This type of paparazzi were persistent. Who knew how long they would camp out? If we were the hot picture, if they were trying to find out more about Bella, getting in and out could be a challenge for a while.

While Bella was in the shower, I had phone calls to make.

It took me a few minutes to find my phone on the living room floor where it landed the night before.

What I wouldn't give to be in that moment again rather than the one we lived now.

Tanya hadn't lied. There were three missed calls from her alone. The head of PR at CI had already left a message as well. I called my mom first, assuming that if he was in on it, then maybe things were more widespread than I thought.

"Hi, Edward. We're just on our way out. What do you need?" She answered.

"Mom, has anyone called you about me today?"

"No, is something wrong? Are you okay?" Her words expressed concern, but she was distracted.

"I'm fine, but there's a problem. You know how I told you I'm seeing someone?"

"Yes . . ." she said slowly, uncertainty creeping in.

"Well, we were followed yesterday and they took some pictures, Mom. And they're bringing up all the old issues."

"Oh dear. How bad is it?"

"I'm still trying to assess it all, and I need some help with damage control."

"I'll do what I can. Your father is not going to be happy."

"I know. Trust me. I know."

"How is your lady friend? Do I know her?"

"No mom, she's not anyone you would know. She's just a girl." The sentiment was true, but it wasn't enough. "An amazing, normal girl. And this is all a bit much for her. She's handling it surprising well, but you can imagine how overwhelming it is. She has no experience with any of this."

"The fact that you're calling me makes me believe she is important to you. You've never worried about a woman's reaction before."

"Very. She's very important."

"Edward, there better not be a problematic back story to this girl. I can only do so much, you know."

"I promise. No surprises. Anyway, are you free for me to bring her over tomorrow?"

I heard my mom sigh on the other end. "Really? Are you sure? I'm sure your father and I would be happy to meet her, and we are available, but that would be quite a bit for her in one weekend would it not?"

"It's the only way."

"We'll be here, but Edward, I can't promise your father will be happy about it."

"I think if anyone can handle him, she can."

I got through with the PR people who offered to release a "no comment" type statement to the press. I poured a cup of coffee and was cleaning up the kitchen when Bella came out. It was the first time she'd been dressed since yesterday afternoon. I missed her in my shirt, but her look was so very Bella. Jeans, no socks, a long sleeve t-shirt with glittery letters that said, "The Dude Abides."

She went to the window and looked down. I'd been there earlier. Several vultures stood at the ready on the sidewalk below.

"This is all so surreal." She lamented.

"Not the finest welcome to my world. And I'm afraid it's not going to get much better."

"How long will it last?"

"No way to know for sure. If there's nothing exciting happening in the celebrity world, they may hang out trying to manufacture something. They can make even the most innocent situations look bad."

"We have to leave sometime." She was trying to hard to stay calm, but all of this was clearly still a struggle for her.

"Yes, and most likely they'll follow us. I'm going to contact Demetri. He's really good at getting people in and out of tight spots. We'll make sure he's your personal driver for now."

"Personal driver? I don't think so. I'm not going to be shuttled in and out of places like a kept woman."

"It wouldn't be like that. I know you want to be independent, but Bella, they can be so aggressive. And it's not just the people with the cameras. Hell, you can't trust anyone. People will milk you for anything they can get."

"What can we do here, Edward? Can we be proactive at all?"

"I talked with CI's PR people. They are going to paint a ridiculously boring picture of us just being two people in a relationship. Maybe the press will take the 'move along, nothing to see here' bait. But given my history and the whole eligible bachelor thing, they'll probably be pit bulls."

"What can *I* do?" Some of her desperation was coming back. Bella was all about action. I knew she felt helpless.

"You might want to call your friends to let them know people will be contacting them. As soon they get your name, everyone will be called. They'll talk to people you've never met who claim to know you. Be prepared to see lies. You'll get mad, but refuting them doesn't seem to help. We lay low. We live. We ignore them, but we can't be rude or it can fan a fire."

She went to the kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. I watched how comfortable she'd already made herself in that space. She fit. Here. This was part of my world, right?

"So, did you talk to your family?"

"My mom, yes." I moved to the couch, and sat down. I let my head fall back, looking up at the ceiling. "We're going there tomorrow if it's okay with you. My dad will not be pleased. He does not appreciate personal matters going public, and he'll find a way to blame me."

"How can he do that? We didn't do anything wrong!"

"He's single minded in his perception of me."

"That's so unfair, Edward. He'll have to see that we're the victims here."

I couldn't control my smile. Her righteousness was endearing of course, but that wasn't what I reacted to. "'We.' I like that."

"Us against them, Edward."

She sat down next to me on the couch, scooting herself as close as possible. I put my arm around her shoulder to make it easier. As she settled into me, I couldn't help but agree with her. "You're right. You and me against the world. That's the only way it works."

~*~

CHAPTER 11: WE'RE NOT WORTHY LIKE BUTT-AH

The balance of Saturday was spent doing damage control. Edward was on and off the phone all day. He worked with the PR people at CI to wrap up a formal statement. He exchanged messages with his brother. He lined up Demetri to help us get out to his parent's house in Southampton. Originally, the plan was to go to their house in the city, but it turned out that a few of the vultures that called themselves photographers had taken up roost there as well.

I exchanged text messages with Alice, who was out of town for the weekend. She knew what was going on and was prepared. I'd also had a very awkward conversation with my father. I never thought I would say it, but telling him that I was pregnant would have been easier than explaining the situation I found myself in. My dad was incredibly protective of me normally, but where relationships were concerned, he was the original poppa bear – even three thousand miles away. He told me to warn Edward that he had better not do anything that could hurt me.

I didn't pass that on. I wasn't ready to dig into my paternal relationship with Edward when we had to deal with his tomorrow. We'd save that one for another day.

After talking to my dad, I placed calls to a few of my co-workers and authors, as well as my boss. It was awkward and embarrassing to admit what was going on, but they were all enthusiastic and wished me well. One of my newer authors, an affected, Truman Capote wannabe with a heart of gold told me 'it's about damned time you find someone. And leave it to you to not do it half assed.' All that was missing in his statement was an 'mmm-mm girlfriend' and a little head waggle.

I didn't call my mother. There was no point; she would do whatever the hell she wanted to do, regardless of what I asked her. Plus, I had no idea where to find her.

Saturday night we made dinner and hung out on the couch. Conveniently, *Wayne's World* was on TV, and we ended up in a quote war. I kicked Edward's ass. He reciprocated by pelting me with popcorn.

"Stop! Uncle!" I shouted, ducking another barrage.

"Nope!" He grabbed another handful of popcorn and started towards me. I dodged around the back of the couch in an effort to stay out of his reach.

"Put the popcorn down, Cullen." I darted back to the bowl to grab my own handful. "I will retaliate!"

"Let's see you try. You throw like a girl!" He taunted as he circled the couch.

"I am a girl. I'm magically babelicious too. Ya know, Cullen, if there is a concern, I can always give that editorial assistant a call who wanted to 'change your orientation...'"

He threw the handful of popcorn at me and launched over the couch to catch me around the waist.

"Gotcha!"

We both landed with a thud half on, half off the couch, laughing. I took advantage of the position to shove the now crushed handful of popcorn I held down his back.

"Pay back is a bitch!" I giggled. I made no attempt to get away. What was the point? This was exactly where I wanted to be.

"You do know, Bella, that I have butter all over my back now. I am going to need to take a shower." He grinned at me. "And I don't know if I can reach that spot."

"Transparent." I sing songed as I rubbed my hand up and down his back, grinding it further in.

"So are you." Edward teased before kissing me. "And you taste like butt-ah."

"Spoken like a true New Yawkah!" I chided him.

My cell phone chirped, interrupting us. As much as we both would have liked to ignore it, we weren't going to get burned like last night.

I reached over to grab my phone as Edward wiped his hand across the exposed sliver of skin where my shirt had ridden up. Now we both had butter and salt all over our backs. *Gross.*

"Hey," I greeted Jasper.

"Welcome to our world, grasshopper. My phone line has been burning up all day thanks to you."

I groaned. "Is it okay if I put you on speaker? I think Edward should hear this too."

I activated hands free mode and lay my cell phone on the table. "Okay, spill it."

"Hey Edward. Leave to you to cause some excitement in my weekend." Jasper acknowledged before launching in. "So I have been getting phone calls like crazy today. Page Six, Liz Smith, Cindy Adams. The usual crew. They all want to know three things; Who Bella is, how serious you are, and what Carlisle thinks. I have been letting all the calls go to voice mail, but they aren't letting up."

Edward sighed and stood up, shaking his shirt to get rid of the popcorn that was stuck to his back.

"Can't say that I am surprised. Has anyone else called you?"

"Just Tanya getting the same questions. We circled the wagons with the old gang pretty quickly. Everything is buttoned up."

He paused for a second before continuing. "You okay, Dizzy Izzy? This is a lot to take in..."

Good old Jasper; always worried about everyone else.

"Yeah, I am okay, but I am fifteen floors above it all right now, so my perspective may be a bit off." I tugged on the front of Edward's shirt, releasing another shower of popcorn chunks.

"Hey JW, can I ask you an etiquette question?"

"Sure thing Diz."

"What is the proper attire when meeting your boyfriend's parents for the first time? Somehow, I don't think Emily Post has a section on family introductions after you've been splashed all over the tabloids."

Edward laughed and shook his head. His hand went up to trace that telltale path along my cheek.

Preparation

We were still laughing. She brought levity to every situation. It wasn't that she didn't take it seriously. I knew that it was a defense mechanism, but it was so much better than the alternative.

The joke about what to wear was the first she'd brought up meeting my family all day. Given how fearless Bella was, it was easy to forget that this was taxing her. And even if she was the most put together woman I knew, meeting my parents wasn't anyone's idea of the perfect way to spend a Sunday.

I leaned in close as she was wrapping up her conversation with Jasper. "Did you bring that suit of yours with Beastie Boys t-shirt?"

She shook her head lightly and waved me off. She finished what she was saying to Jasper, and disconnected the call.

"I didn't think you noticed that outfit."

"I notice everything about you. Like this freckle on your shoulder," I pulled at her shirt, to try to take off enough to reveal the freckle, but she giggled and swatted my hand. "I also know about a scar on your right knee. Shall we take off your pants to check it out?"

"Perv! Anyway, I'm not sure the attitude suit is the best thing, but my options for tomorrow are very limited. You told me to dress warm, so basically, I have jeans, jeans, and oh yeah, I could wear your shirt. Everything I brought is completely casual. "

"I can call Barney's or Saks and have something sent over."

"Oh sure, I can hear that conversation, 'Yes, my girlfriend is stuck in my apartment. I know you're closed, but can you bring me over a Zac Posen suit and a pair of Stuart Weitzman's by 9 tomorrow?'"

"Bella, I can actually do that."

"Oh. Really?"

"I know some people."

"That comes in handy doesn't it?"

"Especially for all the occasions when it absolutely sucks, like being stuck in your boyfriend's apartment surrounded by paparazzi. It's all a double edged sword I suppose."

"Well, no thank you to Saks. It's a bit much, you know?"

"Fair enough. It would be hard to keep that one quiet anyway. I could have my assistant get something from your

apartment though. You tell her what and where it is, and she could do it. I can call her in the morning. We don't have to leave until noon so there's plenty of time."

"How would she get in?"

"Demetri would come here for a key first."

"Do these people not have lives on the weekend?"

"Don't you ever work overtime?"

"Let me think about it, okay. Can I decide in the morning?"

"Of course, and for the record, I think you're perfect in whatever you wear." I gave her my sly smile and turned the corner of my mouth up, "And when you don't wear anything at all. Weren't you about to take a shower?"

"You're incorrigible Cullen."

But that was as strong a protest as she could muster.

Despite the chaos I knew we faced in the morning, sleep came easily and soundly. The only explanation I had was that Bella made everything easier. Even facing my father in the morning seemed less daunting than it had just a week ago. Either she gave me strength, or her fearlessness was rubbing off on me.

The Lions Den

"Are you sure about this?" I tugged at the bottom of my t-shirt. Somehow, the attitude vibe just wasn't kicking in today.

"Yes, you look perfect." Edward smiled; his eyes on the road. "Plus, pardon the pun, it suits your personality."

"Yeah, which might not be the best introduction to your parents. Bella Swan synonymous with the guys who sing *Brass Monkey*." I looked out the window, watching the trees fly by. "I still can't believe you have people at your beck and call like that. It was really nice of Jane to go get my stuff."

"She's paid well for it."

We were quiet for a while. I continued to watch out of the window. Edward focused on driving, periodically checking the rear view mirror. Thanks to Demetri, we had managed to sneak out of Edward's building and the city undetected. That man is a miracle worker. He currently had the press chasing him and the Mercedes around lower Manhattan.

"I wish I brought my Queen CD. We could have killed time singing Bohemian Rhapsody." I joked, hoping to bring back the lightness from last night.

"Sorry. Can't hit the high notes." Edward retorted.

"But I bet you would look cute head banging." He shot me a dubious look before breaking into my smile. That's better.

We turned off onto a long, winding road, lined with trees. No houses were visible, but every so often, impressive

gated drives would fly by.

"Hey, you okay?" Edward squeezed my knee, drawing my attention back.

"Honestly? I am a nervous wreck."

He laughed at me. "Why are you nervous?"

"Hmmm, let's see. You and your dad are antagonistic to start. Their first impression of me is probably not a stellar one, given that it was via the newspaper, and according to Page Six, I am just a cop's kid."

As bad as the photos were yesterday, seeing my full name and quick bio run down in the paper this morning had been terrifying. The world now knew my short and albeit, rather vanilla life complete with anecdotes on my 'being rather reserved' but having a "quirky, offbeat personality and quick wit" from a girl I had marginally known in college. This must be what Edward meant by people milking a situation for anything they can get, which apparently included a few minutes of fame.

Hello fish bowl.

"Bella, it doesn't matter. If they don't like you, it's their loss, not yours."

"But they are your parents, Edward. It's important that your family like me."

"Actually, I think they should be more concerned about you liking them, but I do tend to look at things differently."

He had slowed the car to turn into a set of massive wrought iron gates. The lane was lined with colossal oak trees.

"Jeez Edward, you said your parents house..." I broke off as we pulled up front of building the size of my high school. Only my high school didn't have cut glass front doors and a crushed stone drive.

"It is just a house, Bella." He paused, staring up at it for a second. "Out of all the places I lived growing up, this was always home. But now, it's just a house."

It was a sad statement. I could hear the wistfulness in his voice, but thought better of questioning him. With what we were potentially heading into, the last thing he needed was to get mired down in bad memories.

We climbed out of the car. Edward slipped his hand in mine, and led me up the limestone steps to the front door. It flew open before he could reach for the handle.

"Edward!" A beautiful woman, who appeared to be in her mid fifties, threw her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "I missed you!"

Edward hugged her with one arm, and then pulled me forward. "Mom, this is Bella. Bella, this is my mom, Esme."

I immediately felt like I was back in high school, being eyed up and down by one of the cool girls. Esme took in everything about my appearance. I wanted to check to see if there was something stuck in my teeth.

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Cullen." I held out my hand, a bit unsure as to how best to proceed.

She hesitated for a moment before taking my hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"It's nice to meet you too, Bella. Please come inside, we were just getting ready to have drinks."

She turned, and it was clear she expected me to follow her in.

It wasn't lost on me that she hadn't asked me to call her Esme.

First Impressions

My eyes narrowed when my mom turned to enter the house. My mom was playing it cool. She was always one to survey the situation before weighing in. I'd wager she was dying to ask Bella more questions and dig into our relationship, but she was being cautious. I squeezed Bella's hand to offer reassurance.

I had never seen Bella self conscious. Thinking back to the months I watched her, there may have been days she seemed more distracted or upset by something, but I'd never seen self doubt. I could understand being nervous, but I hoped she could trust herself. I wanted my parents to see Bella for exactly who she was; then maybe they could see why I loved her so much.

Knowing my father, though, it might take an act of god to get us out of this lion's den unscathed.

I clearly underestimated the impact the estate would have on Bella's confidence. I helped her out of her coat and handed it to James, my family's butler. She turned to face me, and her eyes were wide. I hadn't done enough to prepare her for this. I honestly believed that given how long I'd been out of the spotlight, we'd have more time to develop our relationship before facing all of the scrutiny and the chaos. And given how tough Bella had always seemed to me, I figured we could just handle things as they came. But it appeared I was wrong, and now I wanted to turn around and leave because I'd failed so badly to protect her.

There was no doubt there would be more bumps as we navigated this afternoon. It was as if Bella and I had formed our own culture outside of either of our worlds. This was the first time either one of us had truly had to interact outside our bubble.

I would have given anything to trade places with her. I put my hands on her shoulders and slid them down her arms until I took her hands in mine. I leaned in and whispered "you and me against the world."

She took a deep breath and we stepped into the foyer. It was more of a grand entrance really, with a spiral staircase hugging the wall on either side. An archway to the right led to the music room which housed a grand piano as well as my mother's string instruments: a violin, viola, and cello. There was a chaise on the opposite wall of the piano for listeners to sit and enjoy.

I couldn't help but smile when I saw that room. It was undoubtedly my favorite in the house, and the one where I felt most comfortable. I excelled there. My father had no choice but to praise me in that room. Emmett never fit in that room. It was mine and my mother's.

"We're in here, darling," my mother announced, and we both looked to the right. The formal living room, a parlor if you will. It was a stark contrast to the music room. The colors were gray and muted. None of the adjectives used to describe living room furniture applied here. Nothing was "easy" or "overstuffed." Stiff was more like it. There was an antique settee, about the size of a modern loveseat where my mom and dad sat, both straight as a line. They were holding hands, as they typically did when they were in the same vicinity. My dad always sought out ways to touch my mom. Many were so subtle, people often missed it.

Two wood chairs sat opposite the settee, not touching. Divide and conquer.

I led Bella into the room. I moved the two chairs so they were nearly touching. Us against them. We sat down, and I took her hand again. She faced my father and I, my mother. He didn't rise to greet us, and he'd yet to introduce himself. In any culture, that was rude.

"Bella, you met my mother outside, but I'd like to introduce you to my father, Carlisle."

When she answered, I could hear the strain to keep her normal energy. "It really is a pleasure to meet you, sir."

He nodded, "Likewise."

I noticed James standing silently in the doorway. My mother saw him as well. "What can we offer you to drink?"

It was a test, and I knew it. There really wasn't any way to pass it. If you asked for alcohol, you were a lush, and if you didn't, you were too stiff and lacked manners.

"James, do you have any coffee brewed?" I asked.

He nodded. I looked at Bella, and she smiled. "We'll both have coffee please."

I already knew James would deliver scotch, neat for my father and a glass of merlot for my mother. I wasn't opposed to a glass of wine, but I worried it would weaken my defenses, and I needed to be sharp. It was never more apparent than when my dad started the afternoon off with, "So, Edward, where did you find this one?"

Stand Your Ground

I should have been mentally prepared for the visual impact of Edward's father, having seen photos of the rest of the family. He was striking in a 1950's screen star sort of way. His and Edward's features were very similar; incredibly chiseled, almost European. He was fair like Edward, but with pale blonde hair and ice blue eyes.

I let the eyes unnerve me. It felt like he could look straight through me; see every insecurity, every flaw.

But the minute he addressed us, my nerves morphed into anger. The way that he spoke to Edward was so dismissive, so cold; I couldn't help but react.

It didn't matter that it was an assessment of me.

"He met 'This One' in a coffee shop, Mr. Cullen, where he was kind enough to offer up a section of his newspaper. We happen to follow the same route to work, and struck up a conversation."

I felt Edward squeeze my hand. It was all the strength I needed.

"I apologize for having to meet under these circumstances. I can't imagine being in your place and having to greet someone that my child was involved with after seeing them splashed all over the papers."

Esme raised one cultivated eye brow, a bemused look on her face. Carlisle looked slightly entertained for a flash of a moment before his mask slipped back into place.

"So Bella, what do you do?" Esme queried, trying to bridge the gap in the quiet.

Edward fielded the question for me. "She's an editor at Little, Brown, Mom..."

Esme's eyes lit up. Maybe books were a chink in her armor.

"Do you have any famous authors? Anyone that we know?"

I bit back a smile. If only you knew...

"I have a number of authors that I work with; most of them are early in their careers. The most famous is Jack Hale. We started out together, and have put out five books."

The look on her face was priceless. "Jack Hale? I've never heard of him."

Edward squeezed my hand again. The whole conversation was so ridiculous it was beyond surreal.

"Where are you from, Bella?" Carlisle cut in. Any amusement that he might have shown before was gone.

"Washington, sir."

"Really? Georgetown?"

You have to be kidding me.

"State, Dad." Edward's tone was much colder, almost disgusted. He was trying to protect me from the slight.

"How did you ever end up in Manhattan?"

That was an easy answer, which I had always been proud of. But here, in this room, I suddenly felt like a poor relation.

"I was accepted to Fordham on a full academic scholarship. I graduated with a double major in English Literature and American History, and signed on with Little, Brown right after graduation."

You would have thought I wiped my nose on my hand and offered to shake. It was so abundantly clear where this was going, but their pretension, their attitude was almost comical. How the hell had these two Stepfords produced this brilliant, funny, sweet man sitting next to me? I kept waiting for someone to jump out and shout "HA! You've just be punked!"

"Mom, do we have a bit of time before lunch? I'd like to show Bella the music room and the library."

It seemed to diffuse the mood. Esme gave him a brilliant smile. It was a smile that I would know anywhere...the same one that Edward gave me. I almost forgave her for her behavior because of the way that she looked at her son.

"Absolutely, dear. You should make sure to show Bella the first edition Bronte your father just acquired. I am sure she would love that."

And in that moment, I couldn't decide if she was being nice or trying to intimidate me.

Room with a View

My mom was posturing. Interesting. I couldn't tell if she liked Bella, but she certainly viewed her as an adversary. That wasn't entirely a bad thing. I hadn't seen this side of her since Emmett brought Rosalie home.

"Library?"

"You know it."

I knew if Bella had been impressed by my office, the Southampton Cullen library would mean sheer awe. It was the largest room in the house. Two entire walls were floor to ceiling bookshelves, but it was deceiving because they were moveable. Almost like a closet, you could open a shelf, and there was another row directly behind it.

Several shoulder high, double sided stacks lined the floor space diagonally forcing your eye to the pièce de résistance of the room, a wall of windows with an amazing beach view. There were two small, unassuming desks tucked along the entry wall, and large leather chairs facing the windows.

"Wow, you Cullens really like your books and your views don't you?"

"I can't deny it." I walked over to the section I knew would house the Bronte my mother mentioned. "My father's collection is far superior to my own, of course."

"Does he read them all? Do you?"

"Not all, no. Some things are about acquisition, the chase itself. It is a collection, after all. One of the guys I went to prep school with collects rare documents. As a career. It's not all that uncommon. It is something the idle rich do to pass time and spend money."

"And for you?"

"It's a hobby, not a career. My father was adamant that we would be more than idle. I just happen to like books, one of the few things my dad and I have in common."

"I've never been much of a collector. I can't imagine having enough space to keep things that you can't really use." I don't think she realized what all was implied in that statement, but she'd moved before we let it become anything tense.

"This view is amazing. I didn't think it could get much better than your apartment."

"I love the view of the Park, but this one is one of my favorites." I wasn't sure whether to continue. This was all giving her more insight on a side of me she didn't know very well. I enjoyed many of the privileges that came with my family heritage. I wasn't ashamed of having money. I was ashamed of the way people treated each other.

"You know, so much of this," I said while slowly turning around the room, "is pure pretense. I find most of it disturbing really. Living in a fishbowl and having your intimate relationships displayed for the whole world, for example." I paused and turned toward the window. "But always having a room with a view. That is a perk I can live with. The highest form of art, in my opinion. It is an escape, of sorts. "

I stopped talking, and we stared out the window for a while. My mother interrupted our meditation.

"Edward, lunch will be ready in twenty minutes. Have you shown Bella the music room yet?"

"Not yet. We'll go there now." Bella handed me back the Bronte, and I returned it to its home. "We can revisit this

room after lunch if you like."

"Be careful what you wish for, Cullen. Letting me loose in a library like this could have serious consequences...books might actually be read." I picked up a book and pretended to throw it at her, which got her laughing.

I knew the music room wouldn't be as impressive to Bella, but because it was my mother's room, her sanctuary, she wanted me to show it off. Tit for tat with Carlisle's library.

"Who plays the instruments?"

"My mother could have been a concert cellist had she not chosen the life of a socialite. She dabbles in the other strings."

"And the piano?"

"I play, but the piano was here long before I was. Houses like this require a grand piano to make a grand statement."

"You play? Would you play something for me?"

"It's been a long time, Bella. I'm very rusty."

"I don't mind. Might be fun to see you struggle with something for once. Besides, what was that you said to me, 'For you I always will.'"

"Stupid grand gestures," and we both laughed at that, but I sat down and played. It was a simple Bach concerto that I knew well. When I finished, I turned to see Bella on the settee leaning forward, slightly mesmerized. But she wasn't the one who spoke.

"It was lovely to hear you play, Edward. It's been far too long. It appears you have a positive effect on him Bella. I've been begging him to play again for ages." There was a bite to her tone. "Lunch is ready."

Divide and Conquer

If the introduction in the sitting room was surreal, then lunch was straight out of Alice in Wonderland. Carlisle was cool. He baited both of us, throwing snide comments at Edward, and asking me questions deliberately phrased to trip me up. I didn't let him rattle me; I knew exactly what he was doing.

Esme was a different story. One minute she would reach out, be inviting, engaging. The next minute she was distant and reserved. I'd rather deal with Carlisle's frontal assaults than her passive aggressive games.

Lunch was cool at best. We limped through without ever directly addressing the issue at hand, the photos that had come out yesterday as well as the ensuing press coverage today.

The longer we went without addressing it, the tenser the atmosphere became.

Once the dishes were cleared away, Carlisle stood.

"If you'll excuse me, I have some things I need to deal with." He looked me over, as if debating what to say. "Bella, it's been...interesting meeting you, especially given the circumstances."

He turned to Edward. "You know where I am if you need me."

I quickly glanced toward Edward. He had been incredibly quiet through lunch. I knew he was angry; the question was, at what?

He stood, dropping his napkin on the table. He placed a quick kiss in my head.

"I need to talk with my father. Will you be okay?"

There was nothing I could do but nod. I didn't want to be left alone with his mother, but I didn't really have a choice. I knew that he wouldn't leave me here alone if he had any concerns. He had never said anything but truly good, loving things about his mother, and I trusted in that as I watched him walk out, willing all of my strength along with him.

Esme's voice pulled me back to the room. She sat back in her chair, fiddling with the stem of her wine glass.

"I have to admit, Bella, you have thrown me for a loop. I knew that Edward was involved with someone, but I didn't have any details. I can't say anything today has been quite what I expected."

"I'm not sure I understand what you mean, Mrs. Cullen."

She took a sip of wine and looked toward the door that Edward and his father had both walked out of.

"You remind me a lot of him, you know,"

"I'm sorry?"

"Carlisle. You remind me a lot of him. More impetuous, but the wit, the strength, the fearlessness, they are all very similar traits."

The day had worn me down, and I wasn't up for playing her cat and mouse much longer.

"With all due respect, from what little I have seen and heard, I don't think I find that very complimentary."

She studied me for a second, then pushed back from the table and walked to the side board where she refilled her wine glass. She poured another and brought both glasses back to the table.

"I hope you don't mind Merlot." She slid the glass across the table to me before taking a long sip of hers. "Bella, I won't beat around the bush. Neither of us is happy about the press coverage this weekend."

"Neither am I. I am a private person, Mrs. Cullen. I don't enjoy this."

"If you are serious about my son, you will need to learn to deal with it. The media has always loved him, even before he ran off to LA. Wherever he goes, there will be a camera. If you can't deal with that, then you might want to cut your losses now."

"What if I don't want to 'cut my losses' as you so put it?"

She studied me, as if waiting for me to continue. When she realized that I would say no more, she continued her assessment.

"You are completely different from any girl that I've ever seen Edward with. Even dear, sweet Tanya." She hesitated to see if I would react to the mention of Tanya. "But you aren't of our world, Bella. It won't be easy for you to adjust into Edward's environment."

I was lost. Was she trying to scare me off, or to be legitimately helpful? I couldn't understand her angle, and I wasn't sure if she was going to tell me.

"Mrs. Cullen, the only thing that matters to me is that Edward is happy. I have already told him as much. If that means that there is a place for me in his world, wonderful. If that means I have to learn to live with the media and the scrutiny, I will. This is not some frivolous or throw away thing for either of us, although I am sure that most will think that."

She sat back in her chair and took another sip of wine.

I followed her lead and picked up the glass of wine.

"Hemlock?" I asked, more for my sanity than for hers.

She gave me my first legitimate smile of the day. "I haven't been surprised like this in a long time, Bella. I think you may end up being interesting to have around."

Strike, Not a Spare

It was not an invitation to a pleasant chat. I knew why he thought I was on my way to his library right now. He was preparing to give the "What a disappointment you continue to be, Edward," speech.

Classic as it was, I didn't feel like hearing it today. The lunch they served Bella wasn't even lukewarm. I expected his anger toward me, but how could they be so cold to Bella? She'd done nothing wrong.

I could deal with my mother later, but this was my one chance with my father.

He stood with his glass of scotch, leaning against one of the shorter bookcases.

"Edward, what is the . . ." he started, but I didn't let him continue.

"No, dad. Not today. I'm not interested in hearing all of the mistakes I've made and how they impact you. Somehow you always leave out the mistakes you make."

"Edward, there is no need to raise your voice or to speak to me that way." Carlisle Cullen never showed weakness by getting worked up.

"The hell there isn't! You don't seem to be listening to anything else, and you need to pay attention. I care about Bella more than anyone I've ever been with. We didn't toy with the press. It's not a game. The pictures were a complete accident. We don't deserve this kind of animosity—not her especially."

"She won't be able to fit in, Edward. You'll tire of her before she has a chance to acclimate anyway." He took a long slow drink from his glass.

"So, you're making these assessments without giving anyone a chance? You have no idea what that woman is capable of. Sometimes, I'm not sure why she'd even want to fit in." I was hoping to get a rise now.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"You can turn your nose up at her and everything she is, but the higher your head goes, the more we just see what kind of crap is up there. I'm finding it unappealing."

"Watch your step, Edward. I still employ you." He didn't yell, but I heard the warning bell. He was close to losing it. He knew it wasn't much of a threat. I didn't need CI. I didn't need any job for that matter. I almost laughed but I was too irate to find it funny.

"Lovely priorities, Dad. Some might be more concerned about losing a son than an employee. But I guess you already have your heir, don't you? And I think I've already proven finding employment isn't a problem." I was doing my best to keep up with him. I knew the dig on LA would get him.

"Edward, I don't . . ."

"Save it. We have another hour before we're set up with Demetri for decoy. I would like to bring Bella back into the library. I'd appreciate it if you weren't here."

I was angry, but I hadn't been this satisfied walking away from my father in a very long time.

~*~

CHAPTER 12: GET WHAT YOU'RE AFTER SURPRISES

The drive home from Southampton had been quiet. Edward gave me a short run down on his conversation with his father, but I could tell by his tone that he didn't want to dig into it.

My expectations had not been high on the drive out, but I think that his had. It is human nature to crave your parent's acceptance or blessing, and although he tried to play it off, Edward wasn't any different in that aspect.

The irony though, their coolness combined with his father's clear disapproval only strengthened Edward's resolve. It scared me at first. I didn't want to be his rebellion, a reason for him to lash out at his family. He assured me it was otherwise.

"Bella, I have spent my entire life trying to win his approval. He wants what *he* wants for me; he has no clue or consideration regarding what makes me happy. I am done trying to live my life for anyone else. For once, it's about me. About *us*."

I believed him, but I still couldn't help but worry. Family is an important part of who we are, even if they don't approve. I couldn't imagine having to deal with my father's disapproval. He took me moving to the East Coast hard, even though he knew it was the right thing at the time. I can't fathom doing something that would cause him to be angry or disappointed in me. But I had to remind myself that our situations were not the same.

We spent the next month on our 'island' as we dubbed it. We both continued with work as normal, although I did get a lot of questioning looks and more people dropping by my office than before. Demetri ferried me to and from work. I tried to fight it, but Edward had insisted, concerned that someone would try to approach me. I missed our morning ritual; the coffee, stopping by Tiffany's, him walking me to work. Edward must have been aware of that,

and took to leaving me little notes in the car each morning. Some were sweet, some were funny, and some made me turn bright red. Demetri could tell the days I got a 'zinger' as he called them. He loved to tease me.

Weekends were spent at Edward's apartment, a replication of our first weekend there. It was the one place where we never had to worry about prying eyes, people's intentions, or who might be watching. When it came to peoples' intentions, Edward had become my fierce protector. He respected my independent nature, yet did everything he could to make sure that none of the ripples from my newfound notoriety caused harm or concern. He half joked at one point about getting a doorman for my building, but I nipped that one in the bud.

Unfortunately, the press scrutiny didn't die down. We tried going out a few times, dinner or drinks, but photographers always seemed to be waiting for us. I guess the Cinderella angle was too good to give up. Edward tried to make jokes about it, going so far as to take one of the photos and have it framed so he could put it on his desk at work. He insisted that I looked too cute in it to throw it away, and with all the copy cropped out, it looked like any other photo. It was a stretch, but I appreciated the effort.

As much as we could, we continued in the trajectory we had started. I hated the constant scrutiny, the feeling like I was always being watched, but I hadn't been lying to Esme Cullen. It was a sacrifice worth making. And in the end, Edward ultimately made it all worth it.

Family was the only wrinkle in the equation. We didn't see his parents after the disastrous trip to Southampton, and I had yet to meet his brother. I understand that Edward wanted to protect me, but it felt strange, keeping such a large part of his life at bay.

My dad tried to be understanding. We had formed an odd relationship over the years, a by product of it being just the two of us. He meant well, but when it came to things like talking about relationships, he was at a loss. Our twice weekly conversations covered everything under the sun, but romantic entanglements were not one of them.

The biggest surprise was receiving a few notes from my mother. Renee had apparently seen my name on one of the gossip sites, and dropped a few quick postcards to see how I was. This was typical with her. If there was something going on to draw attention then she had to be in the middle of it. There was no irony in the fact that the only times she ever decided to play an active role in my life was when I was the one in the spotlight.

I worried a little bit about telling Edward that she had re-engaged. I knew that her motives were most likely not altruistic, and he already had enough to deal with. I did ultimately end up telling him, but I probably played it down more than I normally would.

It scared me sometimes, the intensity of my feelings for Edward. It was the little things that called it out. When he would catch me looking at him, and give me 'my smile,' or how he'd twirl my hair around his finger as he read. One weekend it was rainy and miserable, and I made a half joking comment about how it would be great to be sitting on a beach with a beer. Two hours later the heat was cranked in the apartment, and we were sitting the middle of the living room floor on beach towels listening to Jimmy Buffet, drinking coronas and eating snow crab.

The sense of completion, of just *us* in those moments made tolerating everything else worth it.

And, I'll be honest. That couch got broken in pretty darn well. And the bed. Well, most of the apartment for that matter.

As much as I lived for the *just us* moments, I felt bad that I had not seen Alice much in all the chaos. We still talked every day. She was my only lifeline to my old life. I hated that it was so hard to see her, but I didn't want her getting pulled into the fishbowl too. The last thing I wanted was for my friends and family to become

decorative background; although knowing Alice, she would insist on being the plastic mermaid sitting on the rock. If there was one thing throughout this experience, it would be to protect the people I loved in whatever way I could.

Today would be the first time we had a chance to catch up in person in, well, forever. She had broken up with the most recent flavor of the month, and was looking for an opportunity to grab some pizza and talk. Work had been chaos; the first round of edits had just gone through on Jasper's new book, and I was in need of a breather too. So I blocked my calendar for the afternoon and met her in Soho.

She gave me a funny look when I climbed out of the Mercedes. She knew about Edward's insistence on having Demetri as my personal driver, yet hearing and seeing it were two different things.

"I won't be that long, Demetri. I can shoot you a text when we are wrapping up."

He grinned at me. "Sounds good Bella. Nice to meet you, Alice."

Alice shook her head. "Surreal!"

"Welcome to my world. Want to trade me names? Yours suits the situation better." We sat down at a table to ordered pizza and wine. This used to be a regular occurrence for us. I hadn't realized how much that I had missed it.

"Well, aside from living in a hermetically sealed bubble, you look fabulous. Being madly in love and having the press follow your every move suits you."

"Thanks, Alice. I'm sorry it's been so long since we've been able to get together."

She waved her hand dismissively. "It's not like you were the only one busy. I was with doofus number ten."

"That bad, huh?" Poor Alice. I've never met anyone who wanted the dream as much as she did.

"Yeah. Can't say it was one of my greater moments. But it's over now. I have resigned myself to flying solo for a while. I am tired of looking."

I laughed at her. "Be careful, Alice. I got to that point, and here I am now."

"Yeah, but you are different, B. You are living the fairy tale."

"Not sure about that. The only fairy tale aspect is Edward. Everything else is kind of nightmarish to be honest."

"How can having Mr. Perfect be nightmarish?"

I thought for a moment, debating how best to explain.

"Well, it feels like everyone knows who I am now, and reacts differently to me. People that never had a reason to be nice before are now. I have to second guess everyone, always looking for an objective or angle. Plus, I have zero privacy. Perfect example, there is a table of women sitting just over your shoulder who have been staring at me and whispering behind their hands since we walked in. Odds are they are either discussing what I am wearing, how I am not very pretty, or that I must be a gold digger. Edward tries to shelter me from it as much as he can, but I still see it and hate it."

"I never thought about it that way. Although I do have to laugh at the thought of you letting anyone protect you. Dare I say it, you've changed, Bella. And I don't just mean that sickeningly sweet 'I am in love' glow." She was quiet for a moment, as if debating how best to proceed, when I heard someone call out behind me.

"Bella?"

I cringed. People had started approaching me in public recently, acting like they knew me. A few people had gotten too close for comfort, but Demetri or Edward had been able to step in and diffuse what could have been a nasty situation.

"Hey, I thought it was you!"

Alice's face had drained of all its color. I looked up to see Jasper walking towards us, newspaper in hand.

"Oh, hey JW. What are you doing here?"

"I had a craving for pizza. I have been working my fingers to the bone lately for my slave driver of an editor, and decided I deserved a break."

"Nice." I made a face at him.

Alice kicked me under the table, hard.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Jasper, this is my best friend, Alice Brandon. I'm sure you remember me mentioning her. Alice, this is the infamous Jasper Whitlock."

We exchanged a few more pleasantries before Alice kicked me under the table again.

"Did you order anything yet?" I asked, hoping to avoid another pointed toe attack from the evil midget sitting across from me. She didn't know how to spell subtle.

"No, was just heading to do that when I saw you." He was addressing me, but Jasper never took his eyes off Alice.

"Would you like to join us? We've got plenty of food."

I might as well not have existed for the rest of lunch. Jasper and Alice never took their eyes off each other. They talked, they joked, they flirted shamelessly. I have to admit, it was pretty cute.

And then he shocked the shit out of me.

"So how is it that Bella and I are on our sixth Jack Hale book, and she never introduced us?"

Did he just out himself to Alice? Wow. That's just...wow.

It became abundantly clear that I was a third wheel to their conversation. Watching them interact made me miss Edward too. Spring, warm weather, and love in the air. It didn't get better than this.

And it gave me an idea. I shot a quick text message to Demetri, and then waited for the next opening in the conversation.

"Jasper, I need to be somewhere. Would you mind keeping Alice company for me?" She mouthed thank you when

Jasper wasn't looking. Oh she had it bad.

"Sure thing, Bella. I'd be happy to."

Demetri was waiting for me outside the restaurant. "Big D, Can we swing my apartment quickly? It should only take a minute."

"Absolutely, feisty one."

While Demetri navigated through traffic, I pulled out my cell and hit speed dial.

"Edward Cullen's office."

"Hi Jane, it's Bella. How is his schedule this afternoon?"

"OH! Hi! Hang on a second." I heard keys clicking. "He is in a meeting until three, and then he should be free."

I looked at my watch. That gave me an hour.

"Perfect. I am going to pop by at three. Can you make sure he's in his office?"

"Absolutely!"

I disconnected and smiled to myself. "You got that, Big D?"

"Your apartment, then CI. Got it."

I was in and out of my apartment in a flash. I was pretty sure that I remembered the day that Edward said he saw me in my wellies. I dug through my closet, frantic for a second when I couldn't find the cardigan. I finally located it wedged in the back of closet.

Fifteen minutes later, dressed in my wellies, cardigan and skirt, I flew out the door.

"Whoa. Nice rain boots there. Planning on going puddle stomping?"

"Thanks Demetri. Let's hit it."

At five 'til three, we pulled up in front of the CI building.

"I'll walk home with Edward, so don't worry about waiting around."

"Sounds like a plan. Have a good time Bella."

I took the elevator to the 53rd floor, where Jane was waiting for me. She looked me head to toe and smiled.

"I wish I had the courage to wear colors like that. I am too chicken."

"Every woman deserves a pair of wellies, Jane. You should get some. Is he in his office?"

"Yes he is. He came back a few minutes ago. He doesn't have anything on his calendar, so he should be in there alone."

"Great, thank you!"

I made my way down the hallway, ignoring the whispers that followed me. I had only been in CI on one other occasion, when Edward needed to pop back in and grab something for work.

His office was at the end of the hall, a corner with a view of course. The door was open. I stopped, hands braced against the doorway, waiting for him to see me.

It took me a moment to realize that there was someone in with him. Whoever it was must be sitting on the couch out of the line of sight of the door.

"...I just don't think it is that great of an idea. I am perfectly happy with where things stand..."

Edward pivoted in his chair at that point, and caught sight of me standing in the doorway. His eyes went immediately to my wellies, and then slowly worked their way up.

He actually blushed. Who would think yellow rain boots would have that kind of effect on a man?

"Bella..." He seemed a bit flustered. "What are you doing here?"

"Thought I would surprise you. Jane said your afternoon was clear."

A man stepped forward into my peripheral vision.

"So you are the infamous Bella, huh? I'm Emmett. It's nice to finally meet you."

Oops.

Busted

Emmet had really put the pressure on. He was doing his part to keep bringing the family together. I wondered how much influence mom had in his showing up at my office today. I hadn't spoken with her since the Monday after Southampton.

"So do you want to tell me what was up with you yesterday?" I'd asked her.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, mom. What was that display? Hot and cold. You weren't terribly welcoming."

"Edward, what exactly did you expect? This is the first time I've met the girl. Typically, you don't date women long enough for me to even find out their last name." I cringed at the attack, though it wasn't much of an exaggeration.

"That doesn't justify rudeness."

"True. I was really only looking out for your best interests. I worried that perhaps you were blinded by love. I wanted to see if I could figure out this girl's intentions."

"You couldn't trust me to assess a person's character?"

"Perhaps, I can now. I was . . . impressed."

That garnered a smile from me though she couldn't see it.

"I hope that means next time you'll be far more pleasant."

"I think Bella and I definitely came to an understanding. Your father on the other hand . . ."

She hadn't had to finish that statement. I knew we hadn't won him over.

But my mother continued to push for ways to get everyone in the same room together.

Emmett seemed to be in agreement with her. I was arguing vehemently with him when Bella walked into my office at 3:00 in the afternoon wearing her yellow rain boots. It wasn't raining outside. There didn't seem to be any real urgency to her visit. She said she was "surprising me." Oh.

I forgot my own name for a moment. Not surprisingly, I didn't remember Emmett was in the room either. He had to introduce himself. Then realization hit me. He had seen her before too. In the boots. In that exact outfit. Would he put two and two together?

"Hey there. I'm Bella. I'm happy to meet you too."

Emmett looked Bella up and down. I could see his wheels turning. His brows furrowed. He looked over at me as if to ask a question. I probably looked like the Cheshire cat. He tilted his head to the side, and then looked back at Bella.

"Oh my god! You're the crazy girl from Tiffany's?" He turned beet red which was rare for Emmett. "I mean I'm sure you're not crazy. I just . . ." I had to save him.

"Emmett was with me the first day I saw you. You were kind of in your own world."

"Was I singing?" She asked Emmett.

"Uh, yeah."

"I probably did look a little nutty, then. Don't worry, I'm mostly sane, but the more I hang out with your brother, here, the more I think you all are the ones living in the loony bin."

And Emmett threw his head back and shook with laughter.

"Ah, now I see what's got mom so on edge," he said to me. "She's as feisty as Rosalie. Mom's still holding out for a quiet one she can have 'tea' with and by 'tea' I mean have a few cocktails in the midmorning and talk about the neighbors."

"Sounds about right," I acknowledged.

"Is the neighborhood gossip any good? Torrid affairs with the cabana boy? Secret cocaine stash in the pool house?"

"Naw, more like, 'Did you see the Muffy wore white yesterday? It's nowhere near Memorial Day!'" And he put his hand up to his mouth to feign shock. Bella responded with mock indignation.

"Oh the horror!"

The mood was light, and it was needed. Though he'd always been good at diffusing in the past, the tension in the family had so strong lately. I almost forgot how much I loved my brother. I might resent the hell out of his easy relationship with our father, but until Bella, no one had ever made me laugh more. Without Emmett reminding me not to take myself so seriously, I hated to think of what kind of miserable, arrogant bastard I might have become. I have a feeling the man in the mirror would have very closely resembled my dad, the man I least wanted to emulate these days.

All my life, people had remarked on my similarities to my father. Even as an adult, clients commented that I approached business exactly like him—calculated and reserved. Observers noted that Emmett and my mother shared a similar humor and they made others feel comfortable instantly upon introduction. I wondered what it said about us that we'd always seemed to gravitate toward the parent least like our own innate personalities. Then again, I knew it was deeper than that. Our personalities didn't necessarily line up that easily. I don't think it was fair to say that I was exactly like my dad, or that Emmett was nothing like him.

"Okay, I'm not sure I meant it before, but now I do. I really am glad to finally meet you, Bella. We should have been there when you met our parents, but it was complicated. Rosalie is very protective of Haley, and we're trying to keep a low profile through the whole media storm."

I knew the argument, and I didn't blame Rosalie for being a mother hen, but I still expected a little more from Emmett. I had depended on him a lot over the years to help calm things with my father. Ever since I was a teenager, he'd been an important buffer. Since I'd come back, his own family clearly took precedence, and I understood, but I'd really hoped that given his position, he could help bridge the widening gap.

And I had anticipated his show of support when I took Bella to the beach house.

"Here's hoping the storm dies down soon." Bella answered.

"I hear you there," he responded. "But maybe we'll get a chance to see you again before long, Bella." And he looked at me pointedly. I shrugged.

"I'll see myself out. Have a nice afternoon you two."

Bella stood in front of me, smiling. "I like your brother."

"He likes you too."

She turned back to the door. "So, are you free this afternoon as Jane said?" She shut the door behind Emmett.

I picked up the phone and buzzed Jane, "Hold my calls. I'm out for the rest of the day."

"I am now. What did you have in mind?" I sat up straight, readying to walk toward where she was standing by the couch.

"Nothing really. Just thought maybe I could lure you away for the rest of the afternoon, and I didn't need anyone listening in on the plans."

"That would probably be for the best," I said as I sat down on the couch.

I doubted Bella was quite aware what that outfit she was wearing was doing to me. A year ago if I were shut in an office with a woman wearing a skirt like this, there is no way I wouldn't have had her under my spell within minutes.

Today, Bella was casting the one casting spells as she sat down in my lap.

"I hadn't really noticed your office view. It's a good one too."

I ran my fingers up and down her leg.

"I like this view better. You're starting to make me believe it's the only view I need."

"Damn, you really should write a book of lines sure to drive women wild."

"Am I driving you wild?"

"Stop it! You are not going to get me to drop my panties in your office, Cullen!"

"Where's your sense of adventure today?" I said in a mock seductive voice. I nipped at her neck a bit, and felt the goose bumps on her arm.

"I have a different couch in mind for this afternoon's make out session."

"I'm intrigued. Which couch did you have in mind?" I asked before she licked my bottom lip.

After her little tease, she pulled back.

"What was the conversation I walked into earlier? With the big guy?"

It took me a second to realize she was referring to my brother.

"There is an event that CI contributes to every year in about a month. He was making the case for my attendance. Actually, rephrase that, our attendance. I'm not sure it's a great idea at this point. With everything . . ."

There was a knock on the door at the same time Jane buzzed the intercom.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Cullen, but he insisted."

Only one person would have that kind of clout with Jane.

I looked at Bella, and said, "Get ready."

He barged in before she had a chance to fully move from my lap to the other side of the couch.

"Hello, dad, to what do we owe the visit?"

"Shut up, Edward. You two can frolic all over Manhattan for all I care, but I will not have you make a laughing stock of this office."

"I assure you I have no idea . . ." I said while standing up to face him. But he cut me off.

"Then why would I get a call that there was breaking news about an afternoon office romp going on in Edward Cullen's office on one of the gossip sites."

"Why would anyone be talking about this? I just came to visit my boyfriend. Is that a crime?" Bella asked clearly confused.

"Certainly, it isn't a crime, but judging by the shut office door, the "no calls" policy, the position I just saw you in, and the shade of your cheeks right now, I'd say they weren't too far off the mark now were they?"

"Looks can be very deceiving." I protested. Just like him to assume first and ask later. Scratch that. He'd never asked.

"I know what I just saw, Edward."

"What you just saw was completely innocent; nothing happened!" Bella was standing her ground.

He raised one eyebrow at her.

"No one knew you were coming, Bella?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Just Demetri and Jane, of course."

No one said anything. Certainly none of us would implicate them. They'd been too much of a lifeline to any one of us at any given time.

"Dad, someone must be a leak. There have been too many times now where the press seemed to how to find us before we even arrived."

"That's your issue, Edward. I won't waste any resources trying to protect you and your tryst."

"Damn it; stop talking about Bella like that. She's right here! I'm not asking for resources. I'm just saying. We aren't flaunting anything. Neither of us is seeking this attention. If you'd get your head out of your ass and see that, maybe we could solve the problem."

He shook his head and left the room without saying a word.

I was shaking.

After a long pause, Bella hedged. "Hey, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not fucking okay." I was livid. None of this should be happening. Every time I thought it was all going to fade away, something stirred the pot again. I didn't know who I could trust anymore. I looked at Bella who looked a little rattled, so I calmed myself, and went over to sit by her on the couch. "I should have just taken you away from here, from all of this. Maybe it's not too late. Want to go hide on that private island with me? We'd only be a plane ride from snow."

"No, as tempting as the private island sounds, I do not want to hide at all. We have no reason to run away."

I leaned my head against the back of the couch. She inched herself closer, and I brought my arm down around her shoulders.

"God, I love you. Talk about always saying the right thing." We stared at each other intently for a while. Every day, every challenge our foundation was getting stronger. Trust was the mortar that held it all together.

"So much for walking home on this great spring day, huh?" she said with a wink.

I called Demetri, but unfortunately, since Bella told him she was going home with me, he had gone up to Connecticut to visit family for the evening. He apologized and offered to be back within a couple of hours. I dismissed him and told him to enjoy himself.

"Well it looks like we may have to brave the walk after all."

"How bad will it be?"

"They'll be in your face. They'll be loud. They won't let up. But we'll be together, right?" I walked over to grab my briefcase, giving Bella a minute to think. She was looking out the window, and she turned to me with a renewed confidence.

"Okay, I can do this."

"No, Bella. *We* can."

Walk on a Nice Spring Day

We rode down in the elevator, Edward's arm securely around my shoulders.

"You ready for this?"

I looked up at him, his expression fierce, like he was ready to head into battle.

"How does this work? You are the lineman, I'm the running back? You block and tackle, I've got the ball?"

Edward stopped in the atrium and looked at me with a bemused expression on his face.

"For someone who hates sports, you sure use them in an awful lot of analogies."

"Remember my childhood. I am the one that shouted 'hit him, hurt him' at football games. I am a product of my environment."

He shook his head. "You never cease to amaze me. You never do or say what I expect you to"

"That's part of what keeps you coming back." I gave him a slight hip check. "Ready to face the crazies?"

"Let's do it."

We walked hand in hand through the atrium doors, and out of the building. The minute the doors closed behind us, the shouts began.

"Edward, this is the longest you've kept a woman around, is this the one?"

"Edward, what do your parents think?"

"Have you taken her to meet the family yet?"

"Edward, what were you doing up there?"

"What is with the rumors about jewelry?"

We pushed ahead, trying our best to ignore the constant clicking and questions. At one point, a photographer got to close to me. Edward slipped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into his side in an attempt to shield me. The flashbulbs were blinding.

"Well, I guess we just gave them one heck of a photo opportunity." He muttered.

"Should I tell you a story to make you laugh?" I asked under my breath.

"Sure. No names though, okay?"

"I had lunch with my best buddy today. We were hanging out talking, and guess who showed up? Mr. Hale."

"Really? Do tell." He kept a small smile on his face as we walked. Cameras continued to click.

"So we were talking, having a good old time, when Mr. Hale comes walking up. He plunks down to join us, and next thing I know, my best buddy and Mr. Hale are in deep smit. So much so that he let on about that dirty little secret of his. I left them at the restaurant. I had better get one hell of a fruit basket for introducing them."

"Dirty little secret outted on the first meeting? Wow that might top us for spontaneity."

We were only a few blocks from Edward's building at this point, and covered the rest of the distance in silence. I kept a small smile plastered on my face as I continued to ignore the barrage of questions.

Once we were safely inside the elevator, Edward leaned back against the wall, and banged his head a few times against the paneling.

"So much for my bright idea. I'm so sorry. I just thought you'd get a kick out of it if I showed up like this."

He stared at the ceiling for a moment. "It's not your fault. And for the record, I absolutely loved you showing up like that. All of this would be a non issue if it weren't for the feeding frenzy we walked into. Something isn't right. There is no way they should have known you would be at CI, which means that I need to figure out how things keep leaking out. There has been too many times where we've been ambushed when no one should know our plans."

We dissected the afternoon, trying to create a short list of who knew that I was either on my way to or at CI. We could only come up with a handful of names.

I sat on the kitchen counter, eating ice cream out of the container with a spoon. "So are you going to tell me about your conversation with Emmett?"

"You aren't going to let that one go, are you?"

"Nope. You know me better than that."

Edward sighed and grabbed the spoon out of my hand to scoop out some ice cream.

"CI sponsors an event at the Met every year. It's supposedly for charity, but it's all a big visibility thing. Emmett thinks we should all be there, as it has always been a family thing. He thinks it would look strange if it were only the four of them."

"You said 'we'. Is that Cullen we, or Bella and Edward we?"

"Both. I told him I didn't think it was a good idea. My family hasn't been the most supportive of late, what motivation do I have to reciprocate? That was before my father came bursting into my office like a raging asshole to further buttress the argument."

I stole the spoon back from him and took another bite. "What if we were to kill them with kindness? They aren't going to break us up, so they are either going to have to accept us or shut up, right?"

I scooped out another gob of ice cream and held it out for Edward. He was frowning at me.

"What are you up to?"

"Why do we care what they think? It's not like what your parents say is going to make a difference to you, right? So why let it? Screw 'em."

"I don't know, Bella. It's bad enough that you are under the microscope everyday. Attending will put a bull's-eye on your back. I let you get ambushed once; I don't want it to happen again."

"We can't let scrutiny rule our lives, Edward. We are going to have to start venturing out of this apartment. What better way to do it than in a controlled environment? Everyone will get to see us out together, we can say yes, no, or how much. It's an easy, slow, managed entry. And by taking the situation head on, we take the power out of your dad's hands. Show him that he can't win. Screw 'em."

He studied me for a minute, as if trying to piece together my thought process. Then he leaned in and took the bite of ice cream.

"You are brilliant. Screw 'em." He took the ice cream and spoon out of my hands and placed them on the counter, then stepped a bit closer, so that he could rest his hands on either side of me, eyes level with mine.

"So are you going to tell me why you showed up at my office today wearing these?" His knee nudged one of my feet.

"I told you, I wanted to lure you back here. You have such a soft spot for them; I thought that you it might provide a little extra motivation."

"Hmm, was that your intent?" He skimmed his thumb along my thigh, stopping at the hem of my skirt. "You know exactly what I think about you in these boots, yet all you thought was that it might provide a little extra motivation for me to leave early?"

His hand inched slowly higher, raising goose flesh as he went. He knew exactly what buttons to push.

"So if memory serves me correctly, the last time I saw you wearing exactly this outfit, I was thinking about doing this...." He moved both of his hands to my knees and pulled them open so he could step in closer. He stared into my eyes with an evil grin as he slid his hands down the back of my calves, straightening them so he could wrap my legs around him.

"You thought all this that first time you saw me? You're a perv, Cullen! You didn't even know me."

"No, but I wanted to know you."

"Yeah, like in the biblical sense!"

"You have a problem with that?"

His hands were slowly moving back up my legs when my phone rang.

"Damnit." I mumbled, fumbling for my phone.

"Let it go." Edward murmured as he leaned in closer.

"Yeah, remember what happened last time we did that?" I looked at my display and flipped it open. "Hey Dad!"

Hold That Thought

I was not feeling the 'patience is a virtue' vibe at that moment. Ever since the moment Bella walked into my office, and I saw those damn boots, my hormones had been raging. My fantasy incarnate. Of course, nothing was going to happen in my office. But I knew why my dad was so quick to jump to conclusions. More of my past coming back to bite me.

I was still working on making connections with the leaks. Something wasn't quite adding up, but today solidified for me that it had to be someone at CI. I wouldn't enjoy the interrogations I was going to have to conduct on Monday, but they were necessary at this point.

I resisted tapping my fingers on the kitchen counter to speed her up. If it had been anyone but her dad, I would have absolutely tormented her while she was on the phone by licking her collar bone or continuing to forge a trail along her thigh with my finger, but I didn't need the police chief suspicious of me before we met.

Bella and I had formed a comfortable pattern over the last several weeks. Both in the routine itself and with each other. Sometimes it was hard to believe we'd been together a relatively short time. But then on days like today, when we faced cameras, or met my brother, the newness of what we seemed all the more real.

As her conversation with her dad continued on, delaying my gratification, I realized I hadn't had to infiltrate Bella's world beyond her apartment. Her circle of friends was apparently quite small, and as for family, well the man on the phone was it.

We were an interesting pair. In a way we were already on our private island. Somehow, we'd both ended up on our own, stumbling and searching. We had friends. We had family. I knew the way I had crafted my isolation had been unintentional. Choices I made in my past led me here, and while I valued independence, I never intended for it to result in complete seclusion.

I studied Bella while she talked with her dad. I wondered what brought her to the island.

When she ended her call, one corner of my mouth turned up. She put the phone down, and crooked her finger toward me.

As long as she was willing to share her island with me, I didn't really care what brought her here.

~*~

CHAPTER 13: OFFENSE DIGGING FOR THE TRUTH

I used to be such a sucker for these big charity galas. Three things typically happened. First, I wore a tux. And I am aware that I do that very well. That led to the second thing . . . the woman I was with inevitably found herself swept away by the elegance of the evening. She would sit a little closer, touch me a little more often to stake her claim. She would work very hard to make me happy after a night like that. The third was that plenty of pictures showed up the next day. And they were the right kind of photos. Good publicity for CI, for the charity, and for me, quite honestly.

I usually had a few new phone numbers of debutantes, models or actresses come across my desk after one of these events.

For obvious reasons, I was not looking forward to this one. I was still in defensive mode. I wanted to do more to protect Bella, to keep her safe. There was no way that this kind of event would allow me to do that. Bella was more of an offensive player. But I didn't think she fully understood what she was getting herself into. I knew I had to do a better job of preparing her this time, considering my previous failed attempts.

My father remained unrelenting in his disapproval. Emmett said he refused to discuss any it with him as well. Emmett wasn't particularly forthcoming with information himself. I got the feeling he and Rose were really trying to distance themselves from the family conflict.

My mother called me a few days after the office fiasco. She was cordial, and I could sense her own internal conflict throughout the conversation. I learned my "us vs. them" philosophy from my parents. They had perfected it. Neither would publicly critique the other. But his unwavering anger was wearing on her.

She revealed a few cracks near the end of the conversation.

"Did I hear correctly from Emmett that you and Bella will be attending the CI event at the Met this year?"

"You did."

"I'm pleased to hear it. Does Bella need anything? I assume she is unprepared for such an occasion." I didn't like the way it came off. Her tone was nice, but it referenced Bella's lack of formal wear.

"We've got it covered, Mother," I snapped back.

"Edward, the offer was sincere." She was quiet for a moment. "I loved hearing you play last month. And I've missed your smile." I didn't have a response to that. What could I say? I was touched, but I felt snarky, and if I'd said anything, I might have come down hard on dad, so I told her to have a nice day and that I would talk to her soon.

"Just remember I am here to help if you need me," she added before disconnecting.

On the side, I was putting pieces together to figure out the leak. I had done a full court press on Jess last week. She was on my mind from the moment Tanya pointedly looked at me and said, "Tiffany's Edward?" Still I didn't believe Jess would be that stupid, so I hadn't immediately hit her up. Also, this time, the leak was clearly more

internal at CI given the nature of some information that was getting out there. Then again, given her history, I had to see what I could get out of her.

She claimed to know nothing about the current situation. As I was leaving though, she dropped one little bomb, "Mr. Cullen, in my experience, you never have to look very far to find people willing to sell you out."

"Why don't you tell me more about this experience?" She looked down at her desk fumbling with papers.

"It was really more an expression than actually having personal experience. It's just a hunch, Mr. Cullen."

Though we were done for the day, I had a feeling Jess was implying more than a hunch. I would find a way to come at her from a different angle.

On my way back to my office from visiting Jess, I got a call from Jasper.

"Hey Edward, how's everything going on your end? I haven't heard from you for a few days."

"We're still playing it as safe as possible. Keeping quiet."

"I suppose that's the best policy. You are going to the Met right?"

"We are, grudgingly."

"I think it'll work out. Might even be fun. Safety in numbers, right? Plus, Bella will have a friend there."

I had heard about the instant chemistry between Jasper and Bella's friend Alice. I had yet to meet the elusive Alice, but she had clearly done a number on Jasper.

"Can't explain it, Edward. She's just. Wow."

"I think I understand that feeling better than you know."

"I have to admit, so far you are surprising me with Bella, but I stand by my warning. You know she's doing a lot to fit in. She's completely exposed right now. It wouldn't take much to break her."

Oddly, this time, there was no anger in my response. I knew exactly how I felt about Bella, and even if no one else had confidence in me, she did. I knew that his concerns fell on two levels. First everything with my family and the press literally had her on display. That made a person exponentially vulnerable. And of course, she was also exposed to me. I chose to ignore that dig.

"I'll do what I can to protect her, but it's good to know you've got her back as well." He was right. There was safety in numbers, and we needed the support.

Bella continued to surprise me. And by now the fact that she surprised me shouldn't actually be surprising. Everything about her was unexpected. Currently, her primary concern was public perception of her. So, her focus was on appearance and understanding the customs. We had enlisted all the help we could. Tanya and Alice volunteered to assist with the vanity elements. Bella was handling the Tanya issue well, but they had yet to spend any time alone. I had concerns when Tanya offered, but she was actually the perfect person, and she'd been nothing but loyal.

I think Bella was more nervous about the dress itself than the potential of spending time one on one with Tanya.

"I definitely don't need to end up on a "worst dressed list" in addition to everything else."

"Do you know where you're shopping yet?"

"I was going to try some vintage shops in the village."

"Bella, you aren't seriously worried about cost are you? You wouldn't need this dress if it weren't for me. And if you are concerned about how they will perceive you, then this is one time you have to play the game their way."

"I don't even know where to begin, Edward."

"I rather like you in Ralph," I said while sliding my hand on the collar of the shirt she was wearing. She'd confiscated it from the first day, and it had become her standard wardrobe at my apartment now.

"You just like trying to get me out of Ralph," she teased. It wasn't inaccurate, but her comment did set a plan in motion.

I gave Tanya a call the next day.

"Hey Edward, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I'm calling to see if I might influence the designer choice for your shopping expedition."

"I thought Bella didn't want designer."

"I think I may have convinced her otherwise, but I'm also hoping you might be influential there."

"I can try. What are you thinking?"

"Ralph Lauren."

"Any particular reason?"

"It's an inside joke."

"What are you up to?"

"Believe me, Bella will understand."

"I'll see what I can do. You know your mom has been begging me to be involved. She could actually be very useful on this. Would you mind if I called her?"

"Whatever works." I was hoping that no matter what happened that night, a dress by Ralph would be a reminder of our island of what it felt like when it was just the two of us.

Playing Dress Up with the Girls

The day that I had gone to CI to see Edward had been a huge fiasco. It was bad enough that Edward's father formed an incorrect assumption which fueled yet more anger. But the whole media debacle had launched me smack dab into the limelight. Apparently I was the first woman who managed to keep Edward around for more

than a few weeks. And they had a field day with my wellies. One column had actually called out my 'eccentric, original style' as a 'breath of fresh air.'

Alice and I just about died over that one. Original style, me? Right.

Edward tried to make light of it, jokingly calling it the 'mystique of the boots.' Unfortunately, having the press watch me didn't create the same thrill as Edward's idealized fascination. They were everywhere, constantly dissecting, always observing. I came out of the pharmacy one day to find a horde of them waiting. My purchase was already safely stored inside my bag. The last thing I needed was for the press to out my brand preference in birth control pills.

I could just see that headline "*Bella Swan, a Girl for All Seasons*."

That attention, combined with the scrutiny that I would be under at the Met had me on pins and needles. Usually, I could care less about fitting in. But just this one time, I needed to. Conforming is scary.

Tanya had been a godsend. She'd been coaching me on the types of people we would meet, what polite conversation was acceptable, and most importantly, the skeletons in their closets, so I would know what landmines to avoid. I had a hard time keeping a straight face. It seems the more money you had, the worse your judgment was. Some of the stories had best seller written all over them.

But the issue of what to wear still loomed. Edward could see how worried I was about finding something appropriate, and offered to take me shopping, but it didn't feel right. More of the kept woman feeling creeping in. Alice was chomping at the bit to help out, but we were talking big time here. Off the rack wasn't going to cut it.

This meant that she was just as far out of her league as I was. We did some research, and found a few vintage shops in the Village that might have something appropriate. We had agreed to meet up after work to make a run at those first. If we didn't have any luck we would re-evaluate options.

But instead of meeting her in the village, I found Alice sitting in the back of the Mercedes when Demetri picked me up. Tanya was in the car too.

"What are you doing here?" I asked Tanya as I climbed in the car. "And more importantly, how do you even know each other?"

"Oh come on, Bella. How do you think we would know each other?" Alice teased. "As for the what, we need to find you something to wear to the Met, don't we?"

"We' tiny woman?" I shot back.

"Yep, we. You are hopeless when it comes to this stuff, and will need all the help you can get. Tanya is running the show, so why not ask her."

Tanya held her hand up from the front seat. "Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies."

"Why do I have a feeling that someone put you up to playing stylist?"

She simply laughed at me. "I have to find something to wear too. Now sit back and enjoy the ride."

We spent our time in the car listening to Alice gush over Jasper. Tanya was a wealth of stories, having known both Jasper and Edward since they were in elementary school. I only half listened as I watched out the window.

We were on Fifth Avenue, but well past all the stores.

"Tanya, I thought we were dealing with what to wear. We've passed everything."

She smiled widely, not looking back. "The joy of being with the Cullens, Bella, is that everyone comes to you."

The car pulled up in front of a gorgeous brownstone ten blocks north of Edward's apartment. Tanya was immediately out of the car, with Alice close behind. The black lacquered front door opened, and a large, olive skinned man greeted us with a large smile.

"Tanya, so lovely to see you. Everything is set up in the solarium."

"Thank you, Laurent."

Tanya led us through the interior of the brownstone. The décor was breathtaking. Warm colors, beautiful works of art and antiques were scattered throughout the first floor. I was about to ask Tanya where we were, when we entered a beautiful, bright room filled with rolling racks weighted down with white garment bags. In the center was a large, low table set with trays holding cheese, fruit, chocolate and champagne flutes. Two wine stands stood discreetly to the side with opened bottles of Veuve Clicquot on ice.

"I like the way you work, Tanya." Alice quipped as she flopped down in a chair. "I will never be able to shop like the hoi polloi again."

"You must be Alice. Tanya's description didn't do you justice."

I spun to see Esme Cullen standing in the doorway, holding a champagne flute. She breezed into the room, and kissed Tanya on both cheeks. Then she turned to give me a quick hug.

"I hope you don't mind, Bella. We thought this might be easier for you. That way you don't have to worry about prying eyes or less than discreet sales associates. Plus, we can have a few drinks while we shop."

I was floored. This must be Edward's parent's house. Why was his mother going out of her way to help? The last time that I saw her was a month ago in Southampton, and while she had indicated that she was not adverse to me, the fact that she would be actively helpful was still surprising.

My eyes darted back to Tanya. She was smiling, and gave me a small wink of reassurance.

I wonder if Edward had any clue that this was going on.

"Come on, let's see what we have." Esme announced.

A woman who I didn't recognize began to unzip garment bags. Tanya settled into a chair with a glass of champagne. Esme handed me one as well.

"Thank you for having everything sent over Esme; it does make this infinitely easier," Tanya enthused. "I had called to arrange for a private showing, but they were giving me a bit of attitude. I didn't want to mention Edward for fear of it leaking out."

"Carlisle would say it's the Cullen name, but I just called Ricky. She and Ralph are wonderful friends, and were more than happy to help out."

Ralph. I wasn't incredibly versed in fashion, but there was only one Ralph that I knew of. He happened to make men's dress shirts.

"I'm sorry, where did you say this was from?"

Esme gave me a small smile, like she was in on a secret. "I didn't, but it's the Ralph Lauren Collection."

I immediately felt my face turn warm. Edward was pulling the strings on this somewhere. If he told his mother why he was so gung ho on this particular designer, I would tie him up with that damn shirt, torture him slowly and enjoy every minute of it.

Alice started laughing. "Ohhh, look at how red she is! I know that face, there's a story there! What is it about Ralph Lauren that gets you all flustered Bella?"

I drained my glass and reached for a bottle from one of the stands. "I think I am going to need more of this."

Tanya and Alice both laughed as I filled my flute to the brim. Esme held out her flute as well.

"Since you are pouring, top me off too please." She darted her eyes quickly to Alice and Tanya, then whispered under her breath, "He always was a sneaky little shit, Bella. If you only knew the things he got up to when he was little."

A model walked into the room in the first dress, ending the opportunity for conversation.

We spent the evening at our own private fashion show. A publicist had accompanied the dresses, and personally narrated the detail on each fabulous creation. They were all amazing. Esme immediately bonded with Alice, charmed by her enthusiasm and fascination in the neighbor's dirty laundry. Tanya led the conversation like a master diplomat, teeing up questions and throwing in anecdotes all while keeping the champagne flowing. Esme never re-engaged in the sidebar commentary she had started.

By eight we were all relatively tipsy and giggling like teenagers. I'd never had a large group of female friends and this was the first true 'girls bonding' type of event in my life. Now I understood why everyone raved about them. There were only two more dresses to view, and I was surprised to say, I would be sad to see the evening end.

"Ohh, Bella! I almost forgot to tell you, I saw the most hysterical picture of Jasper and Edward when they were kids." Alice gushed. "I was over at Jasper's, and there was a picture of two kids standing on the beach with the most awful..."

"...Hair!" Tanya and Esme chimed in. Tanya dissolved into a fit of giggles as Esme set down her flute. She left the room, and came back a moment later holding a silver frame.

"Do you mean this one?" She asked as she held the photo out to Alice.

"YES!"

Tanya continued to laugh. "I take the blame for that one. I really didn't think it would turn out that bad."

Esme sat down on the arm of my chair, and held the picture up for me to see.

"They were thirteen, and decided that they needed more help to look like they spent the summer at the beach."

Given that neither of them could tan to save their lives, they went the hair route. Our darling Tanya here," Tanya held up her hand in acknowledgement, "Doused them both in Sun-In."

The photo must have been taken on the beach at Southampton. The outline of the house was faint in the background. Edward and Jasper stood in the sand, their arms thrown around each others' necks. Jasper's hair was almost pure white. Edward's hair was ...orange.

"Emmett dubbed him Carrot Top. It drove him crazy. He wanted to shave his head, but I wouldn't let him cut it all off." Esme was laughing at the memory. "I was horrified, of course. His beautiful hair was absolutely destroyed. But it was fun to see him not be perfect for once."

I never thought I would say it, but I was actually starting to like Esme Cullen.

"Bella! That's it! That's the one you have to get!" Alice squealed.

The model had entered the room in a simple ivory silk sheath. It had an asymmetrical neckline that was almost Grecian in its cut, with one strap draping high on the shoulder, the other cutting around the upper arm. I immediately thought of Edward's comment about me being his personal goddess of peace. What better way to reinforce the concept as we ran the proverbial gauntlet?

Esme reached over and squeezed my hand. "We are going to be in the Egyptian wing. It would be perfect."

I studied the dress a bit more. I did love it, but this whole thing was just so...surreal. Designer dresses being modeled specifically for me while I drank expensive champagne with my best friend, my boyfriend's former faux fiancé, and his mother. It felt like an episode of Sex in the City, done Bridget Jones style.

"Let's see the last one. Right now, that is the front runner."

We continued to talk and laugh well after the dress review was complete, fueled by more champagne. I chose the ivory silk. Alice and Tanya both selected dresses as well. We were starting to wind down when my cell phone chirped.

I excused myself to answer. "Hello, Carrot Top."

Edward groaned as Tanya and Alice dissolved into giggles.

"Why can't Tanya keep her mouth shut? I should have known she would tell you that story."

"Actually, blame Alice. Although your mother did bring out photographic evidence."

There was silence on the line.

"Where are you?"

"At your parent's house with Tanya and Alice. Your mom has been plying us with drinks. I think everyone is hoping I'll consume enough to tell them why I turned bright red when I found out I'd be wearing Ralph Lauren."

He actually snorted. "I knew they would come through. Did you tell them why Ralph is so near and dear to your heart?"

"Mine or yours? And no, I didn't. But your mom was threatening to send for more champagne. She is intent on

breaking me down, and dare I say it, she's more insistent than you are."

"So you'll come back with a champagne buzz. Hmmm. I could be having a little fun tonight."

"Watch it, Cullen. You may have been pulling the strings tonight, but I've got your number." We both laughed. He was right, and he knew it.

"Come home soon, okay? I love you."

"Yes, Dear." I simpered. Maybe I was more buzzed than I realized. "I love you too."

When I disconnected I looked up to see three curious faces. Tanya and Alice were fighting back smirks. Esme had an expression on her face I couldn't quite read.

We decided to wrap up the evening soon after that. Our measurements were taken, and fittings were scheduled.

Esme walked us to the door, where Demitri waited to take us home.

"Bella?" She stopped me before I could leave. "Listen, I know that this hasn't been easy on you. I...well...there are a lot of things that I should probably say, but nothing will make up for what you have been through in the last month."

She hesitated for a long moment, as if debating how to proceed.

"I apologize for the way I acted when you came to Southampton. You have to understand my position. We've seen a lot of women come through Edward's life. Some of them with less than noble intentions."

She paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts.

"I love Edward with all my heart. He has so much to offer, but he's closed himself off for so long. All because of some, well..." She broke off again. "That day that he played for you in the music room. I haven't seen him smile like that in years. Thank you for bringing that part of him back to life."

I was at a loss. This evening kept throwing one curve ball at me after another.

Esme gave me a gentle hug and kiss on the cheek. "I'll see you soon Bella. Please tell Edward that I'll be sending something to the office for him."

Not Taking Sides

Bella returned from my parent's house drunk and singing a very different tune about my mother.

"I just couldn't get over how gracious she was. A complete 180 from when we went to Southampton," she hiccupped and her hand flew to her mouth. "Damn champagne."

I couldn't help but laugh at her.

"As adorable as you are right now, we'll have to be sure to put a limit on how many glasses you can have the Met. Do not try to keep up with my mother when it comes to cocktails."

"It was just so much fun. We all laughed a lot. I would have never thought your mother had that in her."

"I think you would be surprised how much laughter there was in my house growing up. We weren't uptight all the time, Bella. The four of us used to play football on the beach for hours. Once we were teenagers, she wasn't able to knock us down. My mom's tried in vain for years to tackle Emmett. I still think she's plotting some way to bring him to his knees."

"I didn't mean to imply that you were. I mean, given that you and Emmett came out of that house, I knew there had to be some fun."

"So, I assume you found a dress? Tell me about it." I changed the subject. Happy times with my family were so few and far between these days; it ached to think about them.

"I can't describe it, and even if I could, I'd rather surprise you. Oh, before I forget, your mom said to tell you she would be sending something over to you this week."

"Any Idea what I should expect?"

"No, she didn't give any indication."

She was drunk enough that I saw her coming a mile away. Though I wasn't wearing a tie, she made a grab for my shirt. She lost her balance and stumbled, but I caught her.

"Oops." And she started giggling.

I put the conversation out of my mind entirely until a few days later when an insured delivery required my signature.

There were three items in the package: a jewelry box, a picture, and a note.

I went straight for the picture.

I'd never seen it before, at least not that I could remember. I must have been around fourteen or fifteen. It was taken in the Southampton music room. I was at the piano. There were about a dozen people littered around the room, hugging walls, on the settee, leaning against the piano. Many carried drinks or held plates with appetizers.

I couldn't remember the exact cocktail party; they were quite common. My mother often asked me to play. She rarely did herself because she thought that was too pretentious, but she could let me show off, at least until I turned eighteen.

The picture told a story, but it wasn't really about me or even the party. The lens had been focused on one person in the room. Even I, at the piano, appeared blurred. The only crisp individual was my father.

I stared at that picture for at least a half an hour. I couldn't put it down. It was the expression on his face. Recorded for eternity. It was pride. Genuine, deep pride. I'd seen it on his face when he talked about Emmett at Harvard. I didn't remember seeing it for me. I knew it was real because I was well aware of what fake pride looked like in his eyes.

A part of me wanted to jump into that picture and shake that man. "Why couldn't you just tell that boy sitting on the piano bench how you felt? Just once?"

But somehow knowing that he felt it at all was a good thing.

I knew my eyes were watering, but I would not shed tears over him right now.

I opened the box next. I recognized the earrings immediately. Each one held a teardrop shaped topaz which attached to a few diamond studded links. My father had given them to my mother on their twentieth wedding anniversary. They were actually fighting at the time, behind closed doors, of course. It was during a rough patch at CI, and his attention was entirely on the company for a while. He asked that they not have a party, which disappointed her, and she continued to put pressure on him, but he didn't back down.

Of course, when no party was planned, no invitations received, the society folks began to gossip. People assumed their marriage was on the rocks. For the first time, my parents' names actually showed up in a few gossip sections.

My mom was devastated. It was like she'd received a double whammy. The earrings were more than a consolation prize though. My father chose them because he thought they complemented her well, he said and because the diamond chains meant forever and the topaz was said to remove stagnant energy and promote forgiveness. With my mother practically a scholar in gemstone meaning, he did research to get the gift exactly right.

Now, my mother was loaning them to Bella. Forgiveness. Something I wanted so desperately from my father, I gave readily to my mother.

By the time I opened the note, my hands were shaking.

Edward,

Please tell Bella I thought these were a perfect choice for her, but if she chooses not to wear them, I will not be offended.

Not long ago, you sat at my dinner table and said, "Things aren't always what they appear."

You would be wise to remember that yourself. Appearances are often quite deceiving. He misses you too.

Love,

Mom

I folded the letter, and stuck it in the inside pocket of my jacket. I didn't know if I believed her, but she had my attention. He hadn't given me any reason to believe I was perceiving the situation incorrectly. But there was a time when he was consumed with pride for me. Was it possible some of it was still there?

When I showed Bella the earrings, she practically screamed.

"Oh my god, Edward. They're gorgeous. These must be worth a fortune."

I lifted my shoulders. I had a hunch, but Bella didn't need to know.

"They're Tiffany's right?"

"They usually are."

"No way! I cannot wear something this valuable!" She had the box in front of her, touching the earrings lightly.

"Bella, she wanted you to wear them. They are a peace offering on more than one level."

And I told her the story of how my mother came to possess them.

"Edward, your dad will recognize these."

"Yes, he definitely will." And I couldn't hide my smile. My mother played this very well.

"What is she telling him?"

"She's not taking sides." Or then again, maybe she was. This was a public statement, and it was unusual for her to go that route. Either she thought she could handle my dad's reaction, or she thought his reaction would surprise her. I hoped she was right.

Open Mouth, Insert Foot

My dress fitting was the Monday before the event. I had arranged to meet Tanya at Ralph Lauren at six pm. I was nervous, and wanted the moral support of someone who lived with this type of activity on a regular basis. I couldn't help but have mental flashes of the bitchy sales ladies in *Pretty Woman*. Tanya was going to be my Richard Gere, and fend off the sharks.

Wonder if they would let us order pizza.

When I walked into the building, sales people were falling all over themselves to be 'helpful.' It brought the fishbowl feeling back full force. I took a deep breath, and followed a woman towards a fitting suite. I can do this, I chanted to myself. I can do this. It's no different than being fitted for a bridesmaids dress.

Then again, I'd never done that either.

Tanya was waiting for me, having just finished. She handed me a shopping bag.

"Here you go. Can't play Cinderella without the shoes."

"You are having way too much fun with this, but thank you." I called to her as I began to shed my clothes. "I do have to thank you, Tanya. I was worried that this would be awkward for both of us, given the history that you and Edward have."

It was an innocent enough statement in my mind, but as soon as it was out, I regretted how it sounded. Before I could say anything more, one of the seamstresses entered the room to help me slip into the dress and assess the fit. She was a funny little Russian woman, who clucked over me, telling me that I should consume nothing but water between now and Saturday, and should consider 'getting bigger boobs.' If I hadn't been so focused on what I had said to Tanya, it would have been funny.

The publicist came in at one point to make sure everything was going acceptably. She gasped when she saw me.

"It's like it was made for you. Promise me you won't run away from the photographers, because you make that dress. A publicity shot of you in that would be worth a year of advertising."

I discounted her statement. Everyone seemed to have an angle these days. I wonder if they realized that there was a live, breathing girl underneath the image they chose to see. Who knew that fame or notoriety could be so isolating?

Once the fitting was complete and the seamstress had departed, I immediately launched in with an apology.

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean for that to sound the way it did..."

"Bella, it's okay. Edward is like a brother to me, always has been. We took advantage of the situation and used that friendship to confuse a lot of people. It hurt people then; don't let it hurt you now."

Her statement confused me, but she immediately shifted discussion to her dress, Alice and Jasper, anything but Edward. After a while, I resigned myself to the fact that she wasn't going to return to the topic, and let it go.

We had only discussed his relationship with Tanya once, the day that the photos of our snowball fight had hit. What had Edward said, rumors of an engagement that were never true?

Was there more to it than that?

~*~

CHAPTER 14: GIVE ME A SIGN BOUND

Bella's spirit was infectious. I had a lot on my mind in the weeks leading up to the event at the Met, but her mantra about not giving others power was helping.

I kept the picture of my dad inside the top drawer of my desk. I took it out often throughout the day. I memorized every detail of his face, every line, the subtle difference in color between his left and right eyes.

In that picture I remembered the man I admired, the man I aspired to be. I had forgotten what it felt like to have a true role model.

I was still angry with him. I wasn't at forgiveness stage yet, especially not when he hadn't bothered to apologize. But I found myself thinking about him differently. Above all else, I realized I missed him. I just had to figure out how to reach the man in that picture.

The picture brought up a different set of memories. They were over a decade old, but they were good ones. Sunday afternoons when I was little, I would sneak into his library to watch him read. I suppose I just wanted to be near him. I would sit quietly behind a stack and just look at him. Sometimes, I took a toy car in and ran it along the spines of the books. One day, without looking up from his book he announced, "If you're going to be in here, you might as well pick out a book."

I peeked out around the corner, and asked, "Will you help me pick one?" Of course, there was no children's section to this library. So, we started with things he thought a little boy would like, adventure stories of Huck and Tom and a river. With a dictionary, a lap, and unyielding patience, my father spent hours helping me work through books years ahead of my reading level.

It remained a constant between us. When we had nothing else in common, our small talk typically began with, "So, have you read anything good lately?"

We didn't even ask that anymore.

Public curiosity surrounding Bella and me was still high, but all in all, we were finding a groove. We avoided the press as much as possible, and presented a united front when we couldn't. It was all inevitable really. There's no way to know how things would have gone if Bella had experienced anything other than baptism by fire.

In all relationships, there is a significant amount of disclosure in the beginning. Bella and I had shared so much, but there was even more pressure now. It was hard to stay ahead of the press. I worried about what she'd learn about me by someone asking the wrong question or her reading a random tag line.

Bella handled it all effortlessly. When something came up, she asked questions, but never accused or demanded. Though my dating history was on display in the daily news, she trusted me. No one else seemed to. Even Tanya gave me the warning whistle.

She called the day after the fitting she had with Bella.

"I would like to have talked to you in person, but I knew how that would look."

"Thanks for that."

She didn't waste any time. "I really like her, Edward."

"As do I."

"She is far too good for you, of course." She laughed when she said it, but I wasn't going to disagree. I knew it was true.

"You've been more than kind, and we both appreciate your help."

"I'm happy to do it, but you should know if it all falls apart, I'm keeping her and ditching you as a friend."

"Fair enough," I chuckled. She paused before proceeding.

"Edward, I missed you. You didn't have to disappear from everyone, you know?"

"I know. You didn't deserve it. If it's any consolation, I honestly thought things would look better for you if I were the asshole who ran off."

"I'm tired of worrying about appearances. That's what got us in trouble in the first place."

"I'm sorry, Tanya."

"Does Bella know everything?"

"I don't think so. I mean she may have looked things up, but we haven't really talked about all the dirty details."

"I had a feeling. I have no idea how she might have avoided it, but even she doesn't know, it's time she heard the details...from you."

I knew she was right, and I wanted to be sure she had all the facts about my past going into yet another occasion with my family. I couldn't expect her to give me trust, if I didn't offer her the same.

Not quite what you thought

My dress was couriered to the office on Friday afternoon. Everything combined, including Esme's earrings; I would be wearing an outfit that cost almost as much as the median annual US household income.

It scared the crap out of me. I still buy ten dollar t-shirts from H&M.

Edward kept cheering me on, telling me that I could do this. He seemed to have a knack for recognizing when I was starting to panic, and could talk me down or make me laugh. He was a regular mind reader.

Demetri dropped me off on Friday night, my bag for the weekend already safely ensconced upstairs. I dodged the press outside the building, the garment bag holding my dress tucked under my arm. It must be a slow day, there seemed to be more of them today.

I greeted the door man, and happily slipped into the elevator, away from the prying eyes. That was honestly the worst part of this. I missed my privacy. I ran out one night this week to pick up my dry cleaning, thinking nothing about the yoga pants and sweatshirt I had on. The next morning I was fodder in the New York tabloids. It had been humiliating.

"I can't believe the published a picture of my backside. You can't even see my face!" I exclaimed, disgusted.

Edward looked over my shoulder at the photo. I started to turn the page, but he stopped me.

"What?"

He grabbed the paper out of my hand. "Do you have those pants here? Your butt really looks cute in them."

"Edward!"

He gave me a slow, evil grin, and grabbed the dish towel, twirling it in preparation to snap.

"You wouldn't!" I squeaked.

"Want a bet?"

He always had a way of putting the situation in perspective.

He was in the kitchen when I let myself into the apartment.

"Hey." I called. "I'm stashing my stuff, and then I'll be in to help."

I hung the garment bag up in the closet and wandered back into the kitchen.

"Did you get takeout from Carmines? " I pulled open one of the bags, inhaling the scent of garlic. "Please tell me you got broccoli rabe. I will never complain about you using the last of the half and half again if you did."

"Yeah, that will be the day. I made sure they didn't over sauté it this time."

"Put it in the record books; I'll never complain ever again. But I reserve the right to whine a bit." I pulled wine glasses out of the cabinet and grabbed the bottle off the counter.

"Did you have any luck digging?" Edward had been poking around CI, trying to identify the source of the leak. He'd not had any luck, but he did say that there were a few surprises. I didn't push. I knew that he would tell me when he had it all mapped out.

"So what is our T minus count? Are we going straight there, or do we have to do some kind of pre-event?" I took a sip of wine. "I feel like I am back in college. Are we doing a pre-party? If so, who's buying the Boones?"

"I can't believe you drank that swill. Such a girlie drink."

I pulled the neck of my t-shirt out and looked down. "Yep, still a girl."

"Nice." Edward continued to focus on warming up food and transferring it to plates.

"What's up Edward?" His head shot up, a confused look on his face. "I just looked down the front of my shirt, and I didn't get a single smart alec comment or innuendo. What gives?"

He took a sip of wine and leaned back against the island opposite me.

"If we are facing the lions tomorrow, there are some things that you and I need to talk about."

I grabbed a roll out of one the bags and began pulling it apart. "Okay. Have at it."

He hesitated for a moment, as if struggling for how to begin.

"Do you remember when I told you that if you went digging, you would find references to Tanya and me, specifically rumors about an engagement that never was?"

I popped another bite of bread in my mouth. "Yep. You guys were each other's beard. No big deal."

"Each others' beards. That is one way to phrase it." He reached out to cradle my face in his hands. "I love you; you know that, don't you?"

"Yeah, I think we have pretty well established that." My flip answer was an attempt to mask the apprehension that was building. "Stop dancing around things, Edward. What happened between you and Tanya?"

Set Free

"You want to sit down?"

"I'm good."

"You've got most of it already. We were a public item. It made everyone happy, especially our parents. They loved the idea of our families merging." This is the part I hated the most. I knew she knew about me. And other women, but I wasn't proud of it. "You know I have a reputation right?"

"Are there going to be any supermodels in this conversation, Edward?"

"No."

"Good, then carry on."

"So, obviously you know which reputation I mean. I guess you could say it was warranted. I was never ashamed of it until I knew what I was missing." I had to put some words together, so I took a drink from the wine Bella poured. "I didn't stop seeing other women when Tanya and I were public. She knew about it, of course, and she begged me to be discreet and keep it out of the watchful eye of press or family."

Bella continued to pick at the roll. She didn't break eye contact, and she seemed intrigued. I walked over to her, and touched the bracelet. I hoped that what I was about to tell her wouldn't destroy everything it meant to us.

"It was all a big mess. I made what I thought was a discrete jewelry purchase, but I was wrong, and gossip flew about Tanya and me getting engaged. It was an easy addition to the lie, so she and I sort of went with it, but then someone who knew where the delivery really went started talking. It was a huge embarrassment to both families."

She looked down at her bracelet. "Tiffany's."

I took her hands in mine. And I waited.

"I guess I don't understand it all. I mean, I get the embarrassment, but it was all mutual, right? So, how did this lead to all of the problems with your dad?"

"I'm not always sure I understand that either. Obviously, this wasn't the cause. Things with my dad had begun falling apart years before that. He always seemed to hold me to a standard outside of what I could accomplish. I don't know how to explain it exactly. Emmett would make a mistake, and he would get upset, but he'd say something like 'Son, I know you'll do better next time.'" I did my best to imitate his formal tone.

"With me, it was different. More like 'I would have anticipated more from you.' I know it doesn't seem that different, but I felt it."

"No, I see what you're saying," Bella encouraged. "Did you fight a lot?"

"Not until I was a teenager. I tried too hard before that. I didn't want to upset him. I took his expectations. I was a know-it-all teenager. And everything that happened with my parent's 20th anniversary had an impact as well. My mom was so upset, and I think I saw it more because she took her emotions out in music. I lost admiration for him after that. I didn't understand how he could hurt someone he loves so much. Anyway, I'm sure I didn't exactly treat dear old dad with tremendous respect after that.

"What teenager does?" Bella asked shrugging her shoulders.

"Jasper." I answered. She laughed at the thought.

"Anyway, it all just continued to build. We disagreed on everything, didn't seem to have much in common. So, by the time my relationship with Tanya was outed, he was angry about a lot of things. In part, he hated the negative publicity. As usual even though Tanya was a co-conspirator, he thought I should have had better judgment, and placed the blame solely with me. You can imagine that even though I was a cad, she came off as sort of a pathetic charity case. My family hated seeing that. Hell, even Jasper was pissed at me for that. And I'm not entirely convinced they ever believed Tanya wasn't a misled victim all along. For my dad, the icing on the cake was that 'the other woman' so to speak was a low level staffer at CI. Some inappropriate stories came out after the fact. It just gave him one more nail in the coffin."

"Inappropriate?"

I sighed. I was such an ass. "Workplace inappropriate."

Her brow furrowed for a second before her eyes went wide in realization.

"Oh my god. That day in your office."

I nodded. "I'm sorry."

"You're sorry. I was the one in a short skirt sitting on your lap in the office."

"You had no idea there was a history. After all, it's not exactly the kind of thing to come up in casual conversation. 'Oh by the way, should you ever decide to surprise me at work . . .'"

"True." She appeared to process the information. "And that's why you left?"

"Yes, I needed to put some distance between us and between the whole situation. Remember I told you he wasn't entirely wrong. I fucked up, and I felt horrible. But I like to think I paid my dues."

So far, she had taken everything I'd given and not batted an eye. I didn't know what to expect this time. I didn't want to press, but I needed reassurance. I needed relief.

"Bella, please tell me you have some skeleton somewhere in your closet, some story that makes you fallible."

That's All?

I was really trying hard not to laugh. I know it was a major blow up for Edward's family, but that was it?

"You rich people are screwy. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't something as simple as this. A torrid affair, an illegitimate child, a dead body maybe...something deserving of ire." I popped the rest of the roll in my mouth. "That is not enough to justify a five year self imposed exile, Edward. You Cullens get hung up on stupid shit."

"You probably aren't horribly off there." He acknowledged.

"Okay, so you want skeletons in my closet..." I searched my memory. "Let's see...there was the time that one of my dad's deputies caught me and Mike Newton making out in the backseat of his car. Mike was the local golden boy, and of course, his mom didn't think I was very appropriate. Combine that with the drama of being caught by one of your Dad's employees, it's not fun."

Edward raised an eyebrow at me.

"Oops. Sorry. You wouldn't something that wasn't 'been there, done that...'" I trailed off, searching my memory for the something to assuage his concerns.

Okay, he wanted skeletons. I'd give him one, and it wasn't pretty either.

"Right after college, I started dating this nice, stable guy." I pulled in a deep breath, hating the feelings the memories dredged up. I wasn't proud of this part of my life.

"I had just started at Little, Brown, and was living alone for the first time. I was scared of being on my own, so I probably kept him around more as security blanket. He was a nice guy, but milquetoast enough that I got bored. So I started dating another guy on the sly. The whole thing was pretty pathetic. One guy was boring and stable.

The other was wild and totally unpredictable. I juggled dating both of them for about four months. Each one was convinced that I was the one, and that they were madly in love with me. They didn't even know me, just what I allowed them to see."

I broke off, almost too disgusted with myself to continue. I owed it to him to be honest, but it wasn't a pretty picture.

"I finally owned up and ended both relationships, but I put both of those guys through the blender. All because I was simply too chicken shit to be alone. Definitely not one of my proudest moments. I wouldn't blame either of them if they ran off and joined the priesthood after their experience with me."

It was like I was that scared kid all over again as I told the story. The fear, the loneliness felt crushing. I didn't want to go back to that place again.

I paused for a moment before continuing. I needed to lighten things up, not just for Edward, but for me too

"And then there was the time that I kissed Alice..."

Edward was expecting me to say something serious, and was unprepared when I made my joke.

"You...Alice..." he sputtered.

"Gotcha." I smiled at him. "Edward, I can't say that I am overly enthused about your past. It scared me to death at the beginning. That first weekend I stayed here, all I could think was I am not tall, blonde or gorgeous. I would never be confused for someone famous or a supermodel; how could I ever hold your attention? But then I realized that was who you were, not who you are when you are with me. I can't wish that we could turn back time and change things, because all those things you did made you who you are today. I know that you don't wish anyone ill. So it's water under the bridge, okay?"

He stood there, shaking his head.

I needed to do something to reinforce my words, to make him believe that I was sincere. I had never realized just exactly how little faith people had in him. In some ways, he had so much, and in other ways, he really didn't have anything.

He was still wearing his tie, although the suit coat was long gone. I reached over and gave the tie a gentle tug, pulling him forward. It always managed to get a smile out of him. I gave him a gentle kiss on the nose, not what he was expecting, but keeping him off balance sometimes was good.

"Are you for real?"

"Last time I checked." I teased back. "I'm also hungry. Will you please stop holding my broccoli rabe hostage?"

As we'll ever be

Perspective. Perception. The majority of what had been causing me stress for the past six years had been handed to her. And her reaction was to throw it all out the window. Oh the consequences of everything were real. My family was in the worst state we'd ever been in. I knew the fact that my fling years ago had been with someone he deemed "inappropriate" also influenced my father's perception of Bella.

All of the "stupid shit" I did when I was younger was catching up to me. This was the first time I'd heard Bella

mention any insecurity about comparing herself to the women in my past.

I could see how I missed it. She was so strong. She took on the world for me, literally. I assumed a woman who kissed me on Fifth Avenue, who co-opted every plan I'd ever come up with and made it better, and who loved with the passion she did had to know just how amazing she was.

I'd been careless with her emotions. I can only imagine how I'd feel if I had access to pictures of every man she'd ever dated at the click of a button. It wouldn't matter what they looked like or what kind of titles they held. Just the fact they'd known her, made her laugh, had her comfort them, kissed her, maybe made love to her. I felt a sharp pain in my chest just thinking of imaginary men in tuxedos, men in jeans, men in white oxfords and khakis. I hadn't thought about the men of her past. Of course, I knew they existed, but somehow not talking about it made it easier to ignore. Bella had never had that luxury with me.

I would never take her strength for granted again.

I handed her the broccoli rabe before she lost all patience. I glanced down at the plate as I passed it to her. What an appropriate dish for our discussion. If you went by appearance, broccoli rabe should be disgusting. You had to get in your mouth. You had to see past what was on the plate to get the full sensation. Bella was the only person I knew who seemed to understand that.

Once she took her first bite, I reminded her. "I love you, Bella."

For the rest of the night and into the next morning, nerves made us silly. Bella asked me for a "crash course" in everything she didn't yet know about formal events of this nature. She laughed at the pretentious "rules" of society.

"This is an atypical event. The rules are a little more clearly defined. That can't be completely different in other social strata."

"True, for example, we didn't water the beer down for weddings," She answered. I rolled my eyes. "Honestly, a big night on the town is when the best local cover band is playing at the bowling alley. It's double entertainment. Add dollar taps, and it was an event."

By the time we had to get ready in the afternoon, we were positively slaphappy.

Before I got dressed, I thought I should give Emmett a call since I hadn't talked to him in a couple of days.

"Hey Rosalie, sorry, I thought I called his cell. I wanted to finalize arrival plans for tonight."

"He's in the shower. I picked up because I saw it was you."

"Oh, okay. Have any plans changed for tonight?"

"Not that I know of."

"Excellent. We'll see you at six for drinks then?"

"Edward, play nice tonight, please."

"What do you mean?"

"Emmett's been very stressed about all this. He was so happy to have you back, but there's all the tension, and he's got Esme gushing about the golden child being home all the time. Anyway, it really pains him to see you and Carlisle so at odds. Can you just try not to instigate anything?"

"Did you call my father and give him the same warning? Because I can assure you, if there is any conflict, it will be because he attacks." I didn't understand the warning. I couldn't recall being the one to fuel the fire as of late.

"Whatever Edward. Just try not to make the whole night about you."

An hour later, I was waiting for Bella in the living room. She had commandeered the master bathroom and left me to the guest suite. Given everything she'd put up with, it was a small concession.

I was reflecting on Rosalie's reaction. I couldn't exactly make sense of it. My mom and I were close, but the "golden child?" I decided to let it go. Even though tonight could be a disaster, it was still our first truly public "date," and I wanted to enjoy it.

Playing Dress Up

"As much as I complained, Alice, I am grateful. There is no way I could be getting ready for this thing on my own if I hadn't lived with you for three years."

My cell phone lay on the bathroom counter in speaker mode. We had agreed to make it feel as much like college as possible as a way of keeping my nerves at bay. The phone was a bridge because we couldn't get ready together. She was here in spirit.

"So this is a little different than going to the Pike winter formal, isn't it?" Alice teased. I could hear rattling on her end of the line. She must be digging through her jewelry box.

"Yeah, just a bit. I somehow doubt they'll have kegs of Natty Light and a DJ at the Met."

"Eww. I had forgotten about the Natty Light. I think I took two years of my life that night." Alice groaned.

"And ruined a couch if I recall correctly." I dropped the tube of mascara back in my makeup bag. Nothing too much. I may be going out of my comfort zone, but there was no need to pretend to be something I am not.

"So did you decide? Are you going to wear the earrings?" I had told Alice about Esme's gesture earlier in the week. She thought it was a no brainer. I was nervous about the whole thing, partially because of the potential for negative reaction from Edward's father, and partially because of the cost.

"I don't know, Alice. I feel weird having that much money hanging from my ears."

"Did you at least try them on?"

"No." I picked up the phone and walked back out into the bedroom. The black velvet jewelry box lay on Edward's dresser, untouched since the night that he brought them home.

"Get dressed and at least try them on, won't you? I don't know how you resist; I'd be all over it."

"Yeah, we know how you work, Alice."

I pulled the garment bag out of the closet and unzipped it. I was still in awe over how beautiful the dress was.

"Okay, if you hear a crash, it is me falling over trying to get into this contraption."

"Oh stop, you'll be fine."

I pulled the dress from the bag and stepped into it, slipping it up over my body. The silk was heavy and incredibly soft. I felt invincible in it. Almost like it was armor.

"Oh crap..." I trailed off. I couldn't reach the zipper.

"What?"

"I don't have you to zip me. Hang on." I slipped out into the living room. Edward sat on the couch, feet propped on the coffee table as he flipped through TV channels.

"Hey, can you zip me?" I quickly turned my back.

I heard him stand and come around the couch to where I was standing. I felt the tug of the zipper at the same time that his lips brushed my shoulder. I dropped my head to the side, an instinctive reaction. He continued slowly trailing kisses across my shoulder and up the nape of my neck.

Good god, if he didn't stop, there is no way we will ever get out of this apartment.

The hand that he had been using to zip my dress was now around my waist, palm flat against my stomach as he pulled me back against him.

"Bella..." he breathed against my neck.

Hearing my name broke me out of the fog, reminding me that Alice was still on the phone.

"I left Alice on the phone. Two more minutes, I promise!" I broke away from him without looking back. Nerves were setting in, and it had nothing to do with where we were going, and everything to do with him in a tuxedo.

I grabbed the phone off the bed.

"Sorry. Alice, I got sidetracked."

"Yeah, and I know by who. Jasper just buzzed, so I need to go. I'll see you in a bit, okay?" I could hear the excitement in her voice. She had it so bad for him.

"Oh, and B? Just wear the damn earrings."

I sighed. She was right. "Okay, Alice."

I set down my phone and studied the black velvet box on the dresser. I needed to get over my irrational fears. Edward and his mother didn't seem to be concerned about how his father would react. The earrings, while totally extravagant and over the top to me, were nothing outlandish to Edward's family. This was Edward's world. If I wanted to be part of it, I needed to learn how to deal with it all.

I opened the box and pulled out the first earring. It was heavy, the topaz stone easily twenty carats. I slipped it on and secured the back. It swung back and forth, stopping just short of my shoulder. I pulled the other earring out of

the box and started to slip it on as I walked back out into the living room.

"Well, what do you think? Did I clean up enough to be seen at the Cullen table?"

Awe

"Oh god, Bella. . . ." and that was it. I didn't have any more words. Literally struck dumb. When she'd asked me to zip her, she turned around so fast that I didn't get the full effect of this dress. Of her in this dress. It hit her frame perfectly, highlighting every subtle curve. She wore her hair up, but in a sort of messy bun, which made it very feminine and a little out of control—a lot like her. A few tendrils were loose near her ears, and I knew I'd fight the urge to play with them all night. My mother's earrings were stunning against her skin, and a perfect complement to her dark brown hair.

"You'd better say something before I get a complex."

"Wow." It was all I had. I hoped it was enough.

"That'll do. And back atcha. You clean up well yourself."

The left side of my mouth turned up in a sly smile. "It just occurred to me while I was waiting . . . We've never danced, Bella. How is that?"

"Maybe because I suck at it?"

"I don't believe that for a minute. Would you mind? I'd rather our first dance were here, not in front of the whole world."

"Umm, sure. It would be good practice I suppose."

I knew the exact song I wanted. I was telling her I understood the fear, the comparisons, the insecurities. I understood, but they were unwarranted. I shuffled through on the remote until it was cued, and I walked over toward her. "May I have this dance?"

"I'd be honored."

I held out my hand, and let her do a slow spin before pulling her into my arms. I was humming to the music before Ella even began to sing. I could carry a tune, but no one sang this song like she did, so I lowered my head to be cheek to cheek with Bella as I glided her around the room.

You do something to me

Something that simply mystifies me.

Tell me, why should it be

You have the power to hypnotize me

Let me live 'neath your spell

Just do do that voodoo that you do so well

For you do something to me

That nobody else could do

In the end, it was my favorite memory from that night.

~*~

CHAPTER 15: US VS. THEM, ROUND 1

WARM UP

Demetri navigated the Mercedes slowly along Fifth Avenue, part of a long queue of cars waiting to drop off attendees. I could see the light and flashes ahead of us.

Edward squeezed my hand. "You ready for this?"

I took a long breath. *I can do this.*

"Yep. Good thing I took a nice long hit off the crack pipe before we left."

I heard Demetri snort from the front seat.

"Sorry, Edward. She's way too perfect for you."

Edward shook his head and smiled out the window.

When we were in front of the steps to the Met, Edward opened the door and slid out of the car. He turned and held his hand out to me.

"Bella?" Demetri leaned back over the center console. "Go in there and be yourself tonight. You're better than all of them, you know that don't you?"

I smiled. Demetri had been so kind to me over the past few months; I really had a soft spot for him.

"Thanks, Big D."

"Have fun, Feisty One." I reached out to grasp Edward's hand, and slowly unwound myself from the car.

We had discussed the fact that there would be photographers waiting outside. There were way too many celebrities, politicians and athletes attending for there not to be. And since Edward fell into the 'famous for no reason' group, they would want pictures of us as well. I promised that I would be a good sport and stop for a few photos, but that didn't prevent me from feeling a bit unnerved to hear them call our names. 'Bella, look this way.' 'Edward, over here.'

We stood on the steps, Edward's arm around my waist as photographers continued to call our names.

"How are you pulling off the smile?" He whispered to me. "You almost look like you are enjoying yourself."

"I'm remembering the look on your face when I showed up in your office door wearing my wellies," I whispered

back. "You're cute when you're flustered."

I heard him laugh quietly. "I need to be on my best behavior tonight, and it will be incredibly difficult to if you decided to be a saucy minx."

I laughed too. "I'd never do that."

"Yeah, and I've got a bridge to sell you in Brooklyn."

He gently guided me away from the photographers and up the stairs into the museum. I had been here numerous times, but hanging out on a Sunday afternoon in jeans didn't quite compare to this.

We made our way through the building to the Egyptian wing. The event was being held in the room where the Met had reconstructed the Temple of Dendur. It was one of my favorite spots in the museum, open and airy, with green lighting at night to add to the mystique of the centuries old limestone and reflection pool.

"I love this room," I stated quietly. It never failed to shock me how beautiful it was. "Now if you can figure out a way to get this view every day, I would die and go to heaven."

Edward didn't respond. I turned to see him staring at me, a smile on his face.

"What?"

"Nothing, just enjoying the view." He still had a hold of my hand, and tugged me back close enough to kiss my shoulder. "Remind me to thank Ralph, I like all this exposed skin. It feels blasphemous to say it, but I may like you better in this than my shirt."

A cough from behind me caused Edward to bring his head up sharply. I looked back over my shoulder to see Emmett standing behind us with a tall stunning blonde woman.

"Hey Em." Edward reached out to shake his brother's hand. "Bella, this is Emmett's wife Rosalie,"

I turned around so I could acknowledge her properly.

"Hi Rosalie, it's nice to meet you. I've heard a lot about you and Haley."

She gave me a once over, lingering for a moment on my face. Her eyes narrowed.

"It's nice to finally meet you, Bella. I've heard a lot about you as well."

There was a long awkward silence. Rose continued to stare at me, mesmerized by something, although of what I wasn't quite sure. There also seemed to be a silent conversation going on between Emmett and Edward.

"Well if this isn't a motley crew." Jasper and Alice appeared behind Emmett, diffusing whatever might have been brewing. Introductions were made, and Alice immediately captivated everyone. Thank god she was here. She might end up being a great life preserver.

Edward and Alice lapsed quickly into conversation. It was a bit strange to watch the two people that meant the most to me, other than my father, interact for the first time. They were sizing each other up, trying to gauge character, intentions, worthiness. I wasn't worried; I knew they'd love each other.

Jasper fell into step next to me as we moved further into the room.

"How are you hanging in, Diz?"

"Oh, you know, feeling a wee bit like Dorothy in Oz." I looked over to watch Edward in conversation with Alice. He caught my eye and gave me a quick wink. He can still get that butterfly garden party going.

I felt the blush starting to creep in, and quickly shifted my focus back to Jasper. He had just asked me something about meeting Rosalie.

"I don't think Emmett or Rose like me very much."

"I don't think it's you, Bella. Emmett is just a bit thrown by Edward not being 'Edward,' or at least the one he expects." Jasper leaned closer, dropping his voice. "And Rose probably recognized Esme's earrings. She has a bit of a chip on her shoulder about Edward being Esme's favorite, and him getting special treatment."

It was strange to hear Edward be referred to as the favorite. It was so far out of sync with everything I had seen to date.

"I take it Alice told you about the note and earrings, huh? I don't know, JW, if they reacted badly, how can we expect Carlisle not to?"

Jasper looked around the room, taking in the crowd.

"I wouldn't underestimate Esme Cullen. She always seems to know what she's doing." He smiled as he watched Edward and Alice talking. "Look at them; they are already thick as thieves. It shouldn't surprise me. They both have that same spark in them."

"So I take it you are happy?" I asked. I knew where Alice was mentally, but I'd not spoken to Jasper about anything other than work since they met.

"Yeah. You do owe me an explanation for why you kept me away from her for six years, but I'll be nice and let it slide."

"I could say the same thing." It wasn't an accusation, just a simple statement.

He paused, looking at me with a slight frown. Then he laughed and shook his head.

"I never thought anyone would tame Edward. And I would have never connected the two of you, in my mind or in person. Without seeing you together, it didn't fit. Now, I feel like an idiot. I can't think of anyone more perfect for him than you."

With that, he left me to return to Alice.

I took a moment to collect myself and acclimate to the room. It had started to fill up, and I recognized famous faces here and there. A few even paused to look me up and down, like they knew of me.

"Would you like a glass of champagne, Bella?" I spun around to find Emmett with two flutes. "I heard you ran the champagne gauntlet with Mom, so this shouldn't faze you."

"Thank you, Emmett." I accepted the glass from him and took the longest drink I could while still appearing

ladylike. I would have liked to have pounded it and gone for another to take the edge off my nerves.

"How are you holding up?" Emmett seemed genuinely concerned, not just making polite company.

"Okay. Everything the last few months has been a bit surreal, but Edward keeps me grounded."

He let out a belly laugh that made a few of the people standing around us look.

"That's a first! My brother has never grounded anyone. Got them grounded is more like it."

I was tired of people's inability to see the good in Edward. That, combined with how tightly I was wound caused me to respond a bit more brusquely than I had intended.

"You know what, Emmett? He does ground me. He's sweet, and funny, and kind, and he's done everything possible to help me ease into all this. He doesn't deserve to be ridiculed or put down. He's a wonderful person...." I broke off, searching for the right words. "...and he loves all of you like crazy, but it sure doesn't seem like you give him the same accord."

Let's Get Ready to Rumble

I had intended to stay glued to Bella, but of course, we were separated almost instantly. I kept glancing her way. Each time I did, she took my breath away. I didn't think I'd ever get used to how much she stood out in a crowd, particularly a crowd like this one.

For example, I knew she wasn't tall, but somehow it hadn't been an issue on the couch, or in bed for that matter. But seeing her next to Emmett now, it was startling. How could someone so small be so strong?

The man I was talking to droned on about some merger that we'd worked on together when I was in LA. I nodded appropriately, but I caught sight of Bella's determined face. I knew that face. She was taking on the world again. Only in this case the "world" was my big brother, and he was awfully strong himself. She needed to conserve her indignation if she planned to make it through this night. Emmett should have been an easy one.

I excused myself and joined their conversation just in time for a moment of awkward silence before Emmett smiled.

"I like you, Bella. I really do. But just be careful with your perceptions. There are reasons for the way people view my little brother here, and he may not always see things clearly himself. And for the record . . . loving like crazy has never been the problem in our family."

He turned on his heel and took a deep breath. Then he did a quick look back directly at me and said, "Nice earrings."

With that he disappeared into the crowd.

"What was that all about?" I asked Bella as I placed my hand in hers.

"I don't know. I think I got carried away. I just get so tired of the way everyone talks about you." She paused, biting her lip. It made me smile. Tiger to kitten in sixty seconds flat. "They don't seem very happy about the earrings."

"They?"

"Rosalie and Emmett. Maybe I shouldn't have worn them. What is your dad going to think?"

"I don't know what's with Emmett and Rosalie, but you have every right to wear them right now." I rubbed my thumb in the palm of her hand. "You've taken on so much for me. I'm not entirely sure I deserve it, but I most certainly do not take it for granted."

She smiled in response, and she had opened her mouth to say something when we were interrupted by the sing song of "Edward" from behind us. I didn't have to look. I knew the voice. The night just kept getting better and better.

I raised my eyebrows at Bella in apology. I really needed to figure out how to make this all up to her. I let go of Bella's hand and wrapped my arm around her shoulder. We turned together.

"Giana," I greeted with my typical game face.

"It has been entirely too long, Edward. And you didn't even call when you got back to New York," she said while kissing my cheek. I felt her hand sliding into my pocket as she dragged her lips over to my ear and whispered, "In case you've lost my number." And then she blew in my ear.

When she stepped away, she looked to my side. "Giana, this is Bella Swan." I pulled Bella in closer as I completed the introduction. "Bella, I'd like you to meet Giana."

I'm sure Giana had a last name, and I assume it was something either incredibly boring like "Smith" or something she deemed too hideous like "Finkelstein," but either way, she was just "Giana" to everyone, including me.

There's no doubt the woman was gorgeous. In her heels, her eyes were directly across from mine. She and Bella had similar coloring, dark hair, deep brown eyes. She'd graced the cover of every fashion magazine there was. But seeing her tonight, she didn't hold a candle to Bella. And I didn't believe for a minute that it was only because I was in love. Bella shined and dazzled where Giana oozed and slinked.

The way Giana appraised Bella, or rather didn't, was probably the most disturbing thing I've ever seen. It was as if she didn't exist. There was no contempt, nor even a platitude. She literally ignored Bella, who had put her hand out toward her.

"Call me," she sang as she waved herself away.

"Bella, I . . ." I started to form an apology.

"I think I'm going to plan our dates from here on out," she interrupted. "Because so far, this one sucks. Well, except for the way you look in that tux. And the champagne. Speaking of which, I could use another."

"Pace yourself. As much as I'd liked seeing tipsy Bella, we haven't even run into my dad yet."

"So, I take it she was an ex?"

"Very."

"Did you love her?" I shouldn't have, but I laughed. The question was almost insulting. "I assume that's a 'no.'"

"It was very casual." I tried to choose my words carefully, but I couldn't really hide what Giana was to me.

"She didn't seem to think much of me."

"She doesn't think much of anyone but herself, Bella."

"I don't know. She seemed quite interested in you."

"No Bella, not in me . . . in the idea of me. You're the only one who has ever wanted to know me." I checked myself. Bella's expression was telling. It was one of those moments where she needed reassurance. "I'm not proud of my past, Bella, but I can't change it."

"I know," she sighed. "I'm just having a very ugly stepsister moment. Seeing the pictures was one thing, but watching a real life supermodel putting her hand in your boyfriend's pants is a whole other story."

"You know I only want your hands in my pants right?" We paused for a second just looking at each other, and then I saw her eyes go wider, and a grin start to form. We couldn't help it. We both started laughing at how silly the conversation had turned.

It's probably why we didn't notice the cool air my dad brought with him until he spoke. "You seem to be enjoying yourselves."

"Hello, Dad."

"Edward. Bella."

"Hi, Mr. Cullen."

His expression froze when he looked at Bella. His lips tightened, and his eyes narrowed.

"You look . . . nice this evening, Bella."

"Thank you, sir." Bella said tentatively.

Very slowly, he looked away from her and focused on me. He shook his head slightly. "That was quite a maneuver. I'll give you credit for that. I'm not sure what you thought it would accomplish though."

"Dad, I don't think . . ."

"Try not to call too much attention to yourselves this evening."

Bella was sharp, but she'd been confused by the first statement, enough so that she just now had that "take on the world" look forming. But by the time she was ready to attack, he was already gone.

Shake it Off

Piss off big brother? Check

Watch a supermodel feel up boyfriend? Check

Father thinks I am pond scum? Check

What was I thinking with this whole screw 'em approach? They weren't the ones getting screwed, I was. How had I ever deluded myself into thinking I could do this.

I felt Edward squeeze my hand. That's how.

I took a deep breath and tried to get control of all the emotions running amok. I needed to rein myself back in if I was going to make it through this night. Although I hadn't been joking. He's never planning a date again, ever.

"It's that time, B." I turned to see Alice holding up a rocks glass full of maraschino cherries. God I love her. I might need to buy her an inflatable life vest as a thank you. "You know what you need to do."

I turned back to Edward, who looked confused. "Old party tradition of ours. It's exactly what I need right now, short of being out of here and back on our couch in my other Ralph."

I gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Bella?" Edward called after me, still wearing a confused, slightly worried look.

"Edward, did you know that Bella can tie a knot in a cherry stem? And I am not talking about with her hands." Alice asked innocently. Edward's eyes went wide as my cheeks turned red. I'll never hear the end of this one. "Now go get your glass girly, we are headed up to the roof."

I gave Edward a smile of reassurance, and made my way to the bar in the corner of the room to request a glass full of cherries. The bartender gave me a strange look, but complied.

"Oh, I am so sorry." A tall man had bumped into me, knocking me back a few steps. His hand shot out to steady me. "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. No blood, no foul." I stepped back up to the bar to wait.

"Mind if I prop here by you for a minute? I got ditched, and am hoping to find a place to roost."

I turned to look at him. He was incredibly tall, and good looking in a boy next door sort of way; broad shoulders, sandy hair, a slight tan. He also looked vaguely familiar. I held out my hand to be polite.

"Bella Swan."

He smiled and took my hand. "Tyler Crowley."

I laughed; I knew where I recognized him from. "You used to play for the Mariners, didn't you? My dad is a big fan."

"Yep. Got traded to the Yankees last summer." He leaned up against the bar and surveyed the room. "I got conned into coming to this event by a friend of a friend. She's on a mission to reclaim an old boy toy, and needed arm candy. She just flamed out and took off for the bathroom in a hissy. I guess he found someone better."

"There seems to be a bit of that going around tonight," I observed, trying to be polite.

"Are you here solo?"

"No, I'm with my boyfriend. A friend and I were just getting ready to sneak off to relive an old college party

tradition."

He took a sip of his drink, eyes focused across the room. "That would explain the guy who is staring daggers at me."

I looked back over my shoulder to see Edward. We both smiled the moment we made eye contact. All it took was that smile to make everything feel a little bit better.

"You are lucky, Bella. No other woman in the room exists where that guy is concerned."

Tyler let out a dry laugh. "Trust me; I remember what it feels like to look at a woman like that."

The bartender handed me my glass of cherries. I thanked him and turned to Tyler.

"Thank you, Tyler. It was nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Bella Swan. Giana couldn't hold a candle to you in his eyes."

I hadn't put two and two together until he said Giana. I wondered if he knew who I was when he came over, or put it together when he saw Edward staring at me.

"Thanks, Tyler. For more than you realize."

I took my glass of cherries and champagne flute and followed the route Alice had described up to the rooftop terrace. She had nabbed a cluster of chairs under a portable space heater.

She held out her glass of cherries. "To the good times."

"To getting through this night," I replied as I clinked my glass against hers.

We both dug in, pulling off the stems and popping the fruit like it were candy. We had started a tradition in college of raiding the bar for all the maraschino cherries, and hiding out in someone's room or a corner for a little girl talk. It could be at a party, a double date, or just a night out. Our little way of taking the edge off and enjoying a few minutes of peace. We tried to relive the moment wherever we could.

"How are you holding up? You looked pretty ragged in there."

"I've been better. So far I have pissed off Emmett, alienated Rosalie, watched a supermodel stick her hand in Edward's pants, and Carlisle acts like I am some gold digging fool. All in all, a red letter night."

"Jasper and I heard Rosalie on a mini rant to Tanya about you wearing Esme's earrings. Tanya put her in her place. It was fabulous."

"Why is it that no one can see the good in him?" I sighed. I couldn't understand why everyone was so single minded in their view of him.

"From what little I have heard, Edward was night and day different before he left for LA. Live hard, play hard, different date every night. Sounds like he burned a pretty bright path. Combine that with being at constant odds with his dad, and it seems like it was pretty messy."

"Did Jasper tell you all this?" I felt betrayed. Why wouldn't he have talked to me about these things?

"No, Nettie did over brunch. She's dying to meet you."

"Nettie?"

"Nettie Whitlock, Jasper's mom."

How ironic. They had hardly been dating a month, yet Alice was already welcomed into the family, and was brunching and kvetching with Jasper's mother over bloody mary's and eggs benedict.

Short of Esme, I don't think any of the Cullens wanted anything to do with me.

"So in the course of your brunch, did Nettie Whitlock tell you why Carlisle hates Edward so much? I simply can't fathom why any would ever be so cold to one child and so loving to the other."

Alice took a sip of her drink, and stared off in the distance.

"She doesn't think that Carlisle hates Edward, but she wouldn't say anything more. She mentioned that people are talking about how different Edward seems, and they are giving you the credit. She's only heard anecdotes about the two of you, but she says the change is apparent."

Alice reached over to snag a cherry out of my glass, having eaten all of hers. "She also said that maybe they all needed a good shaking up."

Quick Breather

Though I'd been to roughly a million and one of these events in the past, I'd never felt so lost before. I didn't want to mingle, nor did I want to stand in a corner posing, waiting for women to approach me. I just wanted to be with Bella.

At this point though, despite sparring with Emmett and my dad, my least favorite part of the evening had been watching Tyler Crowley hit on Bella. I knew I wasn't one to talk, but his reputation was not good. Whereas when I played the field I had been upfront about my goals, he liked to play a different game. He would act as if he were in it for the long haul with a woman, get her infested in the relationship only to cut her at the knees first chance he got. He was never in it for more than a short term goal—sex, attention, or a career boost. The problem with a guy like that is he came off too nice. No one ever believed the girl when he jumped ship, leaving her heartbroken.

I completely understood Bella's need to take a break, but once Alice had whisked her away, it left me without a purpose at this party.

My champagne flute was nearly empty, so I began meandering toward one of the servers.

"Where'd your better half go?" I turned to see Tanya approaching.

"Hey, she's off with Alice somewhere. She needed a few minutes away from the vultures."

"Their talons are really out tonight aren't they? Rosalie had quite a bug up her butt."

"I hear she's not happy about the earrings."

"That is an understatement."

"So who is your lucky date tonight?"

"I am solo. Dear Jasper was going to mercifully escort me until he fell head over heels for Bella's friend."

"The nerve!"

"I know! Anyway, my mom tried to set me up last minute with some 'nice investment banker' friend of a friend. Thank goodness I didn't take the bait. I met him tonight. He's hideous."

"Oh come on, he can't be that bad."

"Edward, look over your right shoulder. You're going to see a man snarfing appetizers in a green suit."

I discreetly glanced in the direction she said. I turned back almost instantly, and we both doubled over laughing.

"Your mom is really getting desperate for a wedding."

"You're not kidding. I may need to see what Bella and Alice can do for me. Seems I've been looking for love in all the wrong places."

"Yeah, maybe you should give Mr. Wonderful over there another shot," I said, pointing my thumb toward the man who had just picked his teeth with his fingernail.

"It has been a while. I blame you, you know." I sort of choked. She had a right to blame me, but I didn't expect her to bring it up now.

"I mean growing up around you three made it very difficult to ever find one man who was good enough. If I could take the best of each of you . . ." I caught the hint of sadness. I'd always assumed Tanya chose to be alone, but it appeared I was wrong.

"Oh well, maybe if I drink enough tonight, I could get past the bad hair, well what little there is of it, the awful fashion sense, and the complete absence of a personality." She said quickly changing the subject.

"It's not much to overlook, really. A few more glasses ought to do it."

We were in hysterics by the time I saw Bella coming back into the room. "Oh shit. He's coming this way. Whisper something in my ear, so I can pretend to be engaged in conversation," Tanya insisted. I leaned in, and she threw her head back in mock laughter.

"Is he gone now?" I asked.

"Safe."

"Good, because I see Bella looking for me. Want to join me?"

"Nah, I'll let you be. Off to see how many more glasses it takes to find him attractive."

"Good luck with that!"

I headed straight toward Bella. She was clearly looking for me, trying to stand on tip toe. She finally caught my

eyes, and she smiled. It absolutely melted me. I started to pick up my pace but I felt a tug on my arm.

"Edward."

"Hi Mom. Would you like to say hello to Bella?"

"Certainly, let me issue a warning first. You need to be more aware of your surroundings."

"What do you mean?"

"How do you think that little exchange you just had with Tanya appeared to those not 'in the know?'"

"We were just talking."

"I know that, dear. But not everyone would. Your father wanted me to remind you how a picture of her whispering in your ear might be captioned. And while I realize he may overreact about some things, he's right about this one."

Honestly, I hadn't thought about it. I hadn't been fully on my guard all night. So much for just enjoying a night out with the love of my life. But yes, the press would find ways to make that exchange look awful—I'd be the playboy once again.

My eyes searched for Bella but she was no longer in my line of sight.

Sucker Punch

I reluctantly left Alice on the roof with Jasper. The time away had helped me to get some control over my emotions. I knew I had to get through this for Edward. If not for him, it would have been incredibly easy to tell these people to fuck off.

I was scanning the room when I saw Esme and Carlisle Cullen deep in conversation by the reflection pool. They both looked rather intent, heads close together. To most people, they would appear to be an affectionate couple. But I had been around Edward enough to recognize similar mannerisms in his parents.

Esme was tapping her index finger on her leg. Edward did that when he was irritated.

Carlisle was leaning toward her, focused on her face. I knew that stance. He was totally engaged in what she was saying, and not happy about what he was hearing.

I hoped that she was giving him a piece of her mind. *Go Esme.*

I continued to scan the crowd. It took me a few minutes, but I finally spotted Edward talking with Tanya. Just the sight of him made me feel better, stronger.

Before I could move in his direction, I heard someone call my name. I turned to find Carlisle Cullen looking at me, a neutral expression on his face.

"Might I have a word?"

My instinct was to flee. Every conversation with Carlisle had been glacial at best. I was already on edge, and not confident in my ability to take another frontal assault. At the same time, I knew that blowing him off would only

give him more reason to dislike me. So I gave him a slight nod to indicate my willingness to listen.

"Can we step away? I'd like this to be a private conversation."

I followed him to the edge of the room, close to where I had observed him speaking with Esme.

"I believe that I owe you an apology. I was rather...discourteous to you earlier. I was operating under an incorrect assumption. I inappropriately took that out on you."

Confused, I didn't speak. He had been dismissive of me earlier, but his ire had been entirely focused on Edward.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand." I fumbled.

He sighed, and moved as though to run his hand through his hair. It was disconcerting to see how many mannerisms he and Edward shared. I didn't want to see any semblance of the man I loved in him.

"Bella, there are a number of things that you don't know about Edward, about this family. Things that you can't understand. I made an assumption based off that history, and it made me act inappropriately towards you. For that, I apologize."

The damn earrings. That must be what this is about. Emmett and Rose had freaked out when they saw me wearing them. That must have been what Carlisle got all bent about earlier, the damn earrings. Did they think that Edward had asked his mother for them? Is that what he meant?

"Mr. Cullen, if this is about the earrings, I..."

He cut me off. "Do you know the story behind the earrings you are wearing?"

"Yes sir."

"Can you appreciate why it is difficult for me to see you wearing something I gave to my wife as a representation of my love and affection? You are a bright girl, Bella. I'm sure you have a wonderful future. Don't get hung up in my son's personal vendetta to mock me at every turn. You deserve better than that. I'd hate to see you get hurt because of a chip on his shoulder."

It all clicked into place. He thought that our relationship was Edward's way of flipping him the proverbial bird. That me wearing Esme's earrings had been yet another way for Edward to flaunt his irreverence. Bring home a girl who would appear inappropriate just to piss off his father.

I was tired of it. I was tired of their lack of faith in Edward. I was tired of them marginalizing our relationship. I was tired of them constantly trying to tear him down.

I could feel the tears building. I would not let him see me cry. He wasn't worth it. I reached up to remove one earring, then the other.

"Here, I think it's best that you take these. It's obvious now that I shouldn't have worn them. I'm sorry for any problems that I may have caused."

I slipped them into his jacket pocket.

"I know that you think that our relationship is something orchestrated by Edward to piss you off, but what we

have has nothing to do with you. Edward has never been anything but wonderful to me. He is sweet and considerate, sometimes to a fault. He tries to protect me at every turn; from the press, from people that try and take advantage of me, even from you. He deserves better than what you give him."

Carlisle's eyes were wide, but he wasn't looking at me.

I turned to see Esme and Edward standing behind us. Edward was focused on me, and I could see him ready to swoop in and pull me away.

Esme looked directly at Carlisle. Her face was neutral, but her tone was biting.

"You couldn't just leave it alone, could you Carlisle? You continue to crash down a path based on the past. It needs to stop, and it needs to stop now."

"Esme, now is not the..."

"Excuse me." I couldn't handle another verbal barrage. I slipped past Carlisle and through the crowd.

Not Pulling Any Punches

For a full 15 seconds, I did nothing. Completely stuck to my spot. Mouth incapable of moving. Head aching in the wake of the explosion. In retrospect, those 15 seconds were wasted time. It gave the impression that I didn't know which side I was on, but that wasn't in question.

In those 15 seconds, my mother touched my arm, and looked me directly in the eye. "I'm sorry, Edward."

She turned back to my father holding out her hand. "Give them to me, Carlisle."

He didn't say a word. His hand was in his pocket, subtly fingering something. My mother urged again. "They are mine to do with what I like, darling. I chose to loan them to our son's lovely girlfriend on a very important night. You will let me have them back now."

Silently, he pulled his hand out of his pocket and reached across to place something in my mother's hand. Of course, by now, I knew it was the earrings. And I was livid that he had somehow managed to take them away from Bella.

Before she turned on her heel to disappear into the sea of designer labels and shallow conversations, she pointed to my father and said, "You would do well to remember why you gave these to me."

My father stood in front of me with one eye brow cocked and his head tilted in anticipation.

I walked closer to him so that I didn't need to raise my voice, not wanting to cause a scene.

"You've spent years showing me how disappointed you are in me. I just wanted you to know. The feeling is mutual."

There is so much more I wanted to say, and as much as he deserved my anger. Bella needed me more.

~*~

CHAPTER 16: US VS. THEM, ROUND TWO FANCY FOOTWORK

I left my father with a final passing glare. The whole exchange lasted a matter of a few minutes, but it made finding Bella a challenge.

I began searching the perimeters assuming she would want to be away from people. I saw her in a corner. Her back was toward me, as she was looking at a small statue.

I quickly made my way to her and touched her elbow lightly.

"Bella, are you alright?" I asked softly.

"Cullen, this date really is the worst." Her breathing was hard, but she was keeping her composure better than I was at this point.

"I'm sorry. We could go. We've put in some time."

"Edward, we haven't even sat down at the table, and it would just give everyone the satisfaction of knowing they won. I hate this night so fucking bad, but I will get through this. How else can we prove them all wrong? And they have to be wrong. They just have to be."

She wanted to fall apart; she deserved to fall apart. I couldn't take her in my arms right here, and let her cry on my shoulder, but there was one way for her to bury her face, hide from them all.

"Come on," I said, grabbing her by the waist, and pulling her with me.

"Where are we going?"

"To make some better memories."

This really had been a miserable evening. At this point though, I was feeling confident that it couldn't get worse.

Thankfully, the music was slow when we got to the dance floor, so I was able to keep her close. I kissed the top of her forehead, and ran my hand up and down her back.

"Is this better? I figured we could ignore everyone else for a while."

"Mmm, are there other people here? I wasn't aware." That was the Bella I loved. I smiled as pulled back, and tilted her head up toward me.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She sighed and contemplated. "Later, okay? I think there is a lot to discuss, but not here."

"Fair enough." I was trying to come up with great lines. I wanted to offer her all of the reassurance I could. I hadn't heard all of the details that sparked Bella's tirade on my dad. I knew it involved the earrings, but I wondered if there was more to it. I didn't doubt he deserved even more than she gave him. I wanted to know, but she was trying to calm down, so I wasn't going to push.

We danced, slowly, quietly, peacefully. Another song followed, and we didn't break away, didn't speak. I could hear it in her breathing, and I could feel in her heart beat when she was finally unruffled.

I looked around the room. I even turned Bella so I could take it all in.

"Bella, you say the word, and I'll walk away from all of this. There are only a handful of people in this room I care about, and they will love me no matter where I am."

"No matter where you are? Where are you going Edward?"

"We, Bella. We could take off and go anywhere. No cameras. No meddling parents. Just us."

"Where is this wonderland?"

"I don't know. Iowa?" I was actually only half kidding when I said it, but her laughter was a welcome sound, so I went with it.

"And what would we do in Iowa, Edward?"

"Let's see. Hmm, I could sell insurance or something, just to seem respectable. A man has to work you know? And you could volunteer at the local library. We could get married, make babies, gain twenty pounds, and mow the lawn on Saturdays."

"Oh no way. We will keep up with the Joneses. You'll mow the lawn twice a week, thank you very much."

"I'd mow the lawn every day, if it made you happy. But we could just hire a lawn service."

"That trust fund is good for something after all."

"So, what do you say, Swan? Shall I book a flight for Des Moines?"

"Tempting as that sounds, I have another idea."

"I'm all ears." I turned her once, and brought her back close.

"Maybe it's time you got a look into my world. We could go to Washington, meet my dad."

"I think I'd like that, Bella." I kissed her lightly on the lips. And for a few minutes longer, it really did feel like it was just us again.

Neutral Corner

Edward cooled me down. He always knew what to say. I have to admit, as upset and frustrated as I was, when he joked about getting married and having babies, for half a second I believed him. Even more surprising, I found myself thinking about how easy it would be.

I sanity checked myself. He was lightening the mood; I shouldn't read anything in to it.

I wasn't joking about us going to Washington though. Edward needed to live in my world for a while. He and my dad would get along well, and he'd see that while I didn't bring much from a portfolio perspective, I could provide

a decent place to have Thanksgiving dinner, and the ocean view from Washington was just as good as the one in Southampton.

"You sure you want to see this through?" He murmured into my hair.

"Yep. They aren't going to beat us. They made a mistake thinking that they could ever prove me wrong."

"Never bet against us, right?" He kissed the top of my head one more time, and led me off the improvised dance floor.

Emmett, Rosalie, and Esme were seated at the table. Carlisle was nowhere to be seen. Rosalie gave me another once over, her eyes narrowing in a look of self-satisfaction when she took in what was missing.

Esme stood. "Edward, do you mind if I steal Bella for a moment."

I felt him tense; ready to step into the role of protector. I placed my hand on his chest to stop him from launching in.

"It's okay. I'll be fine." He pulled my hand up to his lips and gave me a smile.

"If you aren't back in ten minutes I am going to come looking for you." He said it to be sweet, but I knew he was worried about what might happen to me. Ever the Prince Charming looking out for dragons to slay.

I gave his hand a quick squeeze and followed Esme away from the table. She led me to a discreet corner of the room. The majority of people had already seated themselves for dinner, allowing us a moment of privacy.

"Bella, I can't apologize enough for how you have been treated tonight. I can't make excuses for Carlisle, but I raised Emmett to be a better man than that."

She opened up her evening bag, and pulled something out.

"When I gave these to Edward, I wanted him to know that I understood what the two of you have. My hope was that it would be enough of an endorsement to my family that they would back off long enough to see that he isn't the person that they always expect him to be. Edward is different now, and what the two of you have is indeed real."

Esme reached out to grasp my hand. She held on for a moment, as if trying to communicate something more, then turned my hand over and placed the earrings back in my palm.

"I'd like you to put them back on, please. I know that they are the last thing that you probably want right now, but I very much would like for you to wear them. My husband might have forgotten the reason that he gave them to me, but I haven't."

"I don't know, Esme. I've already caused enough drama."

"No you haven't." She paused, as if searching for the right words. "Bella, you have changed Edward so much. I see that. Emmett and Carlisle will see it eventually, you just have to have faith. Dare I say it; you might be exactly the push that this family needs to heal."

"Esme, I can't do anything that is going to hurt Edward anymore tonight. He's already been through enough."

She smiled at me. "The only way you could hurt him, Bella, is to leave him. I once told you that you were a lot like Carlisle. I know you see that as an insult, it's not meant to be. Carlisle is incredibly strong and very devoted to this family. I can see those same traits in you. Edward needs that."

"Why do you have so much faith in me? You hardly know me."

"I don't have to know you to see how you feel about my son. And I know how he feels about you. It's no different than the way Emmett is with Rosalie. I'm their mother; I know how their brains work." She squeezed my hand. "Thank you for bringing him back, Bella. There is a big hole in this family without him, even if the others won't admit it."

With that, she walked back to the table, leaving me by myself.

I studied the earrings in my hand. The last thing I wanted to do was put them back on; they felt unlucky. But I also heard loud and clear what Esme said. She had faith in me, in us. This was her way of backing us up, of not only showing her approval of me, but support of Edward. She wasn't playing favorites, just trying to bring her family together again. I slipped the earrings back on, and took a moment to collect myself before making way back to the table.

While I was gone, Carlisle had taken a seat between Rose and Esme. He, Edward, and Emmett all stood as I approached. Edward pulled out my chair for me, giving me my smile as he took in the addition. As he sat down, I leaned in close enough so that only he could hear.

"I love you. I am not sure how I feel about living in Iowa, so we can negotiate on the location. And I want to keep your mom."

He chuckled and whispered 'deal' under his breath.

Hitting Below the Belt

Food was a welcome reprieve. No one could spew spite with lettuce in their mouths. Conversation settled into small talk between bites.

"Rosalie, is Haley feeling better?" My mother asked and then took a bite.

Rosalie swallowed, and then answered, "Yes, she has a little runny nose, but I felt okay about leaving her tonight."

"I've seen pictures of her. She's adorable," Bella chimed in while pushing a tomato around on her plate. She was in this fight for the win. They might keep trying to knock her down, but she was still standing. I cringed a little though because I knew she'd just set herself up. I couldn't be sure who would take the bait, or how they would put it on the line.

"Do you like children, Bella?" It was my father, and he said it while looking down at his plate, cutting something.

She paused. The question appeared surprisingly mundane. "Sure. I don't have a lot of experience with them—a little babysitting in high school, but I like them." I didn't think she fully understood where the line of questioning was going, but I could tell she was uncertain about his intentions. I heard a slight shaking.

"Would you like to have children of your own someday?" I scanned the table to see that everyone was now trying not to be too obvious, but they were all shifting their eyes back and forth between Bella and me, trying to

ascertain the reaction.

Joking about Iowa was the closest we'd come to discussing a marriage and kids. But our relationship had been a whirlwind, and despite its intensity was still relatively new for such discussions.

I wouldn't have known how to answer the question myself. I liked kids. I was definitely on board for marriage someday, but I had some hesitations about children. I saw what it meant to raise a family in the spotlight, and I didn't want that. I also wondered sometimes whether it was even possible not to mess your kids up too severely at some point. But Emmett always said, "It's all about the girl, Edward. When you find the right one, something just makes you want to reproduce."

I put my fork down, and checked Bella's reaction. She was no longer struggling with meaning. She was chewing and trying to delay having to respond. I picked up my napkin, and dabbed at the corners of my mouth. It was time for an Emmett move, and clearly he wasn't going to make it.

"Shall we let Emmett and Rosalie have a break from baby talk tonight?" I placed my napkin back in my lap. "They did an excellent job with the decorations this year. Mom, did you have a hand in any of it?"

It worked. With a wink, my mother went on about the preparations, including some gossip regarding who did what with whom during the planning phase. She wove an excellent tale, and our moods were light. I lost track of the champagne refills, but food seemed to be balancing out the effect. I admit to feeling relaxed.

By the time dessert rolled around, I thought perhaps the evening was in its way to recovery.

We were all laughing at something Emmett said. Even my dad seemed more serene than I'd seen him in a long time. I could almost forget that we had any tension to begin with.

The conversation primarily flowed between my mother, Emmett, Bella, and me. Rosalie had been especially quiet. To her credit, I think this may have been the first time she had any alcohol or at least multiple glasses of free flowing champagne since Haley was born.

"So, Bella, those earrings really do look lovely on you."

"Rose!" My mom and Emmett hissed at the same time. Very terse but under their breath.

"What? They've been the elephant in the room all night long, and I say we just get it all out there." She took another drink from her flute, and when she set it down, Emmett swiftly moved it to the other side of him.

"Please, Rosalie. It's been a very long night already. Could we just get through dinner please?" I begged.

"Dinner's pretty much over, Edward." She rested her elbows on the table and was about to say more when we were interrupted by a "May I have your attention, please?" from the front of the room.

I noticed Bella take a deep breath, and I reached my hand over to take hers.

We sat stoically through the presentation and discussion of the purpose of this fundraiser. My father graciously stood when asked. We knew eyes were on us, so we plastered on smiles. Bella didn't fake the smile, but she looked entirely pleasant.

We both reveled in yet another break. I wondered if we'd be able to leave fast enough when the presentations were done to avoid any further altercations this evening.

But there was no chance of that. Rosalie must have been drunker or more upset than I'd thought. The moment the applause died out from the final introduction, she was on the attack.

"I think topaz is very appropriate for you. Golden earrings from the golden boy." There was an audible gasp from my mom, but my dad was completely frozen. Bella was looking down at her napkin again, and I was trying to figure out whether I was on offense or defense.

Emmett whispered something in her ear and tried to grab her arm to pull her away from the table, but she firmly pulled back. Through gritted teeth and in a low voice, she snarled. "No way, Emmett. I will not hush. I am sick of all this." She turned sharply to me. "Edward, I love you to death, but when are you going to realize the world doesn't revolve around you?"

I kept my voice low, and my face relaxed though I was boiling inside. "Rosalie, you're way off base here. I know you've had too much to drink, and this will all seem stupid tomorrow, but please just back off right now."

"Did you just call my wife a stupid drunk?" Emmett hissed under his breath. He had the same expressionless look on his face. "Seriously, Edward, she's got a point. What were you thinking having her wear those earrings? What did you want to start here?"

"Emmett, you don't know what you're . . ." My mom started, but Emmett waved her off.

"Edward, I stood by you more than anyone for years, but it's time we get some things straight. You act like you're entirely the victim, but what have you really done to change peoples' perceptions? Moved back and got a new girl? Bully for you! The rest of us have been living a pretty calm life, but you came back and shit hits the fan within months. Maybe it isn't us. Maybe it's you. Did you ever think Dad and I have a better relationship because I simply try harder?" He stole a look at my dad who gave nothing away. "Yeah, yeah, so mom gave you the earrings. You could have said no. And mom, did you ever think how Rosalie might feel? After all the years we've been together, you've never once gone out of your way to loan her as much as a handkerchief, and Bella walks in with those earrings?"

When he stopped to take a breath, my father finally spoke—directly at me. "Are you satisfied? This is what you do to the family, Edward." Then he turned his attention to my left. "Bella, again, I apologize. It's unfortunate you're caught in the middle of this. For a minute, I thought perhaps things were different, that maybe you were concerned with something other than yourself but it appears I was mistaken. You've managed to make this evening all about poor Edward."

I threw my napkin down on the table. Everything happened so fast. Despite keeping my volume low, my tone certainly implied yelling. "I'm done. Bella, it's time to go. I've bent over backwards trying to please you, Dad. Apparently, you'll never see that." I stood up from the table, and pulled Bella's chair back for her. I waited for her to stand up, but she hesitated.

KO

It was like watching a crash coming, and not being able to do anything to stop it. I hated seeing them come at Edward, landing blow after blow. It was sickening. Every time he tried to defend himself or explain, another barrage hit.

I knew he expected me to follow, but I couldn't let what had been said go. He deserved better than that. He deserved to know that someone believed in him.

"I realize that I don't know you very well, and most likely you all think I am the flavor of the month. But I can't stand here and let you all attack him like this."

I paused, looking directly at Emmett. "You may also think that my impressions are formed based on what Edward has told me, it's the furthest thing from the truth."

I shifted my gaze to Rosalie. "You've had a chip on your shoulder since you saw me earlier in the evening. I assume it is because of the earrings that Esme graciously offered to me. I did not ask for them, nor did Edward. You accuse Edward of thinking the world revolves around him, but from where I stand, Rosalie, you're the one guilty of being self-absorbed. You get bent out of shape with no context other than seeing 'some girl' that Edward is with sporting earrings you've never been offered. But instead of asking why, or trying to understand, you immediately attack, assuming some perceived slight on your part."

She opened her mouth to speak, but I had already moved on. "And you, Emmett. All I have heard is how you walk on water, what a wonderful brother you are. How you make Edward laugh, how much he loves you. In our limited interactions, I've not seen you once take up for him. It's always been towing the party line, what looks good for the family, what makes your parents happy. When is the last time you stopped to ask your brother what would make him happy or thought about how he might feel? You accuse him of stirring things up. I can only speak for the last few months that I have spent with him, but he's done everything possible to stay out of the public eye and not upset anyone, especially you."

"Bella, you don't have to..." Edward's hand was on my arm.

"No, Edward. I've stood by and watched these people tear you down when you don't deserve it. I'm done with it."

I turned my gaze on Carlisle. "I was at Edward's the day after Valentine's Day. I saw him leave apprehensive but hopeful, only to see him return totally defeated thanks to you. You didn't offer him one chance when we came to see you in Southampton; instead you immediately went on the attack. And that day you stormed into Edward's office at CI, you immediately assumed the worst. I have yet to see you give Edward any support, any faith, even a hint of affection."

I broke off, pulling in a deep breath. Everyone appeared too stunned to speak.

"Bella, it isn't worth it, don't waste your breath." Edward stated quietly.

I was torn between walking away with him and seeing this out. The blank look on Carlisle's face sealed the deal. I decided to take a risk.

"Emmett, when was the last time your father told you he loved you or that he was proud of you."

No one said anything. I continued to stare at Carlisle. His gaze was ice cold.

"Answer the question, Emmett." Esme had been silent to this point, but her tone indicated that she would not tolerate him avoiding an answer.

"Mom, is this really necessary?" Emmett pleaded. All the color drained from his face when she nodded.

I didn't look at Emmett, my gaze remained on Carlisle. "Well, Emmett? Last week, last month, last year?"

The tension that hung in the air was palpable. Emmett finally muttered under his breath, "Last week."

"Edward, when was the last time your dad told you he loved you or was proud of you?"

I couldn't look at him. I reached up and placed my hand over the one that rested on my shoulder and squeezed. *Come on, Edward. You can do this.*

"I was fifteen." He said quietly. "They were leaving for a trip to Europe. He told me he loved me before he left."

I glanced quickly at Esme. A single tear ran down her cheek. *Keep it together, Bella. You can do this.*

Turning the full force of my gaze on Rose and Emmett, I kept my tone level, fighting the urge to scream. "World revolves around him, huh? Yeah, I can see how you might think that, all the positive attention that has been showered on him and all. The only member of this family I have seen be remotely kind to him, show any confidence in what a good person he can be is Esme. Edward is not the person that you all paint him to be, and what we have is not some throw away thing. Did you ever stop to think that is why she gave me the earrings to wear?"

Emmett stared down at his plate. He wouldn't meet my gaze. Rosalie glared daggers at me. Let her, I didn't care.

I took a deep breath, and rested my elbows on the table, leaning in so that I could look directly at Carlisle. "My parents got divorced when I was five. My mom left me; had no interaction what so ever. For years I blamed myself. What did I do wrong? Why wasn't I good enough? Why couldn't I make her love me? No child deserves that, regardless of whether the parent is present or not. You might want to take a long hard look at yourself, Carlisle Cullen. It might not be Edward that you have issue with."

I paused for a second to let my words sink in.

"Ultimately, I pity you. You'll never know what an amazingly beautiful child you managed to raise, in spite of all your *loving* ministrations. I can't begin to make up for what you won't give him, but I love Edward, and I refuse to ever let you hurt him like this again."

I pushed back from the table, and paused long enough to kiss Esme on the cheek.

"Thank you for being so kind, and helping me pull together something to wear for tonight. I will always be grateful for everything that you've done."

She squeezed my hand. For now, it was enough.

I turned to Edward, a little scared of what I might find.

He reached out, hand tracing along my cheek. Everything was okay. He understood.

I leaned into his hand for a moment, my eyes closed. Nothing else existed but this. Nothing else needed to exist.

He dropped his hand to take mine, and we walked out of the Museum, together.

~*~

CHAPTER 17: EAST VILLAGE, DIFFERENT WORLD HOME

Demetri was waiting for us outside. We slipped into the car, and he pulled out onto Fifth Avenue, angling to turn north back towards Edward's place.

"We're going to the Village. Can you head for my apartment?"

"Bella, you don't..." I could see a look of almost panic in Edward's eyes. He thought I was going home, abandoning him.

"It's okay. We're staying at my place tonight, alright? I think we've both had enough of yours for a while."

I looked out the window and played over the scene that we had left behind. I have never been one for confrontation. I have no clue from where I found the courage to take on Edward's family.

Soon enough, we were pulling up in front of my building.

"I know it's Sunday, but would you mind swinging by here around ten tomorrow Demetri? And if it's possible, could you grab a change of clothes from Edward's apartment? Casual is fine."

"Sure thing, Bella." Demetri was a wise man; he was tuned into the mood in the car. "I'll see you in the morning."

I led Edward up to my building, and punched in the code to let us in. We navigated the stairs to my floor. Edward leaned against the wall, lost in thought as I tapped gently on my neighbor's door. I was notorious for losing my keys, and always kept a spare set with her just in case.

I let us into my apartment, and quietly closed the door. When I turned around, I found Edward in the center of my tiny apartment. His tux was still impeccable, his hair its typical all over the place mess. He immediately walked over the couch to study the photos.

'Real people living real lives' he had once said. That is what he needed.

I dropped my evening bag on the counter in the kitchen, and took off the earrings to place next to them. If I never saw them again, it would be too soon.

Edward was lost in his own reverie. I couldn't imagine how difficult tonight had been for him, and I didn't know how to broach the subject. Part of me was afraid that I had gone too far, overstepped my boundaries. I just couldn't stand to see him torn down like that. I promised him us against the world. I meant that. I just hadn't realized that the world would include his family as well.

I wanted us to throw off all the trappings of the evening. No jewelry, no designer clothing, no expensive champagne. We needed a nice, quiet, simple life. T-shirts, bottled water, popcorn. No pretensions. No hidden intentions. Just us being real people.

I slipped into my room and quickly shed the dress. I washed off every trace of makeup, pulled my hair down, and threw on a t-shirt and boxers. Then I dug through my drawer until I found a t-shirt that might be big enough for Edward.

When I made my way back out into the living room, Edward sat on my couch. He looked so lost, so alone. It broke my heart.

I couldn't help but remember the last time he sat on my couch. I wished I could take him back in time to that

moment, to when no one else existed in the world but us, caught up in the euphoria of having just found each other. I wished that there was some way that I could take away all the hurt. He, above all, deserved to be loved.

He held a photo in his hands. It was one of Charlie and me. We sat on the back bumper of his cruiser, eating ice cream cones. Charlie was wearing a goofy flowery old lady hat along with his uniform. I was all skinned knees and gawky limbs. I didn't have to look to know that written in the corner was 'Mothers Day '88'.

We do amazing things that are outside of our comfort zone for the people that we love.

Trust

"How do you do it, Bella?"

"Do what?"

"How do you love me? How do you put up with all of this?"

She'd removed all traces of this evening, all evidence that she'd even been in my world. All the armor was gone, but she was still my strength.

"Loving you is the easiest thing I've ever done. Everything else is a direct result of that."

She sat down next to me on the couch, but it wasn't enough. I held out my hand, and when she gave me hers, I pulled lightly, and she inched closer. I needed more, so I reached over, picked her up, and set her side saddle across my lap.

I ran my hand up her back. Just a thin t-shirt. So, little between us. I slid my hand under her shirt and trailed my fingers up and down her bare back. I could feel the little bumps forming as I made contact.

"I need you, Bella." And I brought my hands around to rest under her breasts. She exhaled into my neck.

"I'm here, Edward."

"No, I mean . . . I need to show you how much I love you." I flicked my thumbs across her nipples, and I leaned in to her ear. "And I love you so fucking much."

I started rubbing her breasts with more force, and my mouth took hers. I pulled back for a second because I wanted her to understand I wasn't using her—this wasn't about taking. "If it's too much, or it doesn't feel right, you're going to have to tell me to stop because I'm giving myself over to you now."

And I pulled her shirt over her head. Her hair was disheveled. She didn't make any attempt to pull back or cover herself.

"Are you ready, Bella?"

"Shh, just show me, Edward." And that was the last word that was spoken.

She stood up over me on the couch, and I pulled her boxers off. She straddled me when she sat back down, naked.

There was no background noise in the room, no music, no TV. I could hear a few passing sirens and cars on the street below, but inside her apartment, on her couch, the only sound was passion. Smacking lips and buttons.

popping as she tried to expose me. Heavy breathing and uncontrolled moans as I let my fingers explore her body. Zipper unlocking and pants hitting the floor as Bella finally freed me. One lone "Ah" from me and an "oh god" from her as she came back down on top of me, taking me inside. Skin slapping skin and couch cushions adjusting as we collided into each other again and again.

I had to know if there was any minute part of her I had yet to discover in the time we'd been together. I worshipped at the temple of her body, knowing what paradise was promised within.

And I hoped to heaven I showed her enough, let her know deep inside.

With each thrust, I hoped to confirm it more. But this wasn't just rough sex. This was about getting as far inside her as I could. I wanted to experience more of her than anyone else had; and just as I needed to know all of her, I wanted there to be no millimeter of me with which she was unfamiliar.

I registered the sounds of low moans and sucking, but I didn't know if was my lips on her breast or her mouth on my neck. It didn't matter; every sound we generated was amplified by the emotion we felt.

She braced her hands on the back of the couch and rose off her knees into a crouching position. She was meeting my need. Coming down harder and deeper each time. I brought one hand around to her, and my thumb stroked with short sharp movements hoping to bring her with me to my nirvana.

I could feel her body nearing the finish, and I knew there is now way I could last beyond.

I have no idea what sounds either of us made at the moment of climax. All I knew in that instant was how I felt. And I felt loved.

Affirmation

He was lost, and he was hurt. I couldn't blame him; I would probably have felt the same way.

And he said he needed to prove how much he loved me. He didn't have to prove a thing. I already knew. I always knew.

I held on to him, my fingers running continuously through his hair. Trying to do anything I could to reaffirm to him that I wasn't going anywhere. That I loved him. That he was worthy of being loved.

We stayed that way, not saying a word, for the longest time.

"I'm sorry about tonight," I began. "I just wanted to stand up for you. In retrospect, I hope that I didn't make things worse."

He tightened his arms around me and kissed the top of my breast, just over my heart. "You couldn't do any more damage than was already there."

He lifted his head to look me directly in the eyes. "No one has ever stood up for me like that before. Thank you."

"Thank you for not being angry. I couldn't bear anything more hurting you tonight."

He smiled. It was the first that I had actually seen in hours. It was half hearted, but it was a start.

"I'm here with you. Nothing is going to hurt either of us."

I reached up to trace the edge of his smile. I had spent so much time looking at him, that the little things are what stood out to me now. The little flaws and imperfections that ultimately complemented the overall image that was Edward. He wasn't perfect. None of us are. But he deserved so much more than what people expected of him.

"I remember the first time I saw you. Once I got done ogling..." He snorted. "Yes, I admit it, I ogled. I couldn't get past how sad your eyes were. We have moments where we push it away, and we need to figure out a way to keep it away. You deserve to be happy, Edward. You are a good person. I believe in you."

"I don't remember the last time someone said that to me."

"Well get used to it, because I do." I traced my thumb over his lower lip. This was about affirmation, about faith.

I held his face in my hands, and kissed his forehead. His closed eyes. His nose. Words had such little meaning in his world. They were used to flatter, to hurt; they were disposable. Actions were not.

I started slowly, placing small kisses along his jaw. My hands never left his face, preventing him from moving away, from trying to take control. After a moment, he understood what I was trying to do, and relaxed. His arms wrapped around my waist, and he held on tightly.

Angling up away from his jaw, I placed a few slow, light kisses on his lips. I felt him smile as I increased pressure, opening my mouth slightly. He followed my lead. I kissed him slowly, focused on every reaction, every sound, and every motion.

We stayed like that for a long time, saying with actions what we didn't trust with words. His arms never unwound, and my hands never left his face. There was no ferocity in this, no desperation. We lost ourselves in each other, in the moment.

I pulled back from him, both of us breathing heavily.

"I need you to show me again."

"Bella, you don't..."

"Show me again, please."

Letting go of his face, I crossed my arms behind my back so that I could lace my fingers with his. My thighs shook a bit as I lifted myself up, but he tightened his arms to stabilize me.

We came back together effortlessly. No sound other than my sharp intake of breath.

Neither of us moved for a moment, staring directly into each others' eyes.

His told me that he loved me.

I hope that he could see the same answer in mine.

Hope

We were slower, gentler. Everything but the orgasm was less intense. I don't know how she knew I needed that second time to come down from the emotional carnage, and she'd given me all of herself to do that.

She fell asleep first, which was unusual as of late.

We'd ended up in her bed. It was a couple of sizes smaller than mine. So she cuddled into me more. There was no space between us. I should have crashed.

But I couldn't get the night out of my mind. It had been a complete disaster, and I worried that I scared Bella. But she was still here, seemingly unfazed.

As I stroked her hair, I could make out a faint beeping. I knew what it was. I had no desire to get up from the bed, to get up from her warmth. But I was on edge, and the beeping was only making it worse.

I climbed out of bed with the intension of shutting the phone off. I pulled my underwear out of my tux pants, and slipped them on. I sat down on the couch and grabbed my phone from the pocket of my jacket.

There were three missed calls and two messages. I didn't remember hearing the phone at all since we left the Met.

I scrolled the missed calls. Emmett and my mom were first. Looking at the time, Emmett's had been within minutes of our leaving the building. My mom's came about an hour later. The last one killed the cat so to speak. I couldn't turn off my phone not knowing if his was one of the messages.

The first message was from my mom. She apologized to me and especially to Bella. She expressed embarrassment and disappointment. Her last comment nearly broke my heart.

"I love you all too much not to believe there's hope."

My hope was asleep in the other room. As long as she was with me, I agreed with my mother.

I waited for a minute before pressing "1" to play the next message. I suppose it was an anticipation thing. On one hand, the possibility that he'd called and not left a message was painful. On the other, what kind of message would he leave?

I had stared at the photo of Bella and her dad a long time earlier. Her dad had to act as her mom. She'd lost a parent in a different way than I had, but we were both jilted. She didn't stay bitter though, and I owed it to her to let my resentment go. Not to let him get to me anymore.

With that, I pressed "1" and I heard the voice mail gods tell me I had a message from "Carlisle Cullen."

"Edward, I don't know if you will listen to this message. I believe we need to talk, and I hope you will be open to it. Bella said a lot of things, and I don't agree with everything, but if you don't know that I love you in spite of all our differences, then I have failed as a father, as a man. I would appreciate a call back."

I played it a second time.

And then I just sat on the couch with the phone in my hands, my elbows leaning on my knees. I wanted to wake Bella up, but she deserved a nice long rest from my family drama.

Faith

I heard him in the other room. Clothes rustling. Then the beeping of his phone.

I had hoped that everyone would leave us alone for a few hours. Give us a tiny bit of peace. It seemed that life had other plans.

Tonight was so far beyond removed from anything that we had experienced together in the past. From a physical perspective, we had sex. It was raw and gritty. But at the same time, Edward laid himself emotionally bare, and any remaining semblance of his walls had crumbled.

I saw a lost little boy, who desperately wanted to be loved by a man he had once idolized.

I saw an amazingly wonderful man, who loved me more than I could ever deserve.

And I saw someone whom I loved, more than I ever thought possible, looking for a way to navigate forward.

So I gave myself over. I let him lead, do what he wanted, take what he needed to prove his point. I was never afraid. I trusted him implicitly. I would have done anything he asked.

Lying there in the dark, I heard him sigh and drop his phone back on the table. My heart ached at that sound.

I slipped out of bed and pulled the comforter off to wrap around me. As quietly as possible, I made my way into the living room.

Edward sat on the couch, his elbows propped on his knees. He looked so defeated.

I stood there for the longest time, just watching him. I wanted to go to him, but I didn't want to intrude on his thoughts.

He must have felt me staring. He looked up, and gave me a small smile.

"I remember lying in bed the day after Valentine's Day, dreading going to my parents, and thinking how desperately I wanted to see you. Not five minutes after that, there was a text asking if you could bring me breakfast. And I was just sitting here thinking about how badly I wanted to wake you up. You always seem know what I need, sometimes when I don't even know that I need it."

I made my way over to the couch, and sat down beside him. I opened up the comforter so that he could slip inside with me.

"You okay?"

"I am now."

We sat there in silence for a few minutes. His breathing was slowly and steady, I thought he might have fallen asleep.

"My mom called. She apologized profusely to both of us, but especially to you."

I stayed quiet, waiting for him to continue.

"And my dad called. You may have accomplished a small miracle tonight. He said he didn't agree with a lot of what you said, but he did say that if I didn't know that he loved me, then he was a failure."

I began rubbing slow circles in his back, trying to impart whatever strength or comfort I could.

"How does that make you feel?"

He sighed and dropped his head down on my shoulder.

"I don't know. Part of me doesn't even want to listen to him anymore. I'm tired of it all. Another part of me just wants to hear him say 'I love you, Edward.' What if that message is all I ever get from him?"

I continued rubbing circles in his back. "And what if it is all that you ever get, Edward? What then?"

He was quiet for a moment, as if processing my question.

"Then I guess that I need to say my peace and move on."

It felt like my heart splintered into a million pieces with that simple statement. Why wasn't there anything that I could do to make it better for him? He deserved the love of his father. No child deserved to feel abandoned.

"I was thinking when you came out. I am going to ask him to meet me somewhere this week to talk. Neutral ground. Not work, not their house or my apartment. I'll let him speak his peace, and I'll speak mine. If there is something to be salvaged, we will. If not, I'll move on."

He sat up with that, hands moving to cradle my face. His thumbs traced along my cheekbones as he leaned his forehead into mine.

"Will you promise me that either way you'll be in this with me, Bella? I can't do this without you."

I slipped my arms around his waist. So much had passed between us tonight, yet there was still so much uncertainty in him.

"I'm not going anywhere, Edward. I promised you and me against the world. I took on the world for you tonight, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat."

I decided to take a leap of faith. He had let all the walls down. It was only fair that I did too.

"You make me believe in things that I didn't want to. As much as I joked about the whole pop tart thing, I so desperately wanted someone who I could love like my dad loved my mother. But I was so afraid of being hurt like my dad was. I never worry about that when I am with you."

I took a deep breath and stepped off the cliff. "All of my life, I have sworn that I would never give in to the traditional things. I saw what they did to my dad, and I refused to let it happen to me. But you make me hope for all the things that I swore I would never do. When you joked tonight about Iowa, about marriage and kids and mowing the lawn...I wanted all of it. And the only reason that I wanted that was because it was with you. Not the name. Not the money. Just Edward."

Love

I took a cleansing breath. This woman. I'd never believed in fate before, not really. But how had she found me? How had I gone from seeing this beautiful quirky girl walking down Fifth Avenue to knowing with absolute certainty that she was my whole reason for being? My thumbs had found their favorite spot on her cheeks earlier, and I let them move softly across her face.

"I love you so much," I said. She leaned her face into my hands in response.

Every day for the rest of my life, making this woman happy would be my goal.

I smiled at her. It was her only warning. I picked her up swiftly and headed toward her room. "Let's get back to bed."

We settled back into the position we were in before I got up to check my messages. I planted kisses down her arm, and ran my fingers through her hair. We used touch to bring calm. I heard her breathing change indicating she was drifting off to sleep. I don't think she heard me.

I said it quietly. "I don't care where we live, but I will marry you."

~*~

CHAPTER 18: BACK TO BASICS SMUSHED, BUT THE CONCEPT HOLDS TRUE

We woke up late on Sunday morning. It had been a long night, and we were both absolutely exhausted.

I slipped out of bed while Edward was still asleep, and pulled the bedroom door closed so as not to wake him. I dug through the kitchen, looking for options for breakfast. I hadn't been spending a lot of time in my apartment, so there weren't many choices available. I was about to give up when I struck gold.

Fifteen minutes later, I had a pub tray loaded down with coffee, sliced pears, and the two packets of strawberry pop tarts that were left over from Valentine's Day. Thank goodness for that shelf life.

I set the tray down on the end table, and I crawled back in bed with him. He immediately wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me in close.

"I didn't say you could get up," He mumbled in my hair.

"Tough. I needed food. I was dying. Come on, I have black gold."

"You are the perfect woman. Well, you would be if you didn't hog all the covers."

I sat up and grabbed a mug off the tray and handed it to him, then grabbed my own. He made a funny face at me when he saw my mug.

"What? It was a gift from Alice. She thought it was funny. Belle, Bella. She liked books, I like books..."

"Bella, it's a Disney mug..." Edward was looking at me like I had two heads.

"It was a gift, Edward. It was meant to be funny!"

"Now that I've met her, I can appreciate that. She is quite a character, isn't she?"

He peeked over at the end table.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"Yep." I smiled. "Still want one?"

"One?" He reached over me to grab both packets. "Who says you get any?"

We ended up wrestling over rights to the pop tarts. In the end we had two very crushed packets. That was okay. They still tasted good; they just didn't look perfect.

Kind of appropriate given everything we'd been through.

"So what do you want to do today?" Edward asked as we finished breakfast.

"Absolutely nothing. I have no faith in humanity right now. I vote for staying in all day, reading the paper and watching movies."

"You can't dodge the world, Bella. We have to go back outside."

I didn't want to go back outside. I didn't want to deal with unrealistic expectations, agendas, or people wanting to take my picture. I wanted to be plain old Bella and Edward.

And honestly, I was surprised that he wanted to venture out. He'd taken more of a hit than I had.

"Come on, we can order pizza, stay just like we are. Make out on the couch all day..." I knew I was playing dirty, taking advantage of a weak point, but I wasn't too proud to use what I had. I was still frayed from the previous evening, and the thought of venturing outside just wasn't high on my list.

"Now you sound like me. Come on, hit the shower. Demetri will be here soon with my clothes. We'll figure out something to do today, just us."

Us. It all came back to that. As long as there is an 'us', nothing else should really matter.

I gave him a pitiful look. I knew I was playing all the angles, but I really didn't want to leave my apartment.

"What if you take a shower with me?"

He groaned and pulled a pillow over his head.

"Go, Bella. I know what you are doing, and as tempting as it is, we are not staying in this apartment all day." Edward gave me a small push. "Now get up, and get in the shower. We are going out."

I sighed and got out of bed. I turned to try and lure him with me.

"No. I know how your brain works. Go." He was trying to be stern, but I could see the smile threatening to break through.

"Offer stands," I called innocently as I headed for the bathroom. "You know where the wellies are."

I heard a loud groan from behind me.

I might be able to convince him to stay in all day after all.

To the Beginning

Willpower. I needed it.

It certainly wasn't that I didn't want to join Bella in the shower. I just had a feeling she was right. If we went down that path this morning, we'd never leave her apartment.

Tempting as that was, I knew I needed to go out. In part, I was breathing the stagnant air of a failed evening. We'd used her apartment as an escape, not a haven. I needed a change of scenery to shake things up in my head.

I understood Bella's inclination to hole ourselves up, and a few weeks ago, I would have signed up for that without hesitation. But her approach was rubbing off. As was her faith in me. It made me less concerned about public perception. Made me more willing to live without fear of what others would think.

While she showered, I picked up the kitchen a bit from her breakfast foraging. My phone buzzed from where I left it on the end table the night before. It was a simple message.

U Okay? T

I hit her number, and went back to the kitchen to pour another cup of coffee.

"Hey, Edward," Tanya answered tentatively. "You survived?"

"Barely," I gave a light chuckle. "How bad were things after we left?"

"Not too bad. People caught some tension, and there may be some talk about that, but nothing was too obvious. I saw you two leave, but the rest of the table stayed frozen. There was some whispering, but I didn't really know anything went down until I caught up with Rosalie in the bathroom."

"I bet you got an earful."

"Not really. She was in tears. Just kept blubbering about how mad everyone was at her. She felt really bad. For what it's worth, I think she was kind of trying to stand up for Emmett the way I heard Bella did for you."

I wanted to feel sorry for her, but I couldn't. I knew logically that all of the tension would have been there regardless of whether Rosalie brought it out in the open or not, but we didn't need it last night. And Emmett hadn't been attacked.

"I caught up with Emmett shortly after, and he filled me in a little. He's pretty torn up."

"That makes two of us. He said some rather unpleasant things."

"And apparently Bella came out fighting?"

"It was a knock out."

"Good for her! Damn, I like her. How's she doing?"

"Okay. It wasn't a good night for either of us, but I'm trying to convince her to get out of the house to shake it off."

"Well if it were me, I'd vote for retail therapy, but since it's Bella, that probably won't work."

"Not a chance," I replied, but it actually did give me an idea. "I should get going Tanya."

"No problem. Hey, do you mind if I talk with Emmett? I mean, I think I can help shed some light on things for him, but I didn't want to talk about your relationship without your blessing."

"It's fine, but I doubt it'll do much good. I'm wondering if we aren't as close as I always thought."

"Edward, you don't get it do you? He's always been jealous of you."

"Of me?" I couldn't make sense of that. "Why?"

"You Cullens are supposed to be so smart. I swear. Listen, when you have more time, let's talk, okay?"

"Sounds good. I think we may be headed out of town soon. She mentioned it last night, so I'll call you. And thanks again."

Bella came into the room with wet hair and a towel.

"That was a boring shower."

"I think it's my turn."

"I used all the hot water."

"With you talking about wellies and walking around like that, I needed the water cold anyway."

"Smart ass."

"Get dressed. Casual. Demetri will be here soon, and we can head out. I was thinking it's back to basics time."

Do You Believe in Fate?

It was a typical New York spring day, sunny and low fifties. I threw on jeans, a sweater and my Macintosh, and grabbed my sunglasses. It was partially for the sun, partially for a bit of anonymity.

Edward laughed at me. "You look so upper east side."

I shot him a dirty look. That was not a compliment.

"Get over it. You look cute. Come on."

Demetri was waiting for us downstairs. He gave me a wink but didn't say anything as he pulled away from the curb.

"So where are we headed?" I asked.

Edward didn't answer, just smiled and started twirling a strand of my hair.

"Hello? Cullen? Little help?"

He smiled a little bigger as he continued to twirl.

Damn it.

We continued on in silence. Demetri flipped on the radio to fill the silence. Funny, I wouldn't have taken him for a James Taylor fan.

The car pulled up at the corner of 55th and Fifth. Edward got out and turned around, hand out. A flash of last night came back. Getting out of the car at the Met. I didn't want to go back there.

"Come on, Bella. Trust me." I grabbed his hand and got out of the car. He tugged me along behind him as he headed straight for the coffee shop.

"Wonder if they still have the heat on?" He asked as we entered. "You looked so miserable standing there that day. I offered you a section of the paper, and then panicked. I had no clue what else to say to you."

I had to laugh at that. Mr. Smooth, no clue what to say?

"Funny, I felt like a bumbling idiot. When you didn't talk to me, I thought I had made a fool of myself."

We stood in line to get coffee; his arms wrapped around my shoulders and I was pulled back against his chest so he could rest his chin on top of my head.

"So why didn't you tell me that you wanted a mocha? You hate black coffee."

"I thought it sounded goofy. I was embarrassed."

We laughed as we dissected those first few meetings. Short of Edward's 'stalker admission' that first weekend at his apartment, we'd never really discussed how things started. Looking back now, it was funny how unsure we were of ourselves and each others intentions.

We settled into over stuffed chairs with our coffee. Since leaving the house, I had noticed that Edward was constantly in contact in some way. Twirling my hair, arm around me, holding my hand. It wasn't an insecurity thing. The contact was differently. It was like something had changed in the last twenty four hours. I couldn't explain it. Things just felt different.

Good different.

"Do you think you would have ever approached me, had I not come in here to get coffee that day?"

Edward looked out the window, thinking for a moment.

"I honestly don't know. I can't answer now, because my perspective is so skewed. There was a day I almost did. It was at the end of January. You were standing in front of the window, and you looked like you were crying. I wanted to do something to make you happy, to make you smile."

I had to laugh. I knew exactly what day he was talking about.

"You did. You just didn't realize it."

He looked at me, confused. "I didn't talk to you, Bella."

It's funny, looking back on things, how it all wove back together.

"That day was my rock bottom. The day I gave up. I had been on yet another miserable blind date, and was fed up with it all. I decided to stop waiting for Mr. Wonderful. I spent a week or so brooding on it all, and realized that if things were going to be different, I would have to take control of my life, make some changes. My first official act was stopping and getting coffee the day I met you."

"You have to be kidding me." Edward shook his head in amazement. "It's enough to make the biggest cynic believe in fate. The connection to Jasper, how we finally ended up talking. Guess you're lucky that I was persistent and you were a good kisser."

I nudged him with my foot.

"Okay, fine. I have another question for you. What did you think when I grabbed your tie and kissed you?"

He broke into a grin and stood up. "Come on."

"What?"

"Come on. I'll tell you, but first, come on."

He pulled me up out of my chair and led me out onto Fifth Avenue. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out where he was headed.

We stopped in front of the window. It was a spring theme, filled with brightly colored stones and flowers. He pulled me around to face him.

"You want to know what I thought? I thought I hesitated a moment too long."

He didn't have a tie to grab on to, but I didn't need one today. It wasn't like I needed to make him come closer. He still tasted like coffee, but no cinnamon this time. I wasn't nervous, but kissing him still gave me the same adrenaline rush.

We stood there like that for a long time. Oblivious to the world. Everything else faded into the background. Last night may have been a disaster, but I would do it again in a heartbeat just to have this.

"Does that answer your question?" He asked when we finally broke apart.

"So I know what you thought the first time you saw me in the boots. That's what you thought when I kissed you? It's confirmed. You are a perv Cullen."

"You complaining Swan?" He squeezed me a bit tighter.

"Nope. Just making an observation."

Subconscious

The window was calming and rejuvenating at the same time. It wasn't just about romance, but about what formed

the basis of our relationship. The window represented anticipation and hope.

"Do you have any regrets?"

"Why would I?"

"It all seemed so easy back then, but if you knew now, would you still have jumped into a relationship with me?"

"Knowing what I know now?"

I nodded. It had all been so much. It was something of a pulse check for me on her emotional state. Were we worth the pain to her?

"I would dive in head first, Edward. Wouldn't you?"

"Without question."

We silently observed the window for a little while longer. Somehow knowing we didn't have the luxury of this place every day made us reluctant to leave.

"I've been thinking about those earrings. Not that I could avoid thinking about them," Bella began. "Anyway, I know your dad said it was about the meaning of the stone, and that makes sense, but I think there was more to it."

"Such as?"

"I hadn't noticed until we stood face to face, but topaz is very close to his eye color. I think it was his way of always being with your mom. You know the saying the eyes are the window to the soul? Well, it was a way for her to always be able to see through to the very heart of him."

I let that wash over me.

"I can definitely see that." If that were the case, I could see why it would have hit him harder to see Bella wearing them. They represented something entirely too personal. "I'm sorry."

She smiled. I took her hand, and we began walking slowly away from the window. We didn't say another word about the earrings.

"Well, you got me out of the house, so what's next on the agenda?" she asked changing the subject.

"A walk in the park?"

"Fresh air sounds perfect."

On the way to the park, Bella cautiously prodded.

"Do you want to talk about anything?"

"Not really," I said with a laugh. But she gave me a look that said she was serious.

"I know what you plan to do about your dad, but what about Emmett?"

"Did I tell you he called last night as well?" She shook her head. "He didn't leave a message though. And I talked with Tanya this morning. She said something that confused me. She said he's always been jealous. I don't know. We've fought before, but this was different. More personal, more real."

"Are you willing to make the first move?" I closed my eyes for a second considering my options.

"With Emmett, maybe, but things are a little raw right now, and I can't see that far ahead."

We didn't engage in much conversation after that. We held hands, and we watched people. The park was busy. Just warm enough to bring people out of their apartments. Walking dogs, playing Frisbee, kicking a ball, running, laughing on a first date, or like us, just being in love. Every once in a while, one of us would squeeze the other's hand or slide a little closer to let our bodies have contact. For so many years, touch had not been tender for me. There hadn't been any meaning behind it. This touch wasn't just for me though. I could tell her I loved her every five minutes, but I learned from watching my dad that constant contact communicated love better than any words could.

We paused to watch some people rowing on the lake. The sun made the water sparkle. My hand found her cheek, and she leaned into it.

We paused for a while watching a puppet show. There were mostly families in the audience. One of the early spring park activities. Kids were laughing and yelling and crying. Parents looked excited and exhausted.

I would say it wasn't intentional, and that was true, but I imagine there was something working at a subconscious level when we headed out of the park. We'd probably been in the park an hour and a half or so. We had simply meandered.

I would call it an unexpected surprise when we found ourselves back on Fifth Avenue at 82nd Street. I heard Bella sharply inhale. The Met.

I tugged lightly on her hand to lead her away quickly, but she resisted.

"You were the one who said we couldn't hide today," she reminded me.

"I didn't mean we had to relive last night."

"It's not the place though is it? I've always loved the Met. I can't let last night ruin that."

"You want to go in?"

We stood at the bottom of the steps for a while. She never answered the question, but after a few minutes, she went up the first step and looked back at me. "Coming?"

The Lighthouse

Once inside, I pulled Edward along behind me. I knew exactly where I was going.

We dodged tourists and kids as I headed for the back corner of the museum.

"I didn't think this was your speed, Bella," Edward teased as we entered the modern art room. I lead him past O'Keefe's, Lichtenstein's and Picasso's.

"I really have a hard time considering this modern art," I replied as I stopped in front of a painting. "This is heaven."

"You like Hopper?"

"I don't like Hopper. I love Hopper. I could stare at this painting for hours. I actually used to. I would stand here and imagine that I could hear the sea gulls, the ships bells ringing in the distance. I even have printout of it hanging on the wall in my office. It's one of those Zen things."

Edward laughed at me. Full out laughter.

"What?" I hadn't said anything funny. So I was nuts about a painting of a light house.

"Ever read the plaque?" He asked, leaning against the wall smiling.

The Lighthouse at Two Light

Edward Hopper, 1929

On Loan from the Cullen Foundation

"Remember what I was saying about fate?" He had a bemused expression. "I remember when I was little; I would sit and stare at that for hours. It was in the library at Southampton. Why do you like it so much?"

I smiled and shook my head. Fate, destiny, call it what you will, but in retrospect, our lives had been slowly twining around each other for months. Maybe even years.

"I guess it reminded me a bit of home. Not the picture per se, but being close to the ocean, the sounds, the memory of the smell. It was a way for me to reconnect to the things I missed."

We'd not spoken much about my home. I had told Edward a lot about my dad, and we'd had one or two awkward conversations about my mother, but we'd never really delved into stories about where I grew up. I don't think it was intentional on my part; it's just not something I thought to talk about.

"I used to complain about how much it rained. It sucked as a kid. But I have come to appreciate it now that I'm an adult. Everything was so vibrant, so lush. And it always smelled so clean. It blows me away the first time I step out of the car after being away for a long time. Living in the smog and pollution you forget what clean air smells like."

"I don't think I ever recall you talking about your home. I guess I always assumed that you left and never looked back," He observed quietly.

We stood there quietly for a while, looking at the picture. What I had always considered my picture.

"I was serious about going. I realize that you don't know very much beyond what I've told you. It would be good for you to meet my dad, do the whole 'this is your life' thing."

"When do you want to go?" His question was matter of fact. No doubt.

"I don't have any deadlines looming for a while, so my calendar is pretty flexible..."

Edward cut in before I could finish.

"Great, I'll call Teterboro and see when the plane is available. Assuming it's not out, we can go anytime."

I laughed and shook my head. "Ridiculously expensive jewelry, loaning famous paintings to major art institutions, and private planes might wow other women, but not me, Edward. If we are going to Washington, we're doing it the normal way. Commercial flight to Seattle, rent a car for the drive to Forks. Same way I have always done it."

"You really don't care about the money, do you?" He asked, a bit amazed.

"You're just figuring that out?" We had moved away from my painting to sit down on a bench. "There are fringe benefits that are great, but I don't need all that, Edward. I just want you. Trust fund or no."

Edward continued to stare at me; a look of skepticism on his face.

"Why does that surprise you so much? Are people really that shallow that you would expect that money is what makes you different or special?"

"You met Giana." It was a simple answer, but it spoke volumes.

"I hate to tell you Cullen, but I'd love you even if you didn't have a trust fund and had to mow the lawn on your own. I'd take care of you and keep you in the manner you are accustomed too...well, yeah, that wouldn't work. I can't afford your Purple label shirts, and we know you need those."

We both laughed. It didn't solve the mountain of issues that he still had to face, but at least he knew where we stood.

"Come on, I'll buy you a vendor dog." I stood and held my hand out to pull him up. "You can't resist a little New York high cuisine."

Strawberries

We didn't hurry. We even stopped for ice cream on the way back to my apartment. We were delaying. She hadn't said it, but I knew she would want to go back to her apartment tonight. We both probably had work issues to deal with and busy days if we were looking to head out of town this week.

We shared a banana split, both fighting over the cherries and the strawberry ice cream.

"I may lead a vanilla life, but you just can't top strawberry flavored anything."

I raised one eyebrow at her. "Anything?"

"Hmm, is this the start of a new fetish, Cullen?" I shook my head and laughed.

"So, I know this wasn't officially a date, and there wasn't much planning involved, but have I redeemed myself at all? Will you trust me to try my hand at planning one again?"

"That depends," she said slyly. "This date isn't over yet."

"True," I said thoughtfully. "So, I need to conclude with a bang then I take it."

"Yes, but please don't tell me you can arrange for actual fireworks."

I snorted. And I didn't tell her that I did actually know who I would call to do that.

"I'll start by offering up the last bite." And I watched her open her mouth to take the spoon I was holding out for her. She drew out a long, "mmmm" as she swallowed the ice cream.

"Bella, you have a little bit of whipped cream right there," I said, pointing at the corner of her mouth. She tried to reach it with her tongue to lick it away. "Still there. Would you like help?"

I must have been wearing my lust on my sleeve. "No way, Cullen. You had your shot at the shower this morning."

When we made it back to my place, we stood in the lobby of the building.

"I know you need to get home, but will you come up for a little while?"

"I don't know, Edward. I'm afraid once I get there, I'll never make it back to my place."

"I understand," and I did, but I wasn't ready to say goodbye. "Let me just run up and get my car keys. I can take you back."

"Really, though, I can just take a cab."

"Bella. Why won't you let me take you home? What kind of a date would I be?"

"You're more than a date, Edward. You're someone who is in a mature relationship with a woman he trusts. How about I make a deal with you?"

I nodded for her to continue.

"I'll come up for an hour. Exactly one hour. But then you have to let me get myself home."

I'm sure I looked conflicted. So, she sweetened the deal. "I bet I still taste like strawberries."

I couldn't get her to the couch fast enough. And after precisely an hour of one of our make out sessions, I walked her back downstairs to help her into a cab. Before I shut the door, she whispered. "Thank you for today. It was exactly what I needed."

"Work on clearing your calendar. We'll get you out of dodge this week."

There were no I love you's in public. It was too personal. Knowing that her first one was caught on camera resulted in an unspoken rule. We said with eyes and smiles and as always my hand on her cheek, but not with words.

I spent the night looking up flights, addressing emails, and checking my schedule for the week. I sent a few messages out to re-arrange some meetings and one to Jasper.

I figured he'd get details from someone else, and I didn't want to leave him completely hanging. I also let him know about our plans for the week. He wrote me back about an hour later saying he had heard about Bella's speech and wishing us well on our trip. As was becoming his norm, his last line warned me to keep Bella safe. As if I needed to be reminded.

"I'm very impressed she took on your whole family. You can't buy that kind of dedication. You better not take it for granted."

I had more money than I could ever spend, and I knew without a doubt that he was right. I just wished he believed me.

I booked the flights before bed. I would never have the heart to tell Bella that the price for 2 last minute first class tickets was probably close to as much as taking our plane, but if she wanted commercial, I would give it to her.

It took me a long time to fall asleep. The bed felt too big. There was too much air in the room with no one to share it. It was too quiet without her breathing or talking in her sleep.

I could go on and on, but it came down to one thing. I missed her.

~*~

CHAPTER 19: LEAVING ON A JET PLANE BIG BROTHERS

When Demetri picked me up on Monday, my usual note was waiting for me.

8:30 Continental flight out from Newark to the Emerald City on Tuesday. I'll let you have commercial, but we are flying first class. My legs are too damned long for coach.

I love you – E

I laughed to myself and slipped the note in my backpack. I knew he had given in too easily yesterday. I probably should have been irritated, but I had only set one parameter, commercial. Lesson learned for next time.

And it could have been worse; he could have bought every seat on the plane.

I spent the day lining things up so that I could take the rest of the week off; including a few major to do's that I needed to get off my desk. I went heads down all morning, took a quick break at lunch to run out and grab something to eat, and then hunkered down for the afternoon with a new manuscript.

I went back and forth between markups and taking bites of my sandwich. I was so focused that I didn't realize I wasn't alone.

"I knew you were different, but hot pastrami on rye? I'm impressed. You eat like a guy."

I looked up to see Emmett Cullen standing in my office doorway, suit jacket open, tie loosened. He looked slightly uncomfortable, and was trying to mask it behind a sheepish smile.

"What are you doing here?" That came out incredibly rude. I quickly followed up. "I'm sorry, you caught me off guard. Come on in." I stood to clear a pile of manuscripts off the visitor's chair. "I apologize for the mess. I am never very good about keeping my office clean."

He sat down in the chair, and looked around my office. I had never been one on one with Emmett. After what I

had said on Saturday night, I was completely thrown by his visit.

"How are you, Bella?"

"Um, I'm okay. Headed out of town for a few days, so I am trying to get some things taken care of."

"How is Edward?"

I should have anticipated this question, but it still unsettled me. Why not pick up the phone or walk down the hallway and ask him yourself?

"As well as can be expected. I thought he could use some time away, so we are heading to Washington for the rest of the week."

"Are you taking him to meet your family?"

"My father, yes." I paused, unsure how best to proceed. "Was there something that you wanted, Emmett?"

He looked around my office, as if taking stock of me by my environment. The Art Deco jazz prints, the little plastic basketball hoop, the lava lamp. He paused for a moment when he saw the print out of the Hopper painting. I wondered how that looked to his perspective.

"I used to jokingly call Edward 'Hopper' when we were little. It drove him nuts." He sat down in the chair, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "I'm not going to beat around the bush, Bella. What you said Saturday night took a lot of courage. Taking on one Cullen takes a lot of strength. You took on three."

"Yeah, well, I had a Cullen backing me up, which helped immensely," I replied, probably a bit too glibly. I wasn't in the mood to spar with him today.

"You love Edward a lot, don't you?"

"I would have thought it was pretty obvious by now."

"I mean really love him. Not his name, not his money, him."

I sighed and shook my head. Sometimes it would be so much easier if he had to work for a living like everyone else.

"I fell in love with him before I knew his last name or his financial status. I am not so shallow as to see a meal ticket. With all due respect, you are all too much work to make it worth it."

He threw back her head and laughed, just like Edward did when he was amused.

"You are unlike any woman I've ever seen my brother with, Bella."

I tapped my pen on my desk, tolerance running low. "I doubt this was a social call, Emmett. What do you want?"

He leaned forward in his chair to rest his elbows on his knees. "You said some pretty harsh things the other night."

I raised my eyebrows as an indication for him to proceed.

"Some were way off base. Others, well, let's say that you gave me a few things to think about." Emmett stared at me intently for a few moments before continuing.

"He's not faultless in this either, Bella. He shut everyone out long before he ever left for L.A. It's hard to accuse people of things if you never confront them or address the issues. Edward is the king of avoidance."

"All I can comment on, Emmett, is what I have seen over the past few months. I'm not saying Edward is perfect. No one is. But how much of your reactions to him are based on the Edward you knew versus the one you know?"

He frowned at me. "What do you mean?"

"You thought Edward asked your mom for the earrings based on his behavior in the past, correct?" He nodded in response to the query.

"Edward didn't want to go to the Met, Emmett. I talked him into going; I made the decision of what to wear, earrings included. It wasn't some event orchestrated by him to get under your skin. In fact, he wanted to keep me sheltered from all the scrutiny. I was the one who talked him into going to present the united front. I thought that us being together was enough. That I could protect him. But you all sure proved me wrong. You never even gave us a chance."

I leaned back in my chair, my pen still tapping on my desk. Emmett didn't move, but his expression had shifted from curiosity to confusion. He must have thought Edward talked me into going against my will.

"Your mother sent the earrings a few days after she and Tanya helped me find a dress. She did it to try and help me feel comfortable, to feel like I was accepted. To get you guys to all back off long enough to realize that things were different this time. Edward showed me the note that she sent with them, and ultimately he left the choice of wearing them to me."

I dropped the pen and leaned forward, my elbows on my desk, so that I could look directly at him. "Edward may suck when it comes to communicating with you all. I haven't seen it, so I don't know. But you are sure quick to jump to conclusions about his actions. The only thing I could fault him for Saturday night was giving in to my insistence that we go. I talked him into it, and I chose to wear the earrings. I guess that means I'm the one you should have gone after."

Emmett hadn't moved during my little diatribe.

"If you don't mind, Emmett, I have a lot to do before we leave, and I would very much like not to rehash one of the worst nights of my life."

He stood and moved to the door, where he hesitated for a moment.

"Bella, I love my family. I don't want to see them torn apart over this. I realize that I might have leapt to conclusions, but you have to understand why."

I looked him square in the eye. "No Emmett, I don't understand. But I do love Edward, and I don't want to see him torn apart over it either. Does that give us the common ground to work together and try and figure it out?"

For the first time since he had entered my office, he gave me a legitimate smile.

"Let me noodle on that one, Bella. Call me when you get back from Washington, and we'll figure out a way to fix

this." He paused in the doorway for a moment, and then looked back at me over his shoulder.

"I'm glad you stood out in the crowd that day."

Lines of Communication

I was looking forward to the trip to Washington. I desperately needed to get away from the conflict, and thankfully, there was nothing too pressing on my agenda that couldn't be handled via phone or email.

It meant putting off a real conversation with my father, but not indefinitely. I didn't want to leave town with my tail tucked between my legs, giving the impression that I was running away. I knew he thought that was my M.O.

So, I sat in front of the computer, with my phone in my hand. I had three choices.

First, I could call my father back, tell him I appreciated the call Saturday night, and let him know I looked forward to speaking with him when I returned. Second, I could call my mom, inform her about the trip and ask her to tell my father that I would be out of town. Finally, I could send an email.

The second two were far more appealing to me than the first. And in the end, I figured I needed to do both. I sent my dad a quick note. I wrote "out of town" in the subject line. And paused, thinking.

I didn't provide a title greeting because it was always awkward knowing how to address him at work as it was.

I received your message this weekend. I look forward to a meeting in the future to discuss those issues. I will be out of the office for the rest of the week, as I will be in Washington State. I realize it is short notice, but I assure you my accounts are taken care of.

I will be in touch when I return.

Sincerely,

Edward

The phone call to my mother was actually more difficult because she begged me to stay and talk, or to come over that evening before we left. I told her how much Bella appreciated her assistance, but we needed some time away. She finally relented but made me promise to come back.

"The last time you left for the West coast, I had to wait over five years for you to come back. You better not be planning a permanent exodus, Edward."

I had to laugh because I'd seriously considered booking a flight with a layover in Des Moines just to see.

"No, Mom. Really. We just need a break from everything. And given how immersed she is in all of this, it's only right that I meet her father."

"I hope the photographers leave you alone for a few days. Where will you be staying?"

"We'll be at her dad's house."

"Do send Bella my best. She really is something."

"She's not just something, mom. She's everything."

"I hope you've told her that."

"I've learned from the best." I heard her take a breath, and I waited for her response.

"I . . . Edward, I'm incredibly happy for you. And so very proud." It hit me hard. Even my mother hadn't told me that in a very long time.

"I love you, mom."

"Stop, I'm not going to cry on the phone. I love you, too. Now, have a nice trip, dear."

"Thanks, Mom."

I couldn't stop smiling after that conversation.

It was all because of Bella.

Bella and I hadn't mentioned the things that were said on Saturday night, but I would not easily forget her saying she wanted marriage and children with me. I still couldn't believe how quickly she had rearranged my priorities. Things that were so far down on the list I assumed they'd never make it to the top were suddenly angling for the number one spot on my life goal list.

We were both swamped trying to make sure work was in order, so this was one of the rare days when we didn't see each other at all. There hadn't been many of those since Valentine's Day. It was painful, but knowing we had the rest of the week made it bearable. She sent me a couple of messages throughout the day. I recognized the rushed tone. So, I kept my communication to a minimum, hoping to give her the time to get caught up.

In the mid-afternoon, I called Jane into my office. I'd been cooking an idea since yesterday morning.

"Jane, I'm completely swamped, and I was wondering if you had time to step out on an errand for me."

"Certainly. Where to?"

"Tiffany's." Her eyes went wide, but then she smiled. "I'll be back before you know it."

"Thanks. I'll let them know you're picking up the package."

I probably wouldn't have given them to her so soon after the earring fiasco the other night, except all of my mom's instruction on gem meanings came in handy again. Despite everything that happened with my family, Saturday night, Bella and I remained a team. We had already told each other in words, but that night we showed each other in an unparalleled physical connection. I also saw it in her eyes after we made love. She loved me. I believed in it. I was secure in it. We solidified it on Sunday. It was the kind of hope symbolized in those simple emerald studs.

Now, she'd have her own. No more borrowing. No more perceptions of begging. Her own. It was also a selfish act; I hoped they would remind her of me. I embraced the idea of her having a direct window to my soul.

Bella,

I miss you. But I'm with you. Always and anywhere.

Love,

E.

I was anxious all afternoon, wondering how she'd react. I thought it would be rude to call and ask her if she liked her surprise. She would acknowledge the gift when she was ready. I started to second guess myself though. Was she tired of jewelry? Would earrings be too much of a negative reminder?

I was getting ready to leave the office when I got a text from her.

Should I pack my ruby slippers? Thank you. Love, B.

I knew it was her way of adding levity. I took it as a good sign. She understood their meaning.

I came **thisclose** to heading down to her apartment that evening, but she was still finishing a few manuscript revisions. I texted her back instead.

Haven't you heard? There's no place like home. Be ready at 7. E.

I had coffee and bagels waiting in the car when she hopped in. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail, showing off her new emerald earrings. She was taking a little bit of my world back into hers.

The Best Medicine

"I am never flying coach again."

Edward laughed at me as he leaned back against the elevator wall. "And why would that be?"

"Are you kidding? Warm chocolate chip cookies? Screw the cushy seats and all the wine you can drink. Just give me a glass of milk and a gooey chocolate chip cookie...heaven."

He was shaking with laughter as the opened onto the parking deck. "You are so easy to make happy."

"Nah, I just know what I like." I leaned over to peck him on the cheek. "You should feel lucky you are counted in with warm chocolate chip cookies, sheets just out of the dryer, and cutting your own Christmas tree. You keep it up, you might get added to the list too, Cullen, along with your dress shirts."

"What, no Main Street of Disneyland or puppies?" He teased. I was lost. Must have been an inside joke.

We easily found our rental, and popped the back gate of the SUV to load our bags.

"I can't believe you didn't want to get a convertible."

"Jeez, Cullen! Have you never been to Washington State? You'd be lucky if you got to put the top down for five minutes!"

We both walked around to the driver's side door, but he beat me to the keys.

"Nope – my turf, I drive." I held out my hand, palm up. "You can navigate and be in charge of music."

He looked at me skeptically. I wagged my fingers.

"I don't know how I feel about this..."

"Hand 'em over."

He sighed and dropped the keys in my hand. Then he gave me an evil smile.

"Just remember, keep your hands at 10 and 2, and don't let anything I do distract you..."

"Focus on the tunes, not the babe driving the car..." I warned.

Amazing how being on the opposite side of the country can lighten a mood.

Once we were outside of Seattle, Edward started fidgeting around with the radio. He had connected his iPod, and was shuffling through the hundreds of millions of songs he had loaded. I'd never heard of half of them.

"Oh! Stop, I love that one!" He flipped back and I started singing along at the top of my lungs. He laughed and shook his head.

"Come on, how can you not sing to this song? I love it!" I kept bopping along, amazed that I remembered the lyrics.

As the song wound down, I decided to have a little fun with him.

"Okay, useless trivia fact. These guys are still together, but they make porn music now. How do you go from Lump to Bom Chicka Wow Wow?"

Edward looked at me like I was crazy. "Your brain scares me sometimes."

"Yeah, we know you are just using me for my last name. The Swan's are a big deal in Forks, Washington. We run the town."

"Bella, your dad is sheriff. Of course he runs the town."

"See, you are rolling with the big leagues now!"

He tossed a soda cap at me. We spent the rest of the drive playing around, laughing and having a good time. It felt so good to laugh mindlessly. No worries.

When we reached the outskirts of Forks, I pulled the SUV over.

"Okay, so I know we talked about this a little, but it's different here, okay? We'll be so far off the beaten path we might as well be at the end of the world. That means that no one is going to bug us or judge us based on what we do or don't do. The people here aren't up on labels or trends, and probably don't pay much more than \$30 dollars for a pair of jeans. Some of them might not have ever heard of Tiffany's, let alone the last name Cullen. I am not joking when I say that I'll be the famous one here, not you. It's going to be different from what you are used to, so open mind please."

Edward rolled his eyes at me. "Yes ma'am."

"Seriously, though, this isn't New York. We're free here, okay? No worries, no stress." I paused, looking ahead. "That is unless my dad happens to be cleaning his service revolver when we get there."

He pulled a straight face and put his hand in the air. "No trying to get in your pants in your dad's house. Scout's honor."

"No scouts in Prep School, Cullen."

"True, but they raised us prep school kids to be prepared. Why else do you think I asked for a car with seats that reclined *all* the way back?" He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

God it felt good to laugh again.

No Place Like Home

It was an outrageously long day of travel, but also surprisingly fun. I forgot to be nervous about meeting her dad. We were so relaxed and laughed so hard, there just didn't seem to be any pressure. Besides, it couldn't be worse than meeting mine.

I have never thought of myself as a snob. Growing up, I hadn't been around anyone who didn't have money. Obviously, there were a few people in prep school on scholarship, but I didn't go to their houses or anything. College was the first time I really had interaction with people outside of my social circle, but still, most of the guys in my fraternity came from fairly well off families. Doctors and lawyers at the very least—even if they weren't old money.

Bella's apartment had thrown me for a loop, but it was Bella, so I didn't dwell on it, and I found it endearing. Driving through her home town made me a little more uncomfortable. Made me realize how little I knew about "the other half" so to speak.

I looked over at Bella when we pulled up to the house she grew up in. She was practically bouncing. The house was small, but I expected that. It was also run down. Badly in need of a fresh paint job, or just new siding. It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like it was leaning a bit.

"Home sweet home!" Bella announced. I was thinking of a response when she squealed. "Come on!"

And that's when I saw the man running down the front steps. I'd barely made it out of the SUV when she was already enveloped in a bear hug. "It's good to see you, Bells," her father beamed.

"Edward, come here and meet my dad."

I walked over to where they were standing. "Dad, this is my boyfriend, Edward."

He stuck out his hand, "So, you're the man responsible for my daughter's pictures being available at the grocery store checkout."

"I'm afraid I'm guilty. It's a pleasure to meet you, sir."

"It's Charlie."

"What are you doing here? I thought you'd be at work," Bella asked.

"I took a couple of hours off. I wanted to be here when you got in. Well let's get inside. Don't need the neighbors gawking at the celebrities."

"Nice!" Bella laughed.

He led us into the house. The inside was interesting. A hodge podge of décor—some old, but not antique. A new flat screen TV and leather recliner, but the couch was circa 1980.

"Can I get you anything?" Charlie said bringing me out of my observations.

"I'm good, thanks."

After the grand tour, we settled into the living room. Bella and her dad chatted a little about local gossip. His comments about the grocery store had her worried. She'd assumed we'd swoop in here and be unknowns, but apparently that wasn't entirely true.

"You haven't been around much, so a lot of people probably didn't even know it was you. But yeah, there's been some talk. Ran into a few of your old high school friends, and they asked about you, but I think it'll mostly be people staring. Too scared to actually talk to you."

"I hope so. I never thought I'd say it, but a little silent staring will be a welcome relief at this point." I snorted, which brought Charlie's focus to me.

"So, Edward, what is it you're famous for?"

"Dad . . . "

"No, it's okay. It's a good question. And the simplest answer is . . . nothing." He raised an eyebrow. "The fame is really all about my name."

"You weren't in a movie or anything like that?"

"No, sir. My family has a very successful company that's been around forever and a day, and people have just taken interest in us, I suppose."

"That's where you work then?"

"Yes, I was working down in L.A. for a long time, but I went back last summer."

Bella seemed to sense that her father would go deeper into this topic, so she changed the subject. "I'm hungry. Are we going out tonight?"

"Unless you want grilled cheese sandwiches. Oh wait, I'm out of bread."

"Don't sweat it. I'll head out tomorrow for supplies."

"Oh, by the way, I pulled out some sheets and blankets for the couch. Bella, do you still have a spare pillow in your room?"

My eyes shot to Bella, and she shrugged. So, I was spending the night on a couch from 1980, with a pillow likely from the same time frame. The phrase, "Don't let the bed bugs bite," never had more meaning. She turned to face

her dad, and the emerald earrings caught a glint of light from the window. It was an instant reminder of everything she had been through for me.

The things you do for love.

Such an Easy Read

I really should get him to play poker sometime. There's no way I could lose. He wears everything right there on the surface.

After my dad left, mumbling something about an emergency and not to wait up, I sent Edward out to the car to grab the bags. I took advantage of the time to quickly make the couch into a makeshift bed. Outside of my dad, everyone important in my life had spent a night on this couch. It only seemed appropriate.

Once it was all made up, I sat down on the end, waiting for Edward to return. Time to lead the horse to water and con him into drinking.

"Where do you want the..." He broke off when he saw the couch made up. "Damn. I hoped he was joking."

I shook my head and crooked a finger at him. Edward gave me a confused look, but complied. He walked over and dropped down on the couch, slumped backward as if in defeat.

"Look, Bella, I don't..." I climbed into his lap and brought my hands up to the sides of his face. It was exactly the position we'd been in on Saturday night. It wasn't lost on him.

I skipped the slow build this time, opting for all out assault. Four hours in a car had built up just a little bit of tension that I needed to get out.

After a good fifteen minutes of making out, we broke off, both panting for breath.

"So how do you feel about the couch now?" I asked as I sucked on his earlobe.

"Ummm. Love this couch..."

"You know that everyone that is important in my life has slept on this couch at some point or another. It's not a long list, but you'll be in incredibly good company."

Edward laughed and shook his head. "You see right through me. How do you do that?"

"It's a special talent, didn't I tell you?"

He tightened his arms around me. "Thank you. I haven't felt this relaxed in ages..."

"Actually, I don't think I ever gave you a proper thank you for my present. They are definitely more me than the ones your mom loaned me. I'm more of an everyday wear type of girl." I paused, studying his face. He looked so sweet, so earnest with his hair all over the place and the pleased smile like a little boy.

"You know that you don't have to buy me things to prove how you feel about me, don't you?"

"I wasn't proving it, Bella, I was just reminding you. Carlisle Cullen doesn't have the sole rights to 'window to the soul you know'."

I hadn't stopped to think about the resemblance. When I had read his note, I had thought it was something simple that I could wear all the time. I didn't stop to think about the parallel. Green eyes, emeralds. I should know better than to not stop and think about the meaning. Edward's gifts were never without some hidden thought.

"You are all the reminder I need, Edward. I don't need expensive jewelry or any other trappings to prove that."

Edward shook his head, laughing at me. "I know that, Bella. And it wasn't about that. I wanted you to have something of your own. Not borrowed, not with meaning to someone else. Although you are making me glad that I didn't go with my first choice. They would make this look like chump change."

He broke off, studying me for a second, before tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ears. "I would buy you anything to reinforce how important you are to me, yet you are the only woman I know who would say that you don't need a reminder. Are you really that disgusted with my world?"

"It's not about your world, Edward. People do it regardless of how much money they do or don't have. I'd say the same thing if you got me a plastic ring out of gumball machine."

I broke off, collecting my thoughts. "And no, I am not disgusted with your world. Yes, there are things about it I wish I could change, but there is a lot of good there. You have things that I will never have, and I envy you for that."

"I thought you just said money isn't everything."

"It's not, and I'm not talking about money. As screwed up as things are, you have a family. You just met all of mine. I can't tell you how many times I wished I had a big extended family with aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents. Holidays get pretty lonely when there are just two of you."

He took a deep breath. We hadn't spoken about his family since our brief conversation on Sunday afternoon. I had thought a lot about what Emmett had said, and promised myself that I would make good on my commitment to him. I would help figure out away to bring them all back together. There was a foundation there under all the rubble, it just needed to be uncovered.

"Look, Bella, family is complicated. It's not as easy as having them there and knowing that everything will work out okay."

"No, but it's all we have sometimes, Edward. When Charlie's gone, that's it for me. I'll be all alone." I paused, trying to think of the best way to explain it. "I don't want you to have to be in the same place. It's scary to think that there might be a day when you are all that's left. No one should have to deal with that. Especially not when there are people who do love you, even though they do need a smack upside the head."

He smiled and pulled me in closer. "How is it that you always manage to turn everything on its head, yet somehow make it better?"

"Mmmm, I don't know. Natural talent." I climbed off his lap and went over to grab one of my bags.

"Speaking of turning things on my head, did I tell you I packed my wellies?" I turned and ran up the stairs, giggling as I heard a groan of 'Bella' behind me.

Selfless

It was the worst night of sleep I'd ever had. It wasn't just that the couch was ungodly uncomfortable. A spring dug into my back, and the cushions were so matted down that it felt like I was sleeping on a concrete slab. That was bad, but the fact that I was on the same couch as men from previous relationships was disturbing—a just reward as you will—she'd already met Tanya and Giana, and well CI was not without ghosts of girlfriends past. But it still bothered me that she'd had other lovers, other loves. Given my history, it shouldn't, but I found myself wishing she had only ever belonged to me.

I stayed on the couch as long as I could, but as soon as it was light, I got up to put some coffee on. I figured maybe I'd go out for a run before anyone got up, but it wasn't long before Charlie came downstairs. He offered an awkward greeting and headed out for work.

After a quick cup of coffee, I left a note for Bella in case she woke up, and I dug my running shoes out of my bag. I had no idea where I was going, but I didn't figure I could get lost in this town.

The air was heavier than I was used to. It wasn't raining, but the humidity was palpable. This run was an attempt to shed New York. Yesterday had been great, but with the lack of sleep, I felt tension creeping back in. With every pound of my foot on the pavement I exhaled a little easier. I didn't stay out long, about forty minutes. I hadn't paid much attention to my surroundings, but what I saw was . . . quaint.

The house was still quiet when I got back, so I stole into Bella's room. She was sprawled across the smallest bed I'd seen since camp in 8th grade. I moved her gently over, and inched in beside her. Half my body was hanging off the edge of the bed. Suddenly the bed in her apartment felt enormous.

She started grumbling in her sleep. It was one of the things I'd missed the last couple of nights without her. I'd grown used to hearing her talk periodically.

Unexpectedly, she gave an involuntary shake and woke up quickly. "Hey," she said sleepily. "How did you sleep?"

Seeing her face light up when she saw me, left me with only one answer. The couch was a very small sacrifice.

"I slept just fine, Bella."

~*~

CHAPTER 20: LITTLE DISCOVERIES

HELL OF A WAKE UP

Our time in Forks hadn't started out quite as I had planned. My dad met us at the house, but something came up at work, which left us on our own for dinner. I was used to 'emergencies' coming up from when I was a kid, but I had hoped for better with Edward here. We decided that ordering pizza and hanging out was the easiest solution. It was a nice decompression after the craziness of the last week.

By ten, we were both exhausted. Our bodies thought it was one a.m., and we'd spent the whole day traveling. I finally gave up on my dad coming home, and resigned myself that it was time to go to bed. I hated knowing that Edward was just a few rooms away, but thought that it would be better for my father to see him sleeping on the couch. He may be a lot of things, but at heart, Charlie Swan was very old fashioned in his notions about relationships.

It was strange sleeping in my childhood bed. I felt like I was in some limbo state. Not the little girl that grew up in this house, but not the woman I had become in New York. On previous visits home, I always checked 'New York Bella' at the door, and slipped back into the 'Forks Bella' that I was when I lived here. I couldn't quite compartmentalize my life like that this trip.

It took a long time to fall asleep, and I was restless. I kept slipping in and out of strange half dreams that I couldn't interpret. I'd wake up panicked, heart racing, but no memory of why.

I didn't remember the dream, just the feeling of hitting something and then falling. I started awake to find Edward wedged around me in my bed. My room was light, but without the sun, it was difficult to gauge whether it was early or late.

"What time is it?" I asked sleepily.

"Just after 8. I put some coffee on when I came back from my run. Do you want some?"

"Where did you run to?" I stretched, bumping into him on my single bed. "Ewww, you are all sweaty!"

I pulled back to see a grey Dartmouth T-shirt that was probably one bucket dump short of a wet t-shirt contest stuck to his chest.

And something inside me tripped. I launched myself at Edward, although it didn't take much effort given the small space to be covered. My hands wove into his damp hair as I pulled him in as close as possible, crushing my mouth to his. Oh god he tasted so good, all salty and sweaty.

He was startled for a split second, and then responded with the same urgency. We were almost frantic in the way that we pulled at each other, trying to shift clothes, accommodate hands, and move legs.

And then we fell out of my bed.

We were both shocked for a second before breaking into laughter.

"Are you okay?" I gasped, trying to get my raging hormones and laughter under control.

"Yes, although I would think that you'd know how to keep a guy from falling out of your bed!" He shot back, laughing just as hard.

"Don't know, you're the first one that's ever been in it."

He rolled over on his side to look at me. "No way. I don't believe that one."

I jabbed him in the ribs. "What do you think I am, some tart?"

He laughed harder. "No, I just thought you were all fired up to jump me in your childhood bed!"

I turned bright red and looked away.

"Nope, not letting you off the hook. Is that what it was?"

I shook my head and looked down, mumbling, "It was the shirt."

Edward rolled onto his back and pulled his shirt up to look at the front.

"It's just a college t-shirt. No big deal." He looked back up to gauge my reaction. I had to be the color of a tomato.

"You aren't going to let this go, are you?"

"Hell no, I want to know what sparked that reaction so I can take advantage of it again."

I sat up and pushed my hair away from my face. He wouldn't stop until I came clean.

"Fine, grey t-shirt, all sweaty, totally stuck to you. Hot as hell."

A grin spread over his face. He laced his fingers behind his head to act as a pillow against the hardwood floor. It caused his shirt to ride up a bit and expose a sliver of his stomach. I shivered. This was not fair.

"Hmm. So we might have found YOUR wellie moment, huh? I'll have to remember this." He smiled at me for a moment longer. "But further proof that we are perfect together. You like me all sweaty; I like you in the water. Hand in glove."

I shook my head and laughed. "Only you could make a fantasy a justification for compatibility, Cullen."

"You complaining?" He teased. I shook my head no. "Good, now let's break in that bed of yours. Any other firsts that I should be aware of?"

"So many, but the easiest way to summarize it is first time in the state of Washington."

"Really?" He seemed surprised. "Well, guess we better stop talking then."

"Aren't you eager?" I teased. He grabbed the front of my T shirt and slid me across the hardwood floor.

"Yes, and for the record, you started it." He pinned my arms over my head with one hand while his other slid up under my shirt. "And you were taunting me yesterday about the wellies, so turn about is fair play."

Edward stared directly into my eyes, an evil grin on his face. "So should I torture you like you've been doing to me, or do you want me to put you out of your misery?"

He squeezed my breast to reinforce his question as I hummed in contentment. So much for controlling my raging hormones.

"I think you need to put me out of my misery. Right. Now." I arched my body into his as a way of backing up my words. He was a smart guy, he knew exactly what I wanted him to do.

His smile grew a bit broader. "Well, when you put it that way."

He tugged on my arms, pulling me upright enough to flip over his shoulder. He stood and dumped me on my bed. The bed frame banged up against the wall, making me giggle at the sound.

Edward was immediately over me, tugging my boxers down my legs. "So never in Washington, huh? I guess then I can let my horny teenager free at the thought of the noise this headboard is going to make. Think Chief Swan would be upset if he knew what I plan to do to his daughter in her childhood bed?"

"Edward!" I had to laugh at how playful he was being. Add sweaty grey t shirt and my god, could he be any hotter?

As lighthearted as we were, things had changed since the Met. Physically, it was almost impossible to keep our hands off each other. But there was something deeper there to. A level of trust had been built over the weekend. When Edward touched me, my reactions were instant, but it wasn't purely sexual. It was like physical contact was an affirmation of our connection. Constant proof of how we felt, of what we had become.

We loved each other. No question. No doubt. We just did.

Forks Bella

I didn't take my shirt off, since I knew it was driving her crazy, but she did claw at it to gain access to my back. She dug her fingers into my skin as mine found their way between her legs and pressed into her. She arched her back and moaned.

She was still wearing her shirt, but I pushed it up with my free hand in order to expose her more. I grazed her breast lightly which garnered an "Uh" from her.

Her eyes were locked on mine. I doubled my efforts with both hands. In out around. Up down across.

Eyes fixed. I could see them filling with anticipation. I grunted my awareness.

Push pull inhale. Back Forth exhale.

Eyes glazed, mouth open.

Pinch release gasp.

Her eyes finally closed at the moment of release. Her body shook, and she let out a high pitched groan. I watched mesmerized.

The intensity decelerated. I kept my right hand in place, as I slid my left away from her breast to place in on the bed. Gaining leverage I positioned myself directly over her. Her eyes shot back open, and I met her gaze, seeking permission. Her arms reached up around my neck, to pull me close.

Our movements were slow and melodic. Bodies joined in harmony and rhythm. I took my time playing this instrument. Trying new notes and changing the tempo. From adagio to allegro and back again. We could have made music all day, but eventually, we began a slow crescendo. Reaching the end, completely in sync.

The sounds of our climax reverberated in the room. Breathing slowed.

I didn't resist one final chord, "Damn, I love you."

She laughed at me as I collapsed next to her. Well almost next to her and half hanging off the bed, but somehow were squished together in that space. But she didn't let me rest long.

Within minutes, she started pushing at me. "Come on. Let's get that coffee."

I groaned in response. "Don't need it if we just fall back asleep."

"No way. There's too much to do today."

Bella was excited. And not just in regards to my shirt, though I definitely appreciated her enthusiasm in that department. I was pleased to have a secret weapon to use against her. And it hadn't passed my attention that we were in a very rainy area of the county, with Bella's boots just a room away. It was very possible we could compose a masterpiece in Forks.

She was eager to start the day so she could show me the whole town.

"So, we'll be done in an hour right?"

"Jerk!"

"It's not very big. I swear I ran the whole thing this morning. How long can it take?"

"Great things come in small packages, or hadn't you noticed?" She teased.

"So, what's first on the agenda?"

"Hmm, well, there are some fabulous hiking trails by the river, and we can do the drive around town too. Tonight I think the plan is to hang out with my dad."

"Coffee's waiting downstairs, but it sounds like we need breakfast if we're going to manage all that. I'd offer, but I don't know where anything is."

"Hopefully, we can scrounge something, but we'll have to hit the grocery store too. You wanna get off me, and I'll get something going?"

I gave her a fake pout, but managed to scoot over to give her just enough room to escape. She stepped into her boxers. I watched. She shook her head and laughed at me and then started throwing my discarded clothes at me. "Get dressed lazybones!"

I complied and followed her downstairs.

She found some eggs, and I began scrambling them in a bowl while she foraged for a frying pan. She tried three cupboards before she located it. She grumbled under her breath about nothing being where it should be. I tossed the eggs in the pan to cook while she set the table. After we ate, she took her plate to the sink. "So do you want to shower first, or should I?"

I raised one eyebrow and smirked at her. "You have a one track mind, Cullen. And it's very dirty."

"Hey, I'm just offering to clean it up. You do sort of stink after all."

"Rude! You're the sweaty stink monster!" She laughed as she took her shirt off and threw it at me. Then she ran up the stairs toward the bathroom.

I nearly spilled my coffee.

We didn't get out of the house until around ten, and Bella insisted we start with a grocery store run. This trip was a week of firsts. Yes, I had been to a grocery store. I wasn't that sheltered, but never one quite like this. In New York I went to corner stores, mom and pop shops, or I tended to have things delivered. This was . . . different. For

a small town, the store was large. It prided itself on being a "one stop shop." There was even a hardware store and an apparel shop in the strip mall.

I kind of liked it. There were so many choices. I kept adding to the heaping pile in the cart.

"Edward, we're only in town for a few days. We can't leave my dad with 5 boxes of cereal to eat. And since when do you even eat cereal?"

"I know, but this aisle is huge. It just begs you to buy one of everything."

"Let's just stick to the essentials, okay?"

"Fine, but I am definitely going back to the souvenir area. I think I saw a grey Forks, WA shirt, I'd like to have." She stuck her tongue out at me. I wasn't kidding though. I was going use her Achilles Heel against her every chance I had.

We had a cart that was way too full for our few days here, and we took a final pass through the ice cream aisle because Bella declared it was a vacation must.

"Bella? Is that you?"

Bella turned away from the freezer, and she smiled at the woman in front of us. She looked to be about our age, and she had a friendly face, the kind you trusted instantly.

"Hi Angela. It's been too long. You look great."

It caused the woman to look over at me. Her expression was unreadable. Either she didn't recognize me, or she was good at masking her reaction.

"Oh Angela, this is Edward, my boyfriend. Edward, this is Angela. We went to high school together."

Angela smiled, and reached her hand out. I returned the gesture, and said, "It's nice to meet you."

"How long are you in town, Bella?"

"I'm not sure," Bella answered looking to me. "Saturday, I think."

"Maybe we can get together. I'm sure Ben would love to see you too."

"Sure, you can call my dad's if you want. Do you still have the number?"

"I can look it up. He's easy to find."

After Angela departed, we finished shopping.

"Are you close with her?"

"Oh we were, once upon a time. Now, we really don't talk much—when I come home mostly."

"Did anything happen?"

"No, not really. I was in New York, she was here, and our interests weren't the same. We kept in touch better through college, but when it was clear that I was making my life out there, I think it just wasn't worth her investing the time anymore. She got married, and we just stopped calling. You know?"

I nodded. There wasn't much else I could say. She stated it all fairly matter of factly, but Bella was quieter; some of her enthusiasm was gone. She didn't say much during the car ride back. As we were unloading groceries, I asked, "Where'd you go?"

"Nowhere. Just thinking."

"About Angela?"

"A little. And my dad. And just how much has changed versus how much has stayed the same since I left."

"I experienced a lot of that when I moved back."

She seemed to shake it off after that. We put away the groceries, and we had a snack before packing a lunch to take out on a hiking trail.

I'd never thought of Bella as someone who would know her way around a trail, but as always, she was full of surprises.

"Actually, I was not much of an outdoorsy person until my senior year. I liked this guy, but he moved away so I started hanging out with my friend Jake more, and we explored the woods. He taught me a lot. That's really how I came to appreciate this area."

"Your friend Jake? Just friends?" I said it casually, but I was swallowing back jealousy.

"Remember what I said earlier? Never in Washington. Jake and I have known each other forever. Our dads are tight. Anyway, it was gross, kinda like kissing your brother." We both laughed at that recalling my description of trying to make something happen with Tanya.

We walked along the river for a while, but Bella had a plan for our picnic. It took us about an hour to find it, and she wasn't even certain it would still be there, but we stumbled upon it almost on accident. We were about to turn around and head back to a different trail when we walked right into it. A meadow, a picture perfect scene in the middle of the forest. Green grass, tree lined with wild flowers sprinkled throughout.

She spread out the blanket while I started taking food out of the pack. "This place is so peaceful," I remarked, taking in the scene.

"I could never be in a bad mood here. I've missed this place. I used to come here a lot that last year before I left."

"By yourself? Or with your friend?"

"Both. It was a rough year for me. I thought I was in love with the boy who moved away, and I felt like it'd never get over him. So I used to come here to wallow. Of course, it's kind of funny now because I realize it was just a high school crush, but you know how real it can all feel when you're young. Everyone kept trying to tell me that, but I didn't believe them so this was a place where I could be sad without anyone telling me to get over it."

"That's . . . I don't know. I'm sorry you had to go through that." She sort of shrugged and ran her hand through the grass next to her. I listened to the sounds of nature around us. "This place is kind of secluded. I don't think I like

the idea of you here by yourself. Did your dad know about it?"

"I was seventeen, Edward. Do you really think I told my dad I was going hiking in the woods? He would have gone all caveman on me, just like you're doing."

"Caveman? Not quite, just wanting you safe. So, you were a big rebel in high school huh?"

"Hardly, my dad was pretty good about not asking questions he didn't want answers to, but I tried not to keep the important things from him."

After we ate, we relaxed in the meadow, telling stories, sharing memories. Something about being here opened Bella up even more. I was seeing sides of her I hadn't known existed—more vulnerable.

I was on my back, looking up at the bits of sky poking through the trees. "We should go before I fall asleep."

"Go ahead; we don't have anywhere to be right now," She urged.

"Are you sure?"

"Definitely. I can either nap too, or just enjoy some time in my favorite place. And she propped up on her elbow and ghosted her fingers down my arm. So, I spent the afternoon sleeping, with Bella by my side. I could get used to Forks.

Introspection

While Edward slept, I replayed our conversation from earlier. I had always seen Forks as a place frozen in time. The one place that always stayed the same. It was a touchstone for me. But something was different this trip. I couldn't put my finger on what or why, but something had changed.

Jake and I had found this meadow by accident the summer before our senior year of high school. I was a distraught 17 year old who had her heart broken for the first time, and was looking to run away. That, on top of the sense of constant scrutiny had me starting to feel stifled in Forks. The straight A student, the Sheriff's daughter, the good girl. I hadn't rebelled, but I hadn't wanted to toe the line either. I took to hanging out with Jake and his La Push friends as a way of breaking out of the mold a bit. Other than Alice, and later Jasper and Edward, Jake was the only one who had truly ever seen the real me.

Our dads had always been close, and I think deep down my dad had always harbored the hope that I would be interested in Jake romantically. But he was the closest thing to a sibling I'd ever known, the one person here who had never let me down. I wasn't joking with Edward when I said I couldn't think about him as anything other than that.

It would be interesting to see how Edward responded if he ever met the La Push gang. They were wonderful people, with the biggest hearts I had ever seen. They also made my dad look like Donald Trump when it came to money. It's not that I expected Edward to be snobbish, but it would take him pretty far out of his comfort zone.

"I don't think I've ever seen you pull back so far into yourself. I'd give anything to get inside that head of yours right now."

I was lying propped on my elbows, tying daisy chains. I hadn't realized that he was awake.

"Have you been watching me for long?"

"Only long enough for you to tie about ten links. What were you thinking about?"

"Just remembering. This place brings back a lot of memories for me. I guess you could call it my west coast Tiffany's window." I tied off the end of the daisy chain, and sat up so I could drop it over my head. "But the prices are much more reasonable."

"Can I ask you a question?" Something in his tone was off. Almost apprehensive. I sat quietly, an indication for him to proceed.

"What you said before, about never in Washington, why?"

"Aren't we a little far down the road to be asking about sexual history, Cullen? I think you are supposed to do that before you bag the babe."

He didn't smile. "I'm serious. Why never in Washington?"

I sighed and reclined back on my elbows.

"There wasn't any irony in Angela and I being friends. The pastor's kid and the sheriff's kid were kind of fated for each other. Did you know that one of our classmates actually said they couldn't hang out with us for fear that we would slip up and tell something to our dads? I believe the sentiment was they'd go to jail, hell, or both."

Edward reached out to twine his fingers with mine. "But that doesn't answer my question."

"That has a lot to do with it. And I guess I am an old fashioned girl. I could have gone out and had sex with anyone, but that wasn't me. The only serious relationship I'd ever had didn't get anywhere near the 'running the bases,' so to speak. And then it was time to go to college. It's really just as simple as that. I used to think that I wanted to go to New York because it was such a great opportunity. In hindsight, I can't help but think it was my way to get away from everyone and learn who I was. My guidance counselor warned me that I might be lonely. I could be in a city all by myself, and it would probably be less lonely than Forks was at times."

I thought back to all the things that I had missed out on because of my small social circle. I had convinced myself that they didn't matter, but deep down, activities like Homecoming, Prom, and parties were all things that any seventeen year old girl wanted to attend. What was the old saying? Me thinks thou doth protest to much?

The seventeen year old Bella had put up a good front, but it didn't mean that it didn't hurt to miss out. And even more so that I was home alone while everyone else had fun. Maybe that is why I fell in love with books. They were always around, always wanted me.

Edward sat up, pulling me along with him. He lifted me into his lap and stroked my hair. We didn't talk for a while.

"We should probably get started back. I was thinking we could throw some burgers on the grill. Odds are my dad will be parked on the couch watching some sporting event." I really didn't want to leave, but part of the reason we had come here was so that Edward could get to know my father.

I stood and held out my hand out to him. "Come on, slacker. You slept all afternoon. You should have told me the couch was that miserable."

He smiled and took my hand. "It was a small sacrifice to see you like this."

Our hike back to the car was quiet. I think Edward was still a bit tired, and I couldn't lose the feeling that had started to settle in. I felt almost melancholic, which made no sense. The day had been great. We explored my hometown, christened my childhood bed, and best of all, I was with Edward.

But I just couldn't shake it.

Once back at my dad's house, Edward won my dad over with his encyclopedic knowledge of the great American past time. While I focused on grilling burgers and throwing together a salad, I could hear them debating the designated hitter, the Yankees payroll, and whether or not the Cubs would ever get their World Series.

I stood at the counter, listening to the conversation flow back and forth. I could tell that Edward was candid in his interest. I knew him well enough to tell when he was simply being polite. He liked my dad.

And best of all, my dad really liked him too. He didn't threaten to clean his gun once.

Common Ground

Charlie Swan was not a man of many words. I respected that. My father was from the same generation and also approached conversation with a similar degree of brevity. I understood that it didn't mean lack of interest. He did seem slightly distracted though.

It was a little awkward at first. Bella began the process of getting dinner together. She insisted I relax on the couch. She sensed how tired I still was. I just couldn't shake it. So, I didn't argue too vehemently.

Charlie sat in the chair while I pretended to get comfortable on the couch. Every once in a while he would look at the phone or the clock or out the window.

"Do you fish?" he asked out of nowhere.

"Uh, no?" I asked tentatively. I had been deep sea fishing, but I didn't think that really counted.

"Too bad. You could come with me on Saturday."

I felt like I'd just failed my first test. He watched the game intently. A bad play by Griffey loaded the bases for the Tigers and it gave me my in.

"Are you glad to have him back?"

"Yeah, but the injuries have really taken their toll on him."

"So true. Is the outfield missing Crowley this year?"

"Nah, he was too injury prone as well. Plus, people thought he was an ass."

I laughed at that. "Bella met him last week at a party."

His eyes flashed to me. "You didn't let him get too close did you? I've heard he has quite a reputation." I nodded.

He looked out to the kitchen but saw that Bella wasn't there. He leaned forward to set his beer on the coffee table. He kept his voice low, but I had no trouble hearing him.

"Look Edward, you seem like a decent guy. That's still my little girl out there, and it's my job to keep her safe. You, uh, don't exactly have the best reputation yourself, but you already know that. I ah don't really follow that stuff, but I had to see what they were saying about Bella."

I nodded again. He was right.

"I know she thinks she's all grown up and tough, but don't let that fool you too much. I just need to know that whoever she's with will take care of her."

"Don't worry, Charlie. I'll keep her safe." By no means could I argue with a man who'd dressed up in a woman's hat on Mother's Day.

"So, uh, Yankees or Mets, Edward?" It was an awkward change of subject, but I understood. He'd made his point. It was enough.

I had a flash of Bella on the day she first told me she loved me, wearing the Yankees cap I'd placed on her head. If I hadn't been a lifelong fan already, I knew I would be from now on.

"Yankees, all the way."

And from there, we found an easy bantering, returning to player stats and recent trades. I should have known baseball would be the great equalizer.

~*~

CHAPTER 21: THE THINGS WE MISSED WHY?

Edward argued, but in the end, I wore him down and convinced him that he should sleep in my bed. He was so tired, and I was used to falling asleep on the couch in this house. He'd been to hell and back in the last week, and he deserved to get some sleep.

Thursday morning, my dad came and sat down on the floor next to me before he left.

"Billy called me yesterday. There is a bonfire down at La Push tonight. He extended an invite to you and Edward."

"Thanks, Dad. I think that would be fun."

He looked at me a bit skeptically. "Are you sure, Bells? That seems, well..."

My dad was worried that Edward would look down his nose at our friends. While Edward might be outside his comfort zone, he would never be malicious or hurtful. And he would love the beach.

"Dad, he'll love it. And it would give him a chance to meet everyone."

"Including Jake." My dad had never given up that hope.

"Yes, Dad, including Jake."

He kissed me on the head, and grabbed his hat off the coat tree.

"Hey Dad?" I called after him. He stopped in the doorway, and turned, waiting for me to continue.

"Act like the stuffy scary guy all you want. You didn't clean your gun last night, and I heard you talking baseball. Admit it."

He gave me a small smile. "Why say what you already know?"

He closed the door behind him. I couldn't help but smile. My dad liked Edward.

The moment I heard his cruiser pull out of the driveway, I was up the stairs. This time we didn't fall out of bed.

We spent the day traipsing around more trails. It was nice to be outside after months cooped up indoors. And we stopped to make out a lot. If Edward had his way, we would have truly experienced the great outdoors. No blanket and a fear of poison ivy put a damper on that.

This trip had been exactly what we both needed. A chance to get away, to just be us, something normal that we'd never experienced. If we wanted to stop and make out a random street corner, we could. Well, random forest path, but it was all the same thing. We'd never had a chance to do that. It was nice.

We got back to the house around four. There was just enough time to catch a quick nap before packing up to head down to La Push.

While Edward was in the kitchen throwing food in a tote, I went upstairs to find blankets to bring with us. But the linen closet was totally empty.

It struck me as odd. We used to have a ton of blankets in here. I couldn't imagine my Dad getting rid of stuff; he was too much of a pack rat.

"Want to pop back into your favorite place? I can't find any blankets." I called down the steps.

"Really?" I could hear the excitement in his voice. It was cute. Who would have thought that a superstore would do that to a man? Wonder what would happen if I ever took him to Costco. He'd probably need to buy the apartment across the hallway to store all the junk he would buy.

An hour later, with a bag loaded with food and a stack of plaid flannel blankets, we carefully navigated the rocky path down to First Beach. I had forgotten just how beautiful it was down here at sunset. The sky was crimson and purple, casting long shadows across the rock formations that jutted up out of the ocean.

"Now how is this for a view?" I looked back over my shoulder, smiling at his awed expression.

"It definitely wouldn't be bad seeing that out of your window every night."

I heard a shout of 'Bells!' and turned to see Jake and Seth Clearwater running up the path towards us. Jake picked me up in a bear hug, spinning me around.

"Jeez, Jake, do you ever stop growing?" He had always been large, but it felt like he had a good foot and a half on me. "You look like you could play for the Seahawks."

"They wouldn't want him; he can't take a hit," Seth quipped. Jake put me back down on the ground for Seth to give me a quick hug. "You look great, not a jaded New Yorker at all. Can't have an all black wearing east coaster in this family."

I stuck my tongue out at him. Seth was a few years younger than we were, and his spirit had always been infectious.

"Jake Black, Seth Clearwater." I held my hand up to gesture behind me. "Edward Cullen."

I watched Edward sizing Jake up, assessing the threat. It was kind of funny. He had nothing to be threatened by.

We all slipped into friendly banter as we made our way down to the beach. Jake peppered Edward with questions about what he did, how we met. It was endearing to see Jake trying to play the big brother, even though I was technically older. Edward fielded his questions graciously without giving too much away. He worked at his family's company along with his brother and his father. We met at a coffee shop on our way to work. It sounded so ridiculously simple when phrased like that.

My dad was already down at the beach, chatting with Jake's dad, Billy. I led Edward around the fire, introducing him to Billy, Sue Clearwater, and a number of the other La Push guys that I had hung out with my senior year of high school.

"Remind me to ask more questions later. I didn't realize when you said the La Push gang you were talking about a bunch of guys."

"I don't really think about them that way. To me it was like having a pack of big brothers. None of them ever thought of me that way. Anyway, you know all my romantic history in Washington."

Edward spread the blanket out on the sand, sat down and held his hand out to me. I dropped the tote on the corner of the blanket and flipped off my shoes before sitting down between his knees.

"Besides, all that counts is who I'm here with now, right?"

"You better believe it." He unzipped his jacket and leaned back on his hands.

"Subtle." I raised an eyebrow at him. "Will you be living in grey T shirts when not at work now?"

Edward laughed and gave me an innocent look. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His knees were bent and legs spread. I scooted up in between so that I could rest my head against his chest. He opened up his jacket and pulled it around me. It was a double benefit. I was close to him and sharing the warmth.

"People are starting to settle in. When it quiets down, one of the elders usually tells old tribe stories. It's a pretty cool experience. So much has been handed down through the generations this way."

We sat quietly, watching as people began to find spots around the bonfire.

"Why are the flames blue like that?" Edward murmured in my ear.

I smiled. So many little things that I took for granted growing up looked new and different through his eyes.

"It's driftwood. The salt water that absorbed in the wood makes the flames turn blue." I relaxed into him, enjoying the warmth and security of being in one of my favorite places with Edward. There was nothing but good memories here.

"I spent most of my summers down here when I was little. I loved playing around by the tide pools, looking for starfish and anemone. I honestly don't think I could ever live anywhere landlocked. I need water too much."

"I didn't know that about you."

"When we first met, it was too cold to be outside much. Then, well, it was just hard to be outside." I sighed, hating how complicated our lives had become. "When it's warm enough, I go down to Battery Park, spread out a blanket and read. It's not the ocean, but it gets me close."

"When it's warmer, we'll have to spend some time in Southampton. The beach is different than the one here, but you can still get your fix."

Going to Southampton meant most likely interacting with his family. Edward didn't mention them specifically, but the inference was there. Tiny steps forward.

"Hey, how about a toast to the happy couple?" I heard Billy call. Edward stiffened against me. I had hoped to escape the scrutiny. This trip was supposed to allow us to be normal, to get rid of all the drama...

"Yeah! To Charlie and Sue," I heard someone else call. "Have you guys set a date yet?"

I sat bolt upright, looking around the bonfire. Charlie and Sue? It couldn't be him. My dad wasn't dating anyone, let alone thinking about marriage. He would have said something. There had to be another Charlie.

But there they were, sitting arm and arm on the other side of the fire. Sue Clearwater beamed radiantly. My father looked at me with eyes wide.

And then it all made sense. The 'emergency' that trumped dinner Tuesday night, why I couldn't find anything in the kitchen, the empty linen closet. I came home, but my dad had moved on. Just like Renee did. Just like they all did.

"Bella..." I heard him call out. But I didn't want to listen to excuses or platitudes. I took off down the beach, not quite running but not quite walking either. I could hear people calling out my name, but I kept going. I had to get away.

How could he do this? He was all I had. The one person I could always count on to be there for me, to believe in me, to make everything better. He was my mother, my father, my everything. Christ, we talked every week, sometimes more. How could he leave something so important out of our conversations? What else had he not told me?

He had replaced me. He had someone new, a family to go to. All the hurt, all the old memories of Renee leaving came flooding back. I hadn't been good enough for her life. She left me behind to find something new. Charlie was doing the same thing.

Only it was million times worse. I never really knew her, but my Dad was all I'd ever known.

What was it about me that drove them away? Why was I never good enough? If my own parents can't love me enough to stay around, what does that say about anyone else?

Piles of driftwood loomed ahead, blocking my ability to progress any further without doing bodily harm. I was at a dead end. Literally and physically.

I dropped to my knees in the sand, arms wrapped around my waist as I sobbed. It was wet and cold, but I didn't care. Numb would be better than what I felt right now.

Someone draped a blanket around my shoulders, and strong arms pulled me up out of the sand. I didn't fight; I wasn't capable. I couldn't fight anymore. I was so damn tired of it.

Edward sat down in the sand and pulled me into his lap. He didn't say a word, just held on to me and let me cry.

"Why couldn't I be enough to make them want to stay?" I gasped, struggling to catch my breath. "He's all I had. And he's going off to create a whole life without me. He doesn't want me anymore. Why does everyone leave me?"

Signs

So many clues. I'd missed them all. It had been so easy for her to mold her life to mine. She'd gone off to New York on her own, created so few new relationships. She was my hope, my strength, and all the while she was still a hurt little girl inside. Her mom's absence wasn't without pain. Of course not.

Her toughness was a shield she crafted to avoid the pain, to keep from getting too close to anyone.

Anyone who met her would think she was invincible. A force. The way she took on my family. Her valiant attempt to protect me. It was merely an extension of protecting herself.

I rocked her lightly in my arms, and ran my hand down her hair over and over again. Periodically, I kissed her forehead. I waited until her sobs dwindled before saying anything.

What surprised me in this moment was that instinct kicked in. Something I didn't know I had. I once helped Tanya get over a bad break up, but I brought her a bottle of Grey Goose, and we threw darts at his picture. Otherwise, the superficial nature of my relationships had never lent themselves to this kind of need to comfort. I didn't know when someone you loved hurt like this, you had no choice, you wanted to help. Needed it.

And I didn't want to diffuse or dismiss. I wanted to help her face her fears, the way she had done with me. I briefly wondered if being with me had stolen her strength.

Maybe it was time for me to give it back.

"I'm here, Bella. You're not alone. I'm not going anywhere."

"You can't promise that."

It wasn't an attack. It was a fact. "I know that many people make promises they can't keep. I don't break mine, Bella."

"Edward, people stand before God and they make vows, and years, hell months later, they're done. Fighting over who gets the dog. Best friends drift apart after years of saying nothing could ever come between them. You might intend to keep it, but you really can't promise."

I hated her bitterness. But I understood it. I asked the question because she needed to find the answer herself, but I was as gentle as I could be.

"Did he really leave?"

"No, but he didn't tell me. He shut me out. He's moving on."

"Maybe . . . maybe he thought you were the one who moved on." Something very heavy fell on my chest with that realization. I wasn't just talking about her dad right then. "Bella, I know relationships fail. I'm not naïve. But not all of them do. My parents have been married for 33 years. And they still love each other deeply. There's never been one time either of them seriously considered splitting up. Obviously, my brother and I just had a fight, but we'll get through it. Jasper and I have been friends since we were kids. Sometimes we go through spells where we don't talk, but then something brings us back together. Not everyone leaves, Bella. And even when they take different directions, it doesn't mean you can't go with them."

And that's when I was sure I wasn't just talking about her.

We were silent for a while. I thought she might be getting upset with me, and I didn't want to risk adding insult to injury. As we sat there, her still in my lap, we both turned when her dad croaked, "Bella?"

He came over by us and knelt down. "Can we talk?"

I looked down at her. She was staring at her lap. After a pause, she looked up at me, and nodded. I kissed the top of her head, and said, "I'll be by the fire if you need me," and I whispered and quietly as I could. "I'm not going anywhere."

The Parent Trap

"I didn't want you to find out like this."

I laughed, but there was no humor in it.

"What, Dad, were you waiting for the wedding invitations to be printed? Hey Bella, hope you are free this weekend, because I'm getting married?"

We were both quiet for a minute. Neither sure what to say next.

"I didn't say anything because I didn't want to hurt you. You had enough going on in your life with Edward."

"Dad, I somehow doubt that this is that recent of a development. Don't use him as an excuse. We both deserve better than that."

He sighed and took my hand.

"I wanted to tell you. I swear I did. But every time I tried, I felt like I was going to disappoint you." He paused, looking out over the water. "Do you remember the summer you were ten, and Renee came here to spend time with you?"

I nodded. It was when I still hoped that they could work everything out. I had so desperately wanted them to get back together, for her to come back to us.

"I told Billy that was the *Parent Trap* summer. You did everything you could to throw us together." He sighed and continued. "When I started dating Sue that was all I could think of. I felt selfish, like I was destroying your dream."

"Dad, Renee has been gone for almost twenty five years. I'm not ten anymore. I know she's not coming back. We've all moved on. Do you think that I would begrudge your happiness because of some stupid fantasy I had when I was a kid?"

He didn't answer me for a long time.

"It wasn't a stupid fantasy, Bells. It was what you wanted. Heck, for a while, I wanted it too. But it wasn't real."

"I know that, Dad."

He squeezed my hand. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I should have. I just didn't want to hurt you any more than you already had been."

I didn't say anything. I knew if I did, I would start crying again. And I was tired of it. Tired of the pain, tired of the disappointment, tired of letting their mistakes guide my life. I had let it rule me for almost twenty five years. It was time to pack it all away.

My dad stood up. "I'm going back to the fire. Do you want to walk back with me?"

I shook my head. "I'm going to stay here for a bit."

"Do you want me to have him come back?" He meant Edward.

I nodded my head.

"Don't let our mistakes close you off, Bells. I see how you look at him. And I can tell from little I've seen of him that he's worthy of you. I never thought I would say that about any man other than Jake, but he is."

I gave him a small smile. "Thanks, Daddy."

"I love you, Bells. More than you could ever know."

He turned and walked away. But Edward was right, just because he wasn't there didn't mean he was gone.

Perspective

Going back to the party was awkward. No one said anything, and they were talking amongst themselves, but occasionally someone would glance over at me. They all seemed like nice enough people, but they didn't know me, and really, what could they say? I wasn't used to sitting by myself at a party though. I've always had people seeking me out. It made me uncomfortable. I knew I was a fish out of water this whole trip, but I was doing my best to take things as they came.

To say that the past week had been exhausting would be the understatement of the year. Between everything that happened with my family, the travel, and sleeping some place different every night, I was drained. I wasn't sure whether the physical or the emotional was overwhelming me more.

Sitting there on the beach by myself surrounded by a crowd of people who had no idea what to think of me, I

realized that even with all my family conflict, it was still easier to face the stress you knew versus the unfamiliar.

I stared at the fire, and after a few minutes, a beer can popped in front of my face.

"Hey, you look like you could use one," Jake said as he plopped down on the sand next to the blanket.

"Thanks." I took a swig. It was cheap, watered down beer, but I was polite and continued to drink it.

"She's pretty upset huh?"

I nodded. "It was a shock."

"She didn't know at all?"

"Nope."

"Huh. I guess that's not too surprising. Charlie did always want to protect her."

"Protecting and sheltering are two different things," I ventured cautiously. He tilted his head to the side.

"You really love her." I turned to look at him. It was a simple statement. Not a question. I didn't have a response.

"She deserves that. I thought for a long time that she'd come home one day and realize she had been madly in love with me after all those years."

I raised an eyebrow. I had a hunch there had been more to the Jake and Bella story.

"She never saw me like that, or anything, and she really didn't come home much. And I got over that fantasy anyway. So, don't worry, I'm not going to fight you for her or anything." I snorted. Kid could probably take me as big as he was. "Just . . . be good to her okay?"

"You don't have to worry about that, Jake."

"Edward?" I heard Charlie before I noticed him standing next to me. "She asked for you."

"Is she okay?"

"I think she's better." He looked down, and then shuffled off to Sue who seemed to be absolutely fretting. I hadn't seen much emotion from him in the days I'd been here, but it was clear that Sue brought out something in him. I knew Bella would never begrudge him that.

Bella was sitting where I left her, drawing in the sand with her fingers. She was looking my way, and she smiled when I came up.

Her eyes looked weary, and her face was blotchy from crying.

"I guess I overreacted huh?"

I shrugged. I really hadn't seen it that way. "Pretty understandable given everything I've put you through."

"Oh no way. You do not get to take credit for my break down, Cullen. This was vintage Bella, you know? I am pretty level headed about things like career and relationships but when emotion takes me, I go with it."

"My tie has noticed."

"Snot!" She nudged me with her elbow. "Thanks for being here."

"Well, you did tear me away from a great conversation with Jake, and I think I have a warm PBR waiting there for me."

"Edward, you know what I meant." She looked at me hard, and she gave me everything she had in that moment. Dropping the defenses, willing to believe that I wouldn't leave.

"I know." My thumb found the spot on her cheek that recharged me. This time, I think she felt it too. We stayed like that for a while—the emotion thick between us.

"So I can't believe you haven't said anything about going in the ocean. It's an awfully large volume of water for you not to notice."

"Oh it's crossed my mind. I figured it would be too cold. And I remembered what happened the last time you were cold and wet. I didn't think that would go over so well with your dad around."

"I thought you said those SUV seats reclined all the way." My smile turned to laughter. My hand was still on her face. I leaned in and kissed her. We stayed connected for a while. When we broke apart, she looked up at me. "Will you take me home, Edward?"

I pulled her in close, with her head resting under my chin. It was clear she wasn't talking about her father's house. She wanted comfort, familiarity. She meant New York. I wrapped my arms around her as tightly as I could without hurting her.

We'd come here to escape. I held on to the misconception that we might reclaim our bubble for an instant. The world was intent on bursting it. And I realized once and for all, the bubble didn't work.

It was time to leave our pasts behind. So much pain, so many regrets. We couldn't let it wreck havoc on our future.

I would take her wherever she wanted to go. I'd give her whatever she needed.

Lines about home ran through my head.

Home is where the heart is.

Home is where you hang your hat. I smiled for a moment thinking of Bella's Yankee cap hanging in my apartment.

In these months I had become immensely certain of one thing.

New York, Forks, Des Moines, Timbuktu. It really didn't matter where we were.

I whispered ever so softly into her hair as I held her on that beach.

"Should we go lawn mower shopping when we get back?"

She raised an eye brow, contemplating, and then she smiled.

"Sure, but I'd rather avoid the 20 pounds, if you don't mind."

It came out before I really thought about.

"You'll gain at least that with our first baby." I caught myself, and I saw that her eyes were wide.

She finally answered with a sly smile. "No lawn service for you. You need yard work to avoid that weight gain."

"Oh come on, wouldn't you still love me with a big gut?" I laughed.

"I'd love you no matter what Edward."

~*~

CHAPTER 22: THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME CLICK YOUR HEELS

The level of exhaustion we felt was staggering. I think we could have both fallen asleep on that beach if it weren't so cold. We were quite simply spent. We'd been hit with an emotional hurricane. The amazing thing was there didn't appear to be any major damage to the foundation of our relationship as a result. We saw the wreckage of the storm as an opportunity to rebuild, taking into account what we hadn't known before.

We wouldn't be putting up this one on an island. Alone time was one thing, but isolation hadn't been healthy for either of us. We needed to construct our relationship with plenty of windows. Light had double meaning for us. Truth and levity. The floor plan had to be large enough to accommodate guests. Friends and family were essential to both of our well beings.

When we returned to the fire, people had scattered or departed. Her dad was getting ready to take Sue home. We said goodbyes, and started back to the house.

"I'm sorry you didn't get to hear any of the Quileute legends. They really are fascinating," Bella noted while walking back to the car.

I took her hand, and rubbed my thumb in her palm. "Maybe next time."

She opened her mouth to say something, but then closed it. She paused, and nodded.

It was a quiet drive, and we began getting ready for bed the minute we walked in the door. We took turns brushing our teeth in the small bathroom. She had stepped out while I finished up. She was sitting on the edge of her bed. I sat down next to her to say goodnight. She leaned into me.

"Do you really want to go home early, Bella?" I wrapped my arm around her shoulder.

"Yeah. My dad is going to take some time off tomorrow so we can talk more, but I'm ready to get back." She sighed, but didn't continue.

"I'm sorry things didn't turn out as you expected."

"Me too. Somehow I felt it from the beginning. I don't know . . . I guess it's just not home anymore. Not in the same way at least. That was kind of a hard realization to come to."

"Believe me, I understand that better than anyone." I squeezed her shoulder. It was one more thing writers had tried to capture since the beginning of time. Finding home was far more complicated than a pair of ruby slippers.

"I don't even know how to tell you how glad I am that you're here. I don't think I could have handled this alone."

I kissed the top of her head. "Do you want me to stay while you fall asleep?" She shook her head slightly, so I made a move to get up, but she pulled me back down.

"I'd rather you stayed all night."

"What about your dad?"

"I'm a big girl. He's going to have to learn that I've grown up."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. It'll be tight though. Can't promise no one will fall out."

I laughed. "Well, I promise you anything beats that couch."

Though it was a challenge, we both stayed in the bed. At least until the next morning. When Bella started to stretch she rolled back into me, forcing me out of my precarious balance at the edge of the bed, and I tumbled off. This time I managed to catch my fall better, and I didn't hit my head.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry. I did it again!"

"If you wanted me out of your bed so badly, all you had to do was ask," I chastised facetiously.

"Stop it. I feel terrible."

"Well, I know how you can make it up to me."

"Edward, not this morning. I'm pretty sure my dad is still here."

"Now, who has the perverted mind? I was going to ask you to make sure there was coffee while I get dressed."

"Oh." Her cheeks turned pink as she smiled at me.

Charlie was already downstairs by the time I got there. I didn't know what to think of the way he was looking at me—part gratitude, part something else. I imagine it was a tough situation. She needed me last night. He wasn't the one to be able to comfort her. He'd been the cause of her pain. From the way Bella described their history, I assumed, he'd always been the one doing the comforting when other boys disappointed her.

Bella was putting together breakfast items when he asked, "What else is on your agenda while you're here?"

She paused before turning to look at him. "Dad, we're leaving later today. We'll either be flying out tonight or tomorrow, but either way, we'll be in Seattle tonight."

"I see," he responded quietly. I sensed they needed some time alone, so I announced that I had yet to buy my Forks t-shirt, and I wanted to run out to get it.

Just before I headed out the door, Bella called out, "Don't forget. I like the grey one."

I coughed, and then I waved goodbye because I couldn't turn to look at her.

Obviously, it wouldn't take me long to get a t-shirt, and I wanted to give them some more time. I sat in the parking lot, and made some calls. First, I checked on moving our flight. I was stewing on an idea, so I specifically chose the one first thing the next morning, which meant I also needed a hotel reservation for tonight.

I sat in the car a little longer, trying to decide whether my idea was a good one or not, given everything we'd been through. Then I made 3 more phone calls in the following order: Jasper, my mom, and Jane. The first two were integral to the plan. The last was to check in regarding a couple of clients and to have her line things up for our arrival tomorrow.

We ended up leaving in the late afternoon. Bella's dad wanted us to stay longer, but though neither of us said a word, we were both anxious to get to Seattle. A goodbye party for our last night on the island.

Unconsciously, we retreated into *just us*, which meant we laughed a lot.

By the time we took off the next morning, I was feeling nervous. She hadn't wanted to talk much about her conversation with her dad, but she said it went well. She still seemed a little raw emotionally, and I hoped my plan wouldn't create a fresh wound.

Over the Rainbow

I feel like a terrible person saying it, but leaving Forks was a relief.

My dad and I said what we needed to say to each other on Friday morning. It wasn't easy, but we cleared the air and came to an understanding. He promised not to keep things from me in the name of protecting me, and would accept that I was a grown woman. In return, I promised to be open minded about his relationship with Sue. Heck, there was one positive thing out of it; Seth would be my little brother now. My family just tripled in size.

I watched out the wing mirror as Forks receded behind us. There had been a lingering sense of 'something' since we had arrived. I was finally able to pin point what it was. Forks wasn't home anymore. There were memories, and there were friends here, but this wasn't where I fit anymore.

It's scary to realize that you can't go home again, as clichéd as that might sound.

Friday night was quiet. We grabbed a low key dinner and crashed early. We had to get up early to make our 7:30 flight.

"I have every intention of stretching out and sleeping for the full five hours. I feel like I haven't slept in a month." Edward groused as we settled into our seats.

Normally, I would have teased him about leaving me to fend for myself. But he was tired, and I couldn't begrudge him the rest. Besides, I had a lot of thinking to do.

"As soon as we are in the air, I'll pull the shade down and not talk to you, I promise."

He smiled at me and pulled my iPod out of his bag. "I loaded it up with all kinds of brain candy. You should have enough things to watch and listen to last for the next month."

"You are only off the hook if I get warm chocolate chip cookies the entire flight."

He smiled at me and pulled a bakery bag out of his carry on.

"Maybe you can convince them to warm them up."

He leaned his seat back and pulled his Yankees cap down over his eyes. His arm was draped on the console between us, and I started lightly ghosting my fingers up and down his arm to help him fall asleep.

"Night, Edward."

I watched out the window as the plane climbed through the clouds, leaving Seattle behind us. The last few weeks had been exhausting. Originally, my hope was that our trip to Washington would give us a break, a chance to regroup and recharge. Now I saw it for what it was. We had run away. It was time to go home, to figure out what came next. Time to forge a path forward so to speak.

I'd lived in New York for a little over ten years. This the first time that I can ever truly thinking that it felt like home. It was a bittersweet feeling. I left a lot of things behind in finally declaring that. There would always be a part of me that would be a small town girl. Yet at the same time, I had a whole world waiting for me. I could finally say, with absolute certainty, that I wanted that, and that I was willing to fight for it.

And part of forging a path meant dealing with the scrutiny, with the press coverage, with all the attention. If I wanted this to work, if I wanted us to work, it was time to accept that I was no longer a private figure. That we would always be watched, talked about.

We'd let the media drive us into hiding. We spent so much time worrying about being photographed or how the family might perceive it, that we'd allowed it to control us. It was time to take that control back.

Edward woke up about a half an hour before we landed. He stretched and leaned awkwardly across the arm rest to lay his head on my shoulder.

"I am starving."

I pulled his baseball cap off and smoothed the hair back from his face. "I didn't want to wake you up; you were so tired. Sorry."

He smiled and nuzzled into my neck. "It's okay. We can grab something on the way home. I could really go for a steak."

"We are dressed kind of scrubby, but want to stop somewhere on the way? I could stand being a carnivore today."

He pulled back to consider me for a second. "You know, there is a good chance that someone could see us out. Photos and all that."

"I thought about a lot of things while you slept. I am tired of letting what everyone else thinks run our lives. So they take pictures of us. I am going to have to learn to deal with it one way or another. What better time than the present?"

"Are you sure about that?"

"Yeah. I need to get over it, or else I am going to miss out on a lot of good stuff."

"That we would." He turned to plant a quick kiss on my cheek. "Besides, I promised you some beach time. The beach in Southampton is relatively private, but there will still be people around to watch."

"That will be *your* issue Cullen, cause I'll be the one sporting a bikini." I teased. He raised an eyebrow at me, but knew better than to take the bait.

We didn't talk for the remainder of the flight. The landing was uneventful. We quickly deplaned and made our way across the concourse. A few people turned to stare at us, but I meant what I said. I was tired of living my life according to what other people thought.

Once we were on the escalator, I looked back up over my shoulder at Edward.

"You shouldn't have said steak. Now I am starving. How are we getting back to the city? Is Demetri meeting us?"

Edward was looking past me, down the escalator.

"I arranged for someone to pick us up."

I turned to follow his gaze. Standing at the bottom of the escalator was a cluster of people.

Esme.

Tanya.

Jasper with his arm around Alice.

Emmett.

"What are they doing here?" I whispered.

Edward tugged on my ponytail.

"Thought you might want your family here for your homecoming."

We were at the bottom of the escalator. As soon as we were clear, Esme stepped forward, arms open wide.

Edward nudged me forward, and Esme pulled me into a hug.

They weren't here for Edward. They were here for me.

Esme didn't say anything, just rocked me back and forth. So similar to what Edward had done on the beach Thursday night. She rubbed slow circles in my back.

She was being the mom I never had. I felt a knot forming in my throat, overwhelmed at the simplicity of the gesture. Edward was sharing his family with me.

Next thing I knew, Alice and Tanya had stepped in too, enveloping us.

"Oh hell, I am not missing a chance at this." Emmett quipped, as threw his arms around the group to squeeze us all together.

"Can't breathe Emmett!" gasped Alice.

"Please remove your hand from my ass, Em." Tanya teased.

"Oops. Sorry. I thought that was Alice."

Jasper coughed behind us. "Come on, I have a table waiting for us. And I personally could use a very stout drink after seeing that display of estrogen."

Everyone laughed and broke apart. Esme placed a hand on my cheek.

"Don't ever feel like you are alone. You are one of us now." She looked back over her shoulder to see Emmett spinning Tanya around like a large rag doll. "Then again, you might want to rethink that."

I didn't know what to say.

"I think this might be the only time I've ever seen you at a loss for words," Edward whispered in my ear. His arms slipped around my shoulders, so that he could pull me back against him.

"When did you do this?"

"Yesterday morning while you were talking to your dad. You aren't alone, Bella. We aren't going to leave you." He kissed the top of my head, and then let go to pick up his carry on. I didn't know what to say. "Come on, let's go get some food. The family is waiting."

The Nerve

Alice pulled Bella away when we got to the cars. "You've had her for a few days, so she's riding with me. I think we need to catch up."

I smiled. Emmett grabbed my arm. "I've got room."

Bella smiled back at me, easing the panic Emmett's invitation had stirred. I didn't know if I was ready. But I'd promised myself leaving Forks that there would be no more delaying the inevitable.

I hadn't expected Emmett to be here at all. When I called my mother and asked her to come, she agreed readily and offered to give Tanya a call. When I saw my brother waiting with everyone, I wondered if she'd had to pressure him or whether he'd come willingly.

There was no way to avoid cameras today. Too many of us. Too obvious. I wondered what it would have looked like if everyone had dressed in disguise. Probably more obvious than just being ourselves. So we dodged and weaved, and tried to act as normal as possible as cameras clicked and "reporters" walked alongside us asking questions.

Jasper, Tanya, Alice, my mom, and Bella all rode in one SUV. I think my mom intended to ride with Emmett, but she took one look at the two of us, nodded, and said, "Do you mind if I join you?" to Bella.

As we pulled away from the airport, Emmett was quiet. His concentration was evident.

"Shit, I had it all planned out what I was going to say, but I can't seem to remember now."

"Want me to start?"

"Nah, then you get to be the big hero, and all that. I wanted to say the right thing for once."

"Emmett, you say the right thing more often than not. You may be the reason I walked out of our family sane." I set myself up there, and I was fully expecting a wise crack about how sanity was relative, but his responding tone was pointed.

"Was it really that bad, Edward? Because I really don't remember it that way. I always saw us as having fun. I thought we had a happy childhood."

I looked at him intently, seeing the lines forming around his eyes, and tight grip he had on the steering wheel. I had a sudden flash of us at as little kids building model cars; he'd always had that same determined expression.

"No, I think you're right. There were little things. Like even back then it seemed like I couldn't do enough to make him happy. He always blamed me for everything."

"But that's because you took it. Hell, Edward, I didn't care. I laughed him off. You took everything he said so literally. He got such a rise out of you."

"Maybe, but you just seemed to have more in common with him, and no matter what I did, I couldn't get him to take an interest."

"You know when Rosalie said that stuff at the Met?" He looked at me, and I nodded. "Did you ever think maybe I felt the same way about mom? You guys just had your own little world, your own room." He paused before continuing tentatively. "And, well, you used to have the library with dad too. You weren't always disconnected."

"Did you mean what you said about the world revolving around me?"

He sighed. "Yeah, a little I guess. I don't think it's intentional or anything, but between mom thinking the sun sets on your ass and dad thinking you're a fuck up, the family does kind of revolve around your issues."

I'd been thinking about that for a while, and I could see his point actually. When I came home from LA, I remember thinking that he had weathered the storm, so to speak. And it was true. It really wasn't ever about him.

"Was it better when I wasn't here?" I didn't know what I would do if he said yes. I wasn't sure I was prepared to make the sacrifice of leaving again.

"Nah, we didn't talk about you any less than. I think you just attract attention, Edward. Must be all that shiny gold."

We both laughed at that reference. "Seriously, Rosalie is feeling pretty torn up. She was just defending me, and she probably did have too much to drink, but she knows she was out of line. Mom explained the whole earring thing, and they had a nice heart to heart. She wanted to be here today too. Haley's teething and has been a total bear lately.

"Have you talked with Dad about it?" I knew talking with Emmett about Rosalie was more contentious than the topic of our father.

"Sure. He's . . . well . . . dad. He said you guys are planning a sit down soon?"

"Yes. I just hope we can keep from killing each other."

"Frankly, that's a fight I'd pay money to see."

"Do you think I've overreacted, Emmett?"

"I used to, but Bella's little speech was pretty sobering. I realized he hasn't been fair to you for a long time. I think maybe you read a bit much into some things, and maybe . . . got a little . . . self righteous? At times." He looked at me sheepishly, probably waiting for an explosion.

"I'm feeling too mellow for conflict, so please explain."

"Well, did you ever apologize to dad for leaving CI?"

"Why would I? He wanted me out."

"No, he didn't. He was devastated when you left. He thought all his scolding would just mean you'd start thinking more about how your actions affected other people. You were kind of thinking with your dick back then. Anyway, he didn't think he'd drive you away. Mom was so pissed at him. You know it's the only fight I ever saw them have in front of me."

"But still, he did drive me away."

"I'm not saying he isn't responsible too, but you pulled some stupid shit, Edward. And it did make us look like flakes, and don't even get me started on what it did to Tanya. So, maybe you have some responsibility in it all too."

"It's a lot to think about." We were getting close to the restaurant. I looked out the window.

"I'm sorry I didn't notice the change in you."

I glanced back at him and raised an eyebrow.

"It was another thing Bella mentioned. We were only seeing you through what we knew about you in the past, and you really have changed." He furrowed his brow. "At first I thought it was because of her, but then I realized that wasn't quite right. You never would have noticed a woman like that before. So, the change must have started sooner. That's when I really felt stupid."

I laughed at him. That was Emmett.

"I didn't help you see it."

"I'm glad you found her, Edward."

It was a simple statement; I knew what he meant. "Thank you for coming today."

"Thanks for coming back, man." He pulled up to the valet. "Especially since we're about to con mom into buying lunch or whatever the heck you want to call a meal at this time of day."

A Brain

It was early enough that there wasn't a crowd when we got to the restaurant. A large table was already set up for us in the back, bottles of wine open. Rolling with the Cullens definitely had its advantages.

"Sorry, they didn't have a private room, or I would have gone that route."

I waved him off. "Don't sweat it, JW. I am going to take my fear of cameras head on from here out."

Alice looked at me like I had two heads. "Who are you, and what did you do with my Bella?"

"Nothing. I am just tired of being hidden away. Not that isn't nice being locked in an apartment with Edward every weekend, but I am getting a bit claustrophobic."

"HEY!" Emmett protested, turning red. "My mom is at the table, ixnay on the..."

"Oh please, Emmett. You father and I humped like bunnies when we first started dating."

I don't know which was better, the gasp of "Mother" from Emmett, or Edward choking on his wine.

"I'm telling you, Bella. I don't know what it is about the Cullen men. They get all uptight talking about sex, but..." Esme trailed off, smiling suggestively. Tanya was almost in tears she was laughing so hard.

"Not so fast there. I've got all kinds of ammunition on you." Edward warned across the table. "Should we talk about what Jasper and I walked in on summer of our Junior year?"

"You wouldn't!" She shot back. "Actually, you would, but I can one up you, and I think it was the same summer."

The evening continued on in that vein. Stories of the four musketeers growing up. Most of them had color commentary from Esme, a lot of times with details no one else thought that she knew. It reminded me of a comment that Edward made once about a childhood full of laughter. If this was an example, I envied him. It would have been great to grow up with this.

"Hey JW, can you top me off please?" I held out my wine glass to him.

"I can't take this anymore." Emmett tossed down his napkin. "Why the hell do you call him JW? Is this some little cute nickname that you and Alice came up with? I've been trying to figure out why you call that, and it's driving me nuts!"

I looked across at Jasper. There was an answer, but it was his secret to be told. He smiled and nodded his head.

"Are you telling it, or am I?" I asked him.

"You start. I'll jump in if needed."

"Do you know what I do for a living, Emmett?"

He nodded. "You work at a publishing company."

"Right, but do you know what I *do*?"

He shook his head, unsure of where I was going.

"I'm an editor. I have a bunch of different authors that I work with, but my most famous is Jack Hale. Have you ever heard of him?"

Emmett's gaze shifted away for a split second, as if suddenly uncomfortable. "No, I don't think so."

"Oh, come on, Emmett. They are great western novels, really good stuff," Tanya chimed in. She had caught it too. "Not Brokeback Mountain at all."

"If I remember correctly, when we were younger, Emmett classified Westerns as a cover for men's romance novels." Edward interjected.

"Jack Hale books are definitely not your cliché westerns by any means, Emmett." Alice picked up on the teasing, hoping to egg him on.

"I know they're not..." He protested. Immediately recognizing his slip, Emmett quickly back tracked. "Okay, yeah, I picked the first one up on a business trip and liked 'em. Keep telling your story."

"Well, the author wanted to protect his privacy. His family wasn't a big fan of the genre, so we went for a pen name. It took a while to come up with 'Jack Hale,' so in the early stages, we called it the Johnny Walker book. The first time I saw the author, he took super long strides that reminded me of the image of Johnny Walker on the old scotch label, plus the initials matched.

"You never told me that is why you picked Johnny Walker! I thought it was because I was smooth like a good glass of scotch!" Jasper groused. I may have forgotten to tell him that part.

"You? Smooth? You don't want me to tell some of my stories!" I shot back.

"Wait a minute. Jasper, you are Jack Hale?" Esme was shocked.

"Guilty as charged. Sixth book should be out in the fall."

"10 million copies sold. I've know Jasper for six years. Kind of ironic when you think about it."

Emmett turned to Jasper in disbelief. "And after knowing her and how cool she was, you still let her date my brother?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence guys. It's not like he set us up or anything," Edward shot back. It was all good natured fun, and he was rolling with it.

"There is absolute irony in this moment. Let's all pause for a moment and appreciate my brother complaining about being set up with someone."

"Just remember how you met your wife, Emmett."

"Exactly!" Emmett shot back.

We all broke into laughter. Edward mumbled something under his breath and went back to playing with my ponytail.

The evening began to ramp down after that. We all said our goodbyes, and Emmett dropped us off at Edward's building.

We were both punchy and slight buzzed from a decent amount of red wine. It felt good. It seemed that we had somehow managed to bring back a bit of the lightness we had found in Washington after all.

As soon as the door to the apartment opened, I kicked off my shoes and ran for the bedroom shouting "You can't catch me!"

I vaulted onto the bed, grabbed a pillow and flopped backwards.

"Do you know how much I love that no matter which way I lay, no part of me hangs off our bed? No more fighting for space, no more falling out! No more accusations of me being a blanket hog!"

I stretched out on the bed, enjoying the space, the soft duvet, the fluffy pillows. When he didn't join me, I propped up on my elbows to look around. Edward stood leaning against the doorway, smiling.

"What are you grinning about?"

He pulled off his baseball hat and tossed it into the corner of the room, then crawled up on the bed next to me.

"Since when is it 'our' bed?"

"Is that what I called it?"

He nodded, not losing the smile.

"And why does that make you happy?"

"Any use of 'our' usually works, but I like that you feel at home here."

"You are bound and determined to make me believe you, aren't you?" I teased. I knew what he meant, but was too tired to be serious.

"If I have to remind you every day, I will." He paused, watching me, waiting for me to say something. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Tired. Physically and emotionally. Tonight was just what I needed though. Thank you for loaning me your family."

Edward reached out to take my hand, turning it palm up so that he could trace the lines. "I didn't loan them to you, Bella. They're your family too. Baggage or no, we Cullen's are kind of a package deal."

As difficult and draining as all the family drama had been over the past week, it seemed to serve two purposes. First and foremost, it was a catalyst towards resolution. None of the conversations would be easy, but at least we each had places to start.

It had also crystallized our intentions towards each other. There could be no confusion about where this was

going, or what either of us wanted. There were things to be dealt with first, but that constant beacon would always sit on the horizon as a promise of what could be.

"You and Emmett seemed to be getting along okay at dinner. I'm guessing you talked in the car?"

Edward didn't look up, his focus still on my palm. "Something like that. It was strange to hear the brother I've always looked up to say that he's basically jealous of me. I never really stopped to think that in a way, they were right. Everything always has been about me. If I were Emmett, I don't think I'd like me very much."

"But you figured things out?"

He smiled as he continued to trace the lines in my hand. "I don't know if we solved world hunger, but it's a start."

We lay there quietly, enjoying the peace that came with finally being home.

A Heart

A week of dealing with our collective family dramas. And I couldn't bring myself to regret a single moment of it.

Because we were at home. In "our" bed.

This is what it was all about. I had wondered if this existed in today's society. I thought maybe it died out with my parent's generation. But it was right here. I wanted it, but I feared it too. Longevity had never been my strong suit, and I hated to think I might do something to mess this up. I would never be able to live with myself if I hurt her, and if she left me . . . well, I didn't think I could survive that.

I closed my eyes.

I cut my way through the thick cloud of thoughts fogging my serenity.

I had to face my dad. Everything that happened in Washington and talking with Emmett had me in a strange place in regards to that meeting. I wasn't ready to go running to him for a long overdue father/son hug, but my mind was open. If he was willing to listen, I was starting to think progress was possible.

I'd been wrong that night at the Met though. I wasn't ready to leave my family again. Not when it seemed I finally had them back.

I opened my eyes, to see Bella looking at me intently. I smiled back at her and squeezed her hand.

A Home

"So no more running away to Iowa, right?"

His smile grew a little bit bigger. "No, but I might buy us a vacation house there, just for fun."

I rolled my eyes. "Okay, enough trust fund wise cracks. No offense to the lovely folks of Iowa, but I think there are other spots I'd rather vacation."

We joked around for a bit longer before curling up to go to sleep.

I lay there for a while in the dark, decompressing and listening to the familiar sounds of the apartment. Edward's

breathing had become slow and rhythmic, indicating that he had slipped into a deep sleep.

No running away anymore. Time to dig in and figure things out. New York ruled out the need for lawn mower, but there were other parts of the dream that wouldn't go away.

His warm hand on my stomach was a reminder of that.

~*~

CHAPTER 23: THE GREAT AMERICAN PASTIME TAKE ME OUT

Bella woke up in the mood for French toast, and I was flipping them over while she pulled syrup and butter from the refrigerator.

"So, I'm just wondering. Is life ever going to be boring with you?"

"I know you won't believe it, but before you, I was living a perfectly banal existence. Maybe it's not I who brings the chaos." It wasn't a lie. In the months I'd been back in New York before meeting Bella, I really had a work, home, sleep routine.

"Chaos, huh?" she said bumping into me purposely. "So what do you want to do today? I guess we have no plans, since we weren't supposed to be back yet. I should work, but I don't want to deal with it yet."

"Hmm, I definitely don't want to think about work yet either." I stacked the French toast on a plate. "I should probably give my Dad a call. I'm not sure when we'll get together, but I doubt it'll do any good to wait."

Bella opened the drawer next to me to grab silverware.

"Did your mom saying anything about him not being there yesterday?"

"No, but I wouldn't have expected him to be there. It wouldn't have felt right anyway." I believed that, but I couldn't help wonder what it would have been like if he had shown up. I watched her nod out of the corner of my eye. I turned around and handed her a plate.

"These look fabulous. Thanks for humoring me this morning."

I smiled at her. "My pleasure, and as for today, is there anything in particular that interests you?"

"Not sure. I've enjoyed not being cooped up, so more outside time would be good."

During breakfast, I gathered my thoughts and built my strength not enthusiastic about my morning task. After we'd cleaned up the dishes, I went out on the terrace to call my dad. I wouldn't have minded Bella listening, but I didn't want to make her uncomfortable.

Ten minutes passed before I could make the call. I was calculating my approach. I was still angry with him, and I felt justified in that emotion, but Emmett and my mom had given me a lot to think about. And honestly, what happened with Bella and her dad impacted me. I didn't want to run from mine anymore. Life passes by so quickly, and I was afraid that someday it would be too late to reconcile with him.

But whenever I spoke with him, my emotions seemed to get the best of me, so at least for this phone call, my goal was to treat it as business. I was calling to set up a meeting. No emotions. Not my father. Just a meeting.

After I'd hit his number, I realized I hadn't planned a message if he didn't respond, which sent me into a moment of panic, but he picked up on the third ring.

"Hello." I couldn't read any emotion in his tone. He must have known it was me when he picked up, but he was giving nothing away.

"Hi, Dad." It came out easier than it should have, like it was something I said every day.

"What can I do for you, Edward?" Business as usual.

"I'm calling about the message you left before Bella and I went to Washington. Would it be possible to meet this week?" There was silence on the other end, and I heard the clicking of a keyboard.

"I'm available Tuesday night. Would that work?"

I was caught off guard. He was already setting the terms. I almost declined just to make him work a little harder for it, but I was willing to make some effort here.

"That would be fine."

"I will have my assistant contact Jane with details."

"Thank you." It felt final, but neither of us made the first move to hang up.

"Edward?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you for calling. I've been waiting for it."

"I'll see you soon, Dad."

I exhaled very loudly at the end. It shouldn't be that hard to get through a phone call with your father.

I looked out over the park, trying to put myself in a better place before going into make plans with Bella. It was shaping up to a perfect spring day. I thought about just taking another walk in the park. It had been such a peaceful experience the last time. The park had become one of my favorite places lately. I couldn't think of it without picturing Bella with that baseball cap pulled low telling me she loved me for the first time.

Of course, that typically brought up everything that happened after.

I teetered on the emotions of those memories—from the joy of love, both falling in and making it to the embarrassment of having the privacy of it stolen out from under us. Back and forth. Up and down.

But it brought us here. And here was good. We had balance here.

It also helped me decide what we would do that day.

A couple of hours later, we sported our matching Yankees hats as we headed to the stadium.

"So do you think we'll get a home run today?" Bella asked with just a hint of suggestion after I picked up the tickets from the Will Call window.

I raised an eyebrow at her.

"What, I was just asking about the game." She feigned indignation.

We bought a program, hot dogs, and beer. It didn't get any better than that.

"Did I tell you I've never been to a major league game before?"

"No, are you serious?"

"It was too far to Seattle really, and I guess it just wasn't a priority since I've been here. Do you come often?"

"Not lately. But I catch a few games a year. "

"Did I see Emmett with a Mets cap?"

"Oh don't get me started. We could go to blows over that one. Dad always had to take us to equal numbers of each growing up. And I would scowl through the Mets games, while he would cheer for whomever the Yankees were playing. When we got older, there was always a wager."

"Huh, I like that. What do you want to bet today, Cullen?"

I don't know where it came from. It was the most off the wall bet I'd ever issued, and after I said it I thought Bella was going to turn around and walk out of the stadium.

"How about if the Yankees win, you move in with me."

First Pitch

He was screwing with me. Fine. Two can play at that game.

"Who are the Yankees playing?" I asked with a straight face.

"The Cleveland Indians. It should be a good game. Pitchers battle between the '07 and '08 Cy Young winners. We signed our guy from the Indians in free agency, and this will be the first time he faces his old team."

I followed Edward down the aisle towards first base. My brain was frantically working, trying to come up with something. I kept expecting him to stop, but he continued on until we were at the first row.

"Here we go. Seats 7 and 8 are ours."

"Banal existence, Cullen? We are in the first row at a Yankees game."

He just smiled and pointed toward the field. "Yep, notice the cameras are all focused over there? Totally banal."

"Smart ass."

But he gave me the perfect idea.

"Okay, fine. I'll take your bet. Which means that I have to root for the Indians, right? But it's a one sided wager. So if the Indians win, you have to move in with me."

Edward whipped around. "What?"

"You heard me." I looked at him with a straight face. "You can't be the only one to throw the gauntlet."

He studied me for a minute before breaking into a grin.

"I wasn't throwing down the gauntlet, Bella. I was serious. Yankees win, you move in." He tried valiantly to hide it, but I could see the glimmer of a hopeful little boy lurking just beneath the surface.

"You are bound and determined to kill every single non-spontaneous cell in my body, aren't you?" I teased him, trying to buy a few minutes to think.

I felt like my heart was going to burst out of my chest. He wanted me to move in with him. It wasn't a joke. He was serious. I should be panicking. I should be running to call Alice to ask what I should do.

Instead, I was tempted to call my landlord and see if I could get out of my lease. What the hell?

"Well?" Edward looked amused. He could see me scrambling, trying to compose my thoughts.

"Fine. I'll take your bet. If the Yankees win, I'll move in. If the Indians win, I stay put. But moving in is contingent on me getting a part of the office. Your precious first editions will have to co-mingle with my lowly paperbacks."

His smile never faded. "Is that my only concession?"

"I have 9 innings to amend the terms. You don't like 'em, you have right of first refusal."

He was fighting hard, but the smile was slowly turning into a full on grin.

"Deal."

I turned to look at the field, pretending to take everything in.

Holy shit. Had I really just done that?

"Bella?"

I looked up to see Tyler Crowley coming out of the dug out in a warm up jacket.

"Oh, Hi Tyler, how are you?"

"Okay, arm is giving me a bit of trouble, so I'm not playing today." His eyes darted past me to Edward.

"I'm sorry! Tyler Crowley, Edward Cullen."

Tyler smiled and nodded at him. "You've got a hell of a girl there, Edward. Hope Giana didn't give you too much grief last week."

He shifted his eyes back to the field. "I have to head out. You guys enjoy the game."

With that, he jogged away.

"What was that all about?" Edward asked, a note of concern in his voice as his arm tightened around my shoulders.

Oh what a difference a week makes. In eight days, we had faced down his family, gone back to where it all started, faced my own family drama on the other side of the country, and came home with the realization that fate might have brought us together, but how we made it work was entirely up to us.

So I decided to be absolutely honest. No sheltering, no protecting. It was instinct to do so, but I knew where that got me.

"You are cute when you're jealous. Tyler was Giana's date at the Met weekend. He and I exchanged introductions and spoke for a few minutes. He actually gave me a little boost of confidence to get through that night."

"I'm not sure I like how that sounds. It was bad enough watching him put the moves on you at the Met, I don't want to actually hear about it too."

"Stop it. You already have green eyes, I don't need to add monster to the end of that statement." I punched him in the arm. "He told me that Giana didn't stand a chance with the way you looked at me. He didn't try a thing. From the comments he made, I think he's hung up on someone else."

Edward laughed and shook his head. "Life is full of surprises, isn't it? Or is it that you bring out the best in everyone?"

"Nah, I just like to think that everyone has the potential for good in them somewhere." I took a sip of my beer and looked out onto the field. "If this week has taught me one thing, it's that if you dig below the surface, people's intentions might be a bit nobler than we thought."

"Would that be a reference to my family or yours?"

"Both."

The announcer broke in, asking everyone to stand for the national anthem, effectively ending the conversation. Once the song was over, I settled back into my seat and smiled as the umpire shouted 'play ball.'

Go Yankees.

Third Inning

I wondered why I wasn't panicking. I had just put out a call to up the ante on our commitment to each other. I had a few women in the past suggest they move in with me, and I'd nearly had a heart attack. But my pulse hadn't increased a bit. I was calm.

And I was sure as hell rooting for the home team.

The first couple of innings went by fairly quickly. No one scored, but we continued casual teasing of each other and the players. Bella was certainly the lone spectator cheering for visitors that day. She got a few looks from the people around us when she clapped at Yankee outs. It was early though, and I wondered if she'd face belligerence once the fans had a few more beers in them.

"So, as a kid you and Emmett would come to the games with your dad?"

"Sure."

"Did you all attract a lot of attention back then?"

"No, not really. The whole concept of paparazzi really didn't exist at the same level. There were gossip columns, so there might have been a mention of it somewhere, but just as a line, you know? My parents kept to themselves for the most part. And types of the events they attended were pretty high society. It was different for Emmett and me. What teenager doesn't want to go to a movie premiere or a major sporting event? It sort of opened up the whole 'celebrity' can of worms."

"What was your dad like then?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I just have a hard time seeing him at a game like this."

"I guess you do have a very limited perspective on him. He taught me how score. He saw it as an important mathematics lesson. In the beginning, Emmett and I sat on either side of him, so he could show us how it all worked, but after a few times, Emmett lost interest. He just liked the game. He didn't need to analyze it."

"That was fun for you? Learning statistics was entertainment? You really are warped, Cullen."

I shrugged and laughed. "It wasn't quite that clinical. We ate junk food, and my dad gave us tips on how to get player autographs."

"Did he laugh then?"

"He still does."

"I haven't seen that."

"I seem to bring out the worst in him." I felt bad, in a way, for skewing Bella's perception of my father. Carlisle was typically a warm man, not the life of the party, not the one to tell jokes. But someone you could trust. Infinitely knowledgeable as if he'd been privy to secrets no one else had—like he'd been around longer, seen more. And it was absolutely true. This cold, hard side to him only seemed to manifest itself in my presence.

"I'm sorry I brought up bad memories."

"You didn't. Those are all very good ones, actually."

She took my hand and laced her fingers with mine. The damn Yankees had better score soon.

Fourth Inning

"Hey batta batta...saawinnnggg batta," I chanted.

Edward shook his head trying not to laugh.

"Come on, I am at a baseball game, I can't not do that!"

A crack of the bat made us both jump. Foul ball.

Three innings and no score. Who would have thought I would be this invested in a baseball game?

"You do realize that I learned more than just statistics at baseball games. I learned money management too."

I looked over at Edward like he had two heads.

"Money management? Living large there, buddy!"

"I'll show you. You have any singles?"

I dug money out of my pocket.

"Okay, so this is called dirty ball. You pay a dollar in each inning. At the end of the three out cycle, you are hoping that the player holding the ball tosses it back up on the pitcher's mound. If the ball stays in the dirt, whoever is holding the money gets to keep the pot. If it doesn't stay in the dirt, then you add a dollar in and pass it on to the next person."

"That's not money management, that's gambling."

He grinned at me. "Semantics."

"Fine. Here's my buck." I handed Edward the dollar.

Another crack of the bat. A ground ball up the middle. The second baseman easily fielded it and threw it to first.

End of the fourth. No score.

"Oh come on, throw the ball you bum!" Edward shouted. But the second baseman ran into the dugout, tossing the ball to the umpire as he ran by.

"I hate when they do that," he mumbled. He added a dollar and handed the money back to me.

"Doesn't look like your team wants to cooperate with you today." I put a dollar on the stack and leaned back against my seat.

"Oh they'll come through. And maybe your team will keep the cycle going for a few innings so that you'll have enough money to get copies of the apartment key made."

"Don't get too confident there, Cullen. There are still three innings to go."

"Haven't you figured out, I'm always confident? You *will* need a key."

"We'll see, that Donnie Darko guy is up to bat next. Isn't he supposed to be their homerun guy?"

Edward laughed as he reached for his beer. "Ryan Garko, not Donnie Darko. And he runs like Fred Flintstone. The only way he's scoring is if he knocks one out of the park."

He leaned back, draping an arm around the back of my seat, smiling.

I knew that smile.

"You know, Bella, you're the one that made the smart Alec comment about hitting a homerun today. I think I just might."

Oh Edward, if you only knew.

Top of the Eighth

Damned Cleveland. Why do they even have to have a baseball team? Damned Donnie Darko.

Bella was the only person anywhere near us on her feet cheering when the guy rounded home plate.

"What was that you were saying about a home run, Edward? It's getting late in the game. I'm guessing that's the last one you'll see today."

I threw a peanut at her.

So now here we were at the top of the 8th with only one run on the scoreboard, and it was clearly on the wrong side.

"I'm going to hit the bathroom. Do you need anything while I'm out?" I asked Bella.

"Nah, I'm good. Want me to come along?"

"I think I can manage, but you're welcome to assist if you want."

She threw a peanut back at me.

I was laughing as I made my way. I decided to surprise Bella with some cotton candy, and while I waited in line I heard a conversation between two women whispering loudly.

Is that Edward Cullen?

Oh my god, it is. He's so hot.

Could you imagine having that much money?

Have you seen that girl he's with?

He's so out of her league.

I don't know. I think she's kind of cute. Have you seen those boots?

Yeah, three women I work with bought wellies last week.

Um, I just ordered a pair online. Mine will have polkadots.

When I got back to Bella, she was studying the program. "So, I've been thinking. Maybe we should go for Ohio instead of Iowa."

"And why is that?"

"There are some real hotties on this team. Check out this Grady Sizemore."

"You just like sweaty guys in tight pants."

"It doesn't suck."

"Speaking of things that don't suck. Did you know you are a trendsetter now?"

"Huh?"

"I just heard you've inspired the sale of rain boots."

"Hey if you make fun of the boots, I won't break them out again."

"I'm not joking. I just heard a couple of women talking."

"Really? God people are sheep aren't they?" She took a wad of cotton candy and was letting it melt in her mouth.

I leaned in close. "If I joined the CI baseball team this year would you watch me run around the bases in tight pants?"

Bottom of the Eighth

I was cool through the tight baseball pant jokes. But when he started speculating on jersey colors, I thought I was going to combust.

Wouldn't it figure that the CI logo was blue and grey.

Grey.

Shit. I am toast.

Another crack of the bat made us jump. Before I could say anything, Edward pushed me back into my seat. A foul ball came whizzing by my head.

"You might want to rethink your alliances. Sizemore just tried to take you out," he teased. I could tell he was a bit ruffled.

"You sure he was aiming for me? Maybe he got jealous."

The words had hardly left my mouth and Edward had pulled my baseball hat off to kiss me. His hand was in my hair, and the kiss was hard, commanding. I couldn't resist, I moaned into his mouth a bit. He knew exactly how to

get to me.

"Good. Let him be. He can't have you," he whispered hoarsely.

So freaking toast. This game needed to be over, soon, for a number of reasons. How had baseball become such a metaphor for so many facets of our relationship? He wanted a home run? I'd give him a home run...

I took a deep breath, trying to collect myself. Between being a bundle of nerves over the outcome of this game and desperately wanting to jump my boyfriend, I was a basket case.

"Well well well, look at that. My boys finally came through. You just got a dirty ball," Edward crowed.

"That just sounds crude." I claimed the stack of ones.

"You have a one track mind," he teased.

"Yeah, well, you better accept that's all your boys might have today. Bottom of the 8th, you are down by one. Your fate rests on the next three outs."

"Don't put that stack of money away yet, Bella. You are going to need it."

God I hope so.

Ninth Inning

The stadium was getting rowdy. Someone started the wave, and we complied with the process.

"See, sheep," Bella remarked when it came back around and we stood again.

We were both on the edge of our seats when the first ball was pitched.

"STRIKE," the umpire called.

People all around us grumbled and moaned. Their complaints mixed with the occasional "Beer here."

"Strike two!" Bella hollered at me, while bouncing a little on her seat.

The batter teased us with a foul and ball before striking out on the 5th pitch. Profanities peppered the stands. People started throwing programs on the ground.

Bella looked at me and winked. "I would probably get lost in your apartment anyway."

Fly Ball at the Wall

Fucking Cleveland. The mistake by the lake. So help me god...

There was a gasp from the crowd as the batter was hit with a pitch.

"Runner on first, one out. Tides are turning Bella," he whispered in my ear.

The next batter took a swing at the pitch. It was up high and long. Everyone stood, watching, waiting....

It was caught at the wall.

I looked back at Edward over my shoulder.

"One more out, Edward. Do you believe in miracles? You might need one."

Men in Scoring Positions

As the big screen showed the batter warming up, I wondered if it was too late to buy off the Indians. If they won this game, I swore I would never step foot in that state again.

I'm not sure why it was so important to me. I mean, I could just ask Bella to move in with me. That would probably be the logical thing to do. But this way, neither of us felt as much pressure. Making the decision to live in sin as you will was scary. Losing a bet was luck.

Swing and a miss.

Bella nudged me. I scowled.

Ball.

I nudged her back. She laughed.

Next was a pop up foul, and we watched the crowd dive for it a few sections over.

Everyone was standing by this time. Completely impatient. On the next pitch, we heard the crack of the bat, and the batter was off in a hurry. It was a line drive the short stop missed. That put one on second, and one on third.

"Not quite loaded, but it'll do for now."

Honestly, Bella looked excited. If I didn't know better, I might wonder if her "Go Indians" was genuine. Maybe it was the just the anticipation.

Mr. November

Two men on.

Two outs.

Edward started laughing the minute the batter stepped into the box.

"What's so funny?"

He just smiled and pointed up at the screen.

Derek Jeter.

"Should that mean something to me?" So I was playing dumb a bit. I didn't follow baseball, but you'd have to be living under a rock to not know who he was.

"Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky, Derek Jeter."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means I might get my miracle after all."

The umpire called strike one.

The next two pitches were balls.

Strike two.

The game was almost over.

I leaned in close enough that only he could hear me.

"I might have said yes if you asked."

Swing and a Miss

Derek Jeter and I had something in common that day. We both struck out. The boos in the stadium were deafening. Bella and I sat staring at each other in stunned silence.

Her words echoed in my head. I was a damned pansy for playing this game. I should have just asked her in the first place. What the hell was wrong with me? Oh it'll take the pressure off! Yeah, I felt infinitely better now.

"Well, I guess that's that," I said dejectedly.

"Uh oh. Are you a sore loser?"

"Hell yes. And why do you look so unhappy? You won this bet."

"I don't really feel like I got anything out of it." She looked down at her lap.

People were filing out of the stadium all around us, but we continued to sit there. I couldn't ask her now, could I? It would just seem . . . anticlimactic.

When the seats around us were all empty, we slowly stood up to leave the stadium. I knew we should have been talking, but I was too frustrated. They just had to win one lousy game.

"Bella?"

"Yeah?"

I exhaled, and leaned up against a post, pulling her in front of me. "I hate the days I wake up without you. My apartment didn't feel like a home until the first day you were in it. I love seeing your toothbrush in the bathroom, and smelling your perfume on my sheets. I like going through coffee twice as faster and knowing I will need strawberry preserves every time I place a grocery order."

I took a breath and continued looking at her.

"Are you trying to say something, Edward?" she asked.

"I . . . well . . ." I knew what I wanted to say, and it was on the tip of my tongue, and after an entire day without even an instant of doubt, it wasn't coming out. It felt too real.

My own insecurity crept in. Were we really ready for this? Was I? It had only been a few months after all. I knew how I felt about her, but was it possible everyone was right? That I wasn't capable of this kind of relationship.

I looked up at her, not knowing how to complete my thoughts, and as always, she saved me.

Post Game Pep Talk

"Let's go home, okay? Some of the grounds crew is starting to stare at us, and I'd prefer that no one take a picture of us having this conversation, okay?"

Our subway ride home was quiet. Too many people around who stared a bit too intently; watched a bit too closely. I could tell that my lack of answer was bugging Edward, but the break gave me a chance to frame out my thoughts.

He threw it out as a joke, but we were both taking the loss hard. I wonder how we would have reacted had the Yankees won.

Once home, I pulled him out onto the terrace.

"God I love it out here," I sighed. The view of the park was fabulous, but being outside as the lights started to come on was absolutely perfect.

Edward sat quietly in a chair, his feet propped on the stone wall. I could tell he was waiting for me to start.

"You came up with that bet on a total whim today, didn't you?"

He sat quietly, looking out over the park.

"Yep,"

"Is it something that you had thought about before?"

He continued to gaze out over the park, not looking at me.

"Flashes here or there, but not really until last night. Would it sound trite to say you started it?"

I sat down on the terrace and leaned against the leg of his chair.

"How so?"

"The comment about our bed."

"Ah." I sat quietly for a moment, thinking about how best to proceed. "The day before we left for Washington, Emmett came to see me at work."

Edward didn't say anything. I felt him start to twirl a strand of my hair.

"I won't go into all the gory details, but let's say that Emmett and I came to an understanding. When he was there, he made a comment about how you dealt with sticky situations. I didn't pay much attention to it at the time."

I paused for a minute, trying to collect my thoughts.

"I may be blunt to a fault at times, but you always know where you stand with me. If I want something, I'll ask. If I think something, I'll tell you. I need you to do the same thing, Edward. You have angles that you play, bets you make, or you disengage entirely. You can't do that with me."

I leaned my head against his leg and closed my eyes. I hated to have this conversation after everything that we had just been through, but it was the right thing to do. I wrapped my arm around his calf, hoping to reinforce my words with my actions.

"I love you, and I want to be with you. But I can't do it because it was part of a bet, even if the intent was solid. I want you to ask me again..."

I felt him move, and I held on to his leg. Too afraid to see the expression on his face perhaps. Or maybe too afraid that he would ask me again right there.

"Let me finish. I want you to ask me again. Not now. When is up to you. But I want you to do it the normal way. No bets, no grand gestures, no angles. Just ask Edward. All I need is intent, okay?"

We were both quiet for a long time, listening to the sounds of the city around us. After what felt like an eternity, I felt him pick up the abandoned strand of hair and start twirling again.

"I love you, Bella. You know that don't you?"

I smiled and turned my head so that I could kiss his hand.

"You really don't need affirmation after everything we've been through lately, do you?"

I heard him laugh. "No, but it's always good to check."

We sat outside on the terrace until it was dark. Not talking, just being together. I used the quiet time to replay the day over in my head. There was one thing that I had been sure of, and it brought out a myriad of emotions. Joy, fear, hope, and most of all, love.

I took a deep breath, inhaling the typical New York smells, tinged with the ever present scent of Edward, and it brought it all home. I didn't have the courage to say it as any more than a whisper.

"I really wanted to lose."

~*~

CHAPTER 24: POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES

TUESDAY, 5:45 PM BELLA

I stared at the clock on my phone. Edward had to be in transit by now. He was supposed to meet his dad at The

Harvard Club at 6.

I knew he was keyed up. I didn't know what to say to help, so I said the only thing I could. I tapped out a quick message and hit send.

Be strong. I love you.

It was getting late, and I really needed to go. Edward had his challenging night ahead of him. It appeared that I would too.

I flipped off the lights in my office and made my way downstairs. I had called Demetri and told him not to worry about picking me up. Edward would go ballistic if he knew what I was going to do, but I needed to fly under the radar tonight.

It was raining lightly, so I pulled my trench coat tightly around me and slipped on my Yankees cap. He hadn't said anything more about me moving in with him. This hat was my only reminder that it was all real.

I had so many mixed reactions to my memories of Sunday. We'd been able to laugh, to relax, to have fun like we did in Washington. We'd managed to bring a little bit of our bubble out into the real world. It proved that we didn't need it to be us.

Both of us had expected the Yankees to win. When they didn't, it forced us to act like adults, to acknowledge that the bet probably hadn't been the wisest idea. We loved each other; neither of us doubted that. Yet we both knew that taking that next step should be based on a better foundation than how many men rounded the bases.

And I have to be honest with myself; I might have hit the panic button a bit as well. It's hard to shut off twenty five years of learned behavior. Was I too jaded, too emotionally closed off to make him happy? He was happy now, but would he stay that way?

I pushed the thoughts to the back of my mind as I hailed a cab and gave the driver an address in SoHo.

Ten minutes later, he let me off at the corner of Spring and Mercer. There was a drugstore a few blocks from here, and it gave me a chance to collect my thoughts as I walked.

Life is a dichotomy. Edward was having dinner to talk through things with his father. Our relationship was at a crossroads. And amongst all of that turmoil, I was buying a pregnancy test.

Not for me, but for Alice.

We were all trying to resolve our parental issues in some way. Edward was facing his head on while Alice figured out if she would be one.

Black or white. Yes or no. Love or ambivalence. Positive or negative. No shades of grey tonight. But one way or another, life as I knew it was changing.

Once inside the drug store, I slipped to the back and consulted the list that I had jotted down in my office, ordered by efficiency ranking. I promised Alice that I would buy her the best tests and a boatload of chocolate. That's what friends do.

I selected two, just in case. I also purchased two pints of ice cream and a box of Kleenex. It could be a long night, and I had a feeling we were going to need all the support we could get.

I left the store and walked the few blocks to Alice's apartment. I couldn't help but wonder how things were going with Edward.

Tuesday, 5:58 PM Edward

The Harvard Club. His terms, definitely. So, he'd chosen the date, the time, and the place. The only control I had was whether or not I'd show up.

I was resolved to do it. This conversation could not have happened before now. Up until recently, I would not have seen a way for this to turn out well. Honestly, if it were only about me, I probably wouldn't have gone. It would have always bothered me to have a strained relationship with my father, but I could have lived with it if it meant never having to bow down to him. And the way he set this dinner in motion did have me feeling like I was already submissive.

But there were so many more people who needed this. Emmett and my mom desperately wanted peace in the family, and they deserved it. Plus, Bella needed me whole.

I'd been thinking so much about her moving in. I wanted to ask her about a thousand times a day. In the past weeks, it had come to the point where it literally hurt every night she didn't spend at my place. Granted, they were few and far between, but still, the idea that she had someplace else to be was painful. Somewhere along the line, though, I realized issues with my father had to have resolution one way or another before we took any more steps toward commitment.

She'd pegged me. Relationships had never been more than a game to me before. I was used to strategy and manipulation as a means to get my way. That wouldn't and shouldn't work with her. Using the bet as a means to move forward in the relationship was a sign of my past.

It wasn't fair to ask Bella to make a home with a broken man. And I decided this meeting tonight would fix me one way or another. As I'd told her the night of the horrendous event, if I had to say my peace and move on, I would. Still, I couldn't help but be hopeful. He had made the phone call after all.

I'd been carrying around the picture my mom had sent in the inside pocket of my jacket for a while now. It was a reminder of what had been and what I hoped could still be. I stood outside the Harvard Club for a moment, preparing myself, determining strategy. Delaying.

The maître d' knew me by face, and wordlessly escorted me to my father's usual table. I could feel eyes on me. The stares were a weight causing each step to be more forceful, more deliberate.

He was looking down as I approached. Fiddling with the menu in front of him. My father never fiddled. He must have heard us approaching because just before the maitre d' said, "Here we are Mr. Cullen," his eyes snapped up.

All my strategy, all my determination went out the window. He looked . . . vulnerable. I needed to be cautious in my interpretation however. After all, I'd sat in on enough business negotiations with him to know he was just as good at strategy and manipulation as I was. Hell, I probably learned it from him.

"Hello, Edward."

"Hi, Dad," I said as I sat down.

"I hope you approve of the location."

He was being cordial, and I knew he was capable of humor. It could go one way or the other. Since Bella came into my life, I'd discovered humor went a lot farther than an attack, so I took a gamble.

"Still trying to get me into Harvard after all these years, huh?" I smiled.

He paused a moment, but a corner of his mouth started to inch up. The other followed.

Tuesday, 6:30 PM Bella

"I don't know, Alice. Everything I read said you should do this in the morning. Something about everything storing up in your body so you get a better test first thing."

Alice held the small white stick in her hand like it was a knife.

"I can't wait until morning. I need to do this, now. What do I do? Pee in a cup? Pee on the stick?"

I looked back down at the instruction sheet in front of me.

"Pee on the absorbent part for five seconds. Then we wait."

She studied the stick for a moment longer.

"Give me one out of the other box too. I am double fisting it."

In any other situation, at any other time, her statement would have been funny. But laughter didn't seem appropriate tonight. I ripped open the box and handed her the stick, this one blue.

"Good luck."

She held the two sticks out in front of her like they might bite.

"Have the ice cream and the timer ready when I get back."

I heard the bathroom door click.

How did we get here? How had life become so complicated? It wasn't supposed to be like this.

I sat studying the box. I'd never known anyone who was pregnant before. The closest I had been to a pregnancy test was to pass them in the aisle to buy tampons.

Alice could be pregnant.

My mind shifted from Alice to Edward. Different situations, same issue.

Parenthood.

I only had one actively engaged in my life. Edward had two, but the connection was fragile. Alice and Jasper might be ones soon. Would they learn from our mistakes? From what we've had to deal with? Were we cursed to repeat the cycle?

Repeat the cycle. Is that what I wanted? Not to make the same mistakes, but to have the opportunity to?

What if it were me in there with those two plastic sticks?

Alice walked back out of the bathroom. Pale but determined.

"Set that egg timer to a nickel and give me a spoon. This may be the longest five minutes of my life."

I knew exactly how she felt.

Tuesday, 6:30 PM Edward

We began pleasantly. An observer wouldn't have known that apart from the day at in the Southampton library, we hadn't been alone together in six years, and that was merely an occasion for him to lambaste me before I left for LA. He didn't know at the time I'd already set the wheels in motion for the move, but his verbal castration was enough to send me packing within the week.

The Harvard Club was inherently formal, so the setting kept our tone serious but quiet. Everything we said had to filter through to a clear façade of formality and niceties.

"How was Washington, Edward?"

It was a good first question. Unfortunately, the answer was fairly complicated. I couldn't lie and say it was a great trip. He'd known we returned early, and he probably ascertained from my mother how things had gone. How much did he want to know? How would he use it against me?

"We were glad to get away from the cameras for a couple of days."

"I'm sure. You do seem to attract them."

Breathe. In and out. Listen to the tone. No bite. Maybe it's just an observation. Don't get defensive.

"Dad, I really don't want the attention. Not now anyway. I know that I was reckless before, but I promise that's not who I am today."

"How does she feel about all of this?"

Breath. In and out. She. Not Bella. Was it intended to de-individuate her, or was it merely too personal to use her name when they'd never really established a relationship. Don't get defensive.

"Bella is very strong. She has handled everything remarkably well, but she's still very human, and there have been some difficult challenges." I'd placed the emphasis on everything, as we were clearly talking about more than just the press.

"She has most definitely charmed your mother and brother."

"And me." Of course, charmed didn't even begin to describe what she'd done to me.

"Well, yes."

"And you?"

"I'm intrigued."

At that point, our salads arrived, and we both began to eat, grateful for the excuse not to talk. So far, so good. I couldn't let my guard down yet though.

Tuesday 6:45 Bella

The egg timer went off five minutes ago. Neither of us moved.

"Are you scared?"

Alice pulled in a long breath. "I don't know. Is that bad?"

"I don't know if anything is bad per se. How do you feel?"

"Nervous. Out of control." She paused. "But not scared."

"Does JW know?"

"Yeah. I couldn't keep this from him. But I couldn't take the test with him here. I didn't want to see disappointment in his eyes."

"Why would he be disappointed, Alice? He loves you. I am sure he'll be happy if you are."

Alice grabbed a Kleenex out of the box.

"That's the thing, B. He wants me to be pregnant. I told him that I was late, and he was over the moon. He started talking about all the things he would do. Going to the park and baseball. He was going on about buying Yankees season tickets..."

I laughed. It was totally involuntary. But all too ironic.

"What?"

"We went to a Yankees game on Sunday. Edward asked me if I would bet him. If the Yankees won, I would move in with him."

Alice leaned back against the couch. "Damn. What is it about boys and baseball? What happened?"

"They lost. Let's just say it spurred a discussion."

She stood, tossing the Kleenex on the coffee table. "Well, let's go figure out what my fate is. But so help me god, if I am pregnant, you better damn well move in with him. No way am I doing this whole 'before marriage' thing on my own."

"Leave it to you to be worried about appearances."

Alice stopped and turned to look at me.

"It has nothing to do with appearances, Bella, and everything to do with going with your heart. It's easy to get

caught up in being scared, but sometimes, taking a chance and living is worth it."

Tuesday 7:00 Edward

I chewed slowly, prolonging conversation. I drank my first glass of wine a bit quickly, and was well on my way through my second, when I heard the clink of his fork.

"Are you happy with CI, Edward?"

"I am. I have always been proud of the company, and I believe I've been able to contribute since I've been back. Have there been any complaints about my performance?"

"No, certainly not. Quite the opposite. Many of my acquaintances have commented that you are building an excellent reputation. I just wanted to be sure you hadn't regretted your return."

"I haven't. I wanted to be home."

The main course arrived, giving me time to process the interaction. There was clearly an ocean between us, but we'd remained civil, and his questions almost seemed genuine. That wasn't to say this was easy. Walking on eggshells fit the scenario. Maybe chess match. Choose a metaphor that was about caution and calculation, and you'd have it.

"What are your intentions with this girl? Your mother seems to think you're quite serious." Interestingly, I hadn't received that question from her father.

"Actually, I am going to ask her to move in with me."

"I see. Do you think she will agree?"

"She's given me positive indications."

"She makes you happy then?"

I nodded. "She brings me to life, makes me feel human."

"Your mother heard you in the music room when you brought her to the beach house. She was impressed that you played for her. I can't remember the last time I heard you play."

I didn't need to think about my response.

"It was ten years ago. I was home for college, and mom asked me to play a few Christmas carols."

"You remember that?" He tilted his head and waited for my answer. I inhaled and met his eyes.

"It was the last time I remember you smiling at me."

The waiter had come to remove our entrée dishes. So, we both picked up our glasses and drank. We shooed away the dessert cart.

He looked down at his glass while he ran his fingers around the rim.

"Edward." He said it quietly, and I waited for something to follow, but nothing came. I knew it was time.

"Why?" I asked. And I felt like a boy again.

Tuesday 7:00 PM Bella

"Well, taking two at once definitely eliminated the need to say 'are you sure,' didn't it?"

We stared down at the two pieces of plastic. Each had the same indication.

"Yeah. Kind of makes me wish we did it the old fashioned way, killed a bunny, ya know. Somehow this feels anticlimactic."

My arms were already around Alice, my chin resting on her shoulder. All I could do was squeeze her.

"Is this the answer you wanted?"

She looked up at me, eyes bright. The beginning of a smile starting to form.

"Surprisingly enough, yeah."

"Whatever you want, I want."

"Thanks, B. Can you hand me the phone? I told Jasper I'd call him once I knew."

I retrieved the phone from the charging cradle and passed it to her. I stood up to leave, but she waved me back down.

"You know, I had it all figured out. How my life would go, career, marriage, maybe kids someday. None of it is happening like I thought, Bella. And you know what, I'm okay with that."

She stared at the phone in her hand.

"We will have to figure things out. Telling will make fessing up to Jack Hale look like nothing. I mean, come on, it's not like we've even been together as long as you and Edward have, and everyone considers you guys a whirlwind romance. But I'd face it all for this. As crazy as it sounds, it all feels right, like it's meant to be. ."

I envied her at that moment. Everything was so clear for them. A simple sign on a plastic pregnancy test gave them everything they were hoping for. Nothing in my life had ever been that clear cut.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. There was one thing in my life that was as simple as black and white. Positive or negative.

And that was when I realized that Alice was right. I was holding back. I was afraid. And because of that, I was missing out.

I loved Edward. I couldn't imagine my life without him. He was the first person I wanted to talk to in the morning. He made me laugh. He put up with my idiosyncrasies like only being able to sleep on the left side of the bed or eating all of one thing on my plate before starting on the next. He gave me perspective, helped me see things for more than what they were. He gave me courage and hope. Very simply, he made me a better person. I wanted that every day. Forget every day, I wanted it forever.

Nothing about JW and Alice's situation was easy or clean. But they had each other. They had faith, and they had love. Everything else would work out.

I couldn't help but smile when I heard Alice greet Jasper with a shout of "Positive!"

They were going to be parents. They weren't scared. They were over the moon happy.

The way it should be.

Tuesday 7:30 PM Edward

He picked up his drink, paused, and put it back down again. He exhaled. He opened his mouth to speak, and then closed it again.

"Dad?"

He nodded.

"It will sound horribly sexist to say it, but when you were born I was elated. Two sons. In my family, with the importance of name and duty to the company, at that time, it was an exceptional feeling. Do you remember your grandfather at all?"

I shook my head. I was too young when he died.

"He was a highly intolerant man. His beliefs were rigid and unchanging. Unless you did exactly as he demanded, he had no use for you. The company was run with an iron fist. That isn't to say it wasn't successful, of course, but people feared him. No one liked him, not his wife, not his mistress, not even his son. The fact that there was only one of me was a source of great disappointment for him, and he reminded my mother what a failure she was daily. He reminded me what kind of responsibility that meant constantly. I was not the most outgoing boy. I was quiet and studious. My father would have preferred me rambunctious. He had trouble seeing the potential in me as a real man. I had to take lessons on how to talk to people and how to influence them because I would have preferred to live my life out of the public spotlight. And business had not been my first choice. I'd always wanted to help people."

He paused to take a drink. I think my hands would have betrayed me had I tried to take a drink. I knew that my grandfather was a tyrant. His escapades were legendary at CI, but I'd never heard my dad talk about him.

"I vowed to be completely unlike him. I cared about people, and that would show in everything I did. I would extend compassion. I would marry a woman and love her like there was no tomorrow, and if I were blessed with children I would raise them with unconditional love rather than expectations. Did you ever read Larkin's 'This Be the Verse'?"

I looked up at the ceiling. Fighting back a laugh. "They fuck you up your mum and dad," I responded. The opening lines had been something of a mantra for me in my late teens. I'm sure any poem with "fuck" in the first line would have been interesting, but the meaning hit home.

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

My dad nodded slowly. "Shortly after I phoned my father to tell him we were expecting Emmett, he sent me the poem in the mail with a note that said, 'Good Luck,'"

But they were fucked up in their turn

By fools in old-style hats and coats,

Who half the time were soppy-stern

And half at one another's throats.

I met his eyes, and I'm sure I frowned. I was incredulous at the thought of his father sending that poem. It was hardly a congratulatory note. At first glance, it might have seemed like an apology or an acknowledgment, but I knew how it ended.

Man hands on misery to man.

It deepens like a coastal shelf.

Get out as early as you can,

And don't have any kids yourself.

We were two grown men, sitting in the middle of the Harvard Club. If anyone got close enough, they would see both of our eyes were wet, but we were holding back tears.

"I'm not exactly sure why I failed with you." He was looking me directly in the eye then. "You were everything I wasn't. It all came so much more naturally to you than it did for me. My father would have loved you. You were exactly the kind of son he wanted. So, perhaps, I was jealous of you. It's unforgivable, I know. But somehow when I saw you, I saw everything I couldn't be to him. I'm certain that was a part of it. And then it seemed to me that you also weren't living up to your potential. You had every talent, every skill I didn't, but you were more concerned with having a good time than being a good man. "

It stung, and I started to speak, but he picked up quickly.

"I had great struggles with the way you treated people, particularly women, but ultimately even your family. It seemed you lacked empathy, and despite my father's teachings, I've come to believe that it's an essential leadership quality. At times it was as if you were doing things to spite me. And I thought that raising you as we had, a tightly knit family, with love and laughter, that with all that potential, you would simply make the right choices."

"But I was young and immature. Everyone makes mistakes don't they, Dad?" I choked out.

"Of course, Edward. Some of ours are just greater than others." I wasn't sure for a moment whether he was talking about me or him. Either way, I knew the greater mistake was to have all of this information and continue to resent him.

"I'm sorry I disappointed you, Dad. I'm sorry I embarrassed you. But I am not sorry I went to Dartmouth, or even to LA for that matter. I needed to be my own man. And I think I have turned out well."

"I don't agree with all of your choices, even today. And I still believe you are capable of more than you've ever attempted, but I can no longer deny that you are a good man." He paused again when his voice broke slightly. "I honestly thought I had communicated love and pride despite my disappointment, but perhaps that is the flaw of so many parents. Love and approval are inextricably linked. For that, I am immensely sorry."

It was a compromise, I suppose. We disagreed on some finer points, but on the most important, we made significant progress.

Dinner was over. Our hearts were open. Our voices were tired. There was more to say; there were more steps to be taken, but tonight we'd built the bridge that would allow us to continue the journey.

"Thank you, Dad," I said when we stood outside the club, watching his car pull up. The driver opened his car door. He delayed entry.

He stepped in for an awkward hug, and said quietly, "I love you, son. And for what it's worth, I've never agreed with Larkin."

I had intended to call Demetri, but I decided to walk home.

8:30 PM Bella

I had planned to go back to my apartment after leaving Alice's. I didn't know how late Edward would be with his dad, and I had a manuscript that I needed to get through.

But I didn't want to go to my apartment.

It held all my worldly belongings, but it wasn't home. Not anymore.

Home was with Edward. Not his apartment, not Washington, not Southampton. Just with him.

So instead of heading for the Village, I hailed a cab and gave the driver the address of Edward's building.

I leaned my head against the cold glass of the window, watching the lights of cars and shops fly by. I shut out the noise of the cab driver babbling away on his cell phone, choosing to focus on Alice's words from earlier tonight.

She had accused me of being afraid to live. I'd taken more risks; put myself out there more in the last three months than I had in my entire life. It was all because of Edward. Yet I still held back. I let my fears dictate my actions. It's why at the last minute I had pulled back from the conversation about living together. I had framed it as Edward's issue, but in all honesty, it was mine.

I was at a crossroads. I could go in one direction, and continue with how I've always lived, ruled by the scared kid who watched her parents' marriage fall apart. Or, I could take the other fork, and trust in everything that I had learned over the past few weeks.

I could hear Alice in my head, taunting me to just rip the band aid off. To stop being afraid.

The cab pulled up in front of Edward's building. I paid the driver and slipped out of the cab. The night doorman greeted me, holding the door open for me.

"I haven't seen him come in yet, Miss Swan."

I thanked him for the information, and made my way up to Edward's floor. I took my trench coat off and folded it up into a small square. Using it as a pillow, I leaned against the wall, and pulled a manuscript out of my bag. At least it was quiet.

I lost myself in the pages, making notes in the margins, correcting spelling and adding punctuation. I wasn't sure how long I sat there.

The ding of a bell pulled me out of my reading. I looked up to see Edward walk out of the elevator, one hand stuffed in his trench coat pocket, the other hand running thru his hair. His eyes were downcast, as if lost in thought.

He pulled up short when he saw me sitting on the floor. A look of confusion crossed his face. He had dark circles under his eyes, and appeared to be exhausted.

"I thought you were going home?"

"I am, or at least, I want to be, but I don't have a key." I pulled in a deep breath. "I do have a stack of ones though; do you think that maybe I could get a copy made?"

Tuesday 9:15 Edward

Despite the lump in my throat, I managed to smile at her, as I stuck my hand out to help her up. We went silently into the apartment. I hung her coat up in the closet, and she waited for me. I pulled her into my arms.

"I think that can be arranged."

She sighed in relief. "How was your night?"

I shook my head lightly. My emotions were far too raw at this point, and the last thing I wanted was to break down in front of Bella. "I need a minute. Can you distract me?"

She contemplated something, but then shrugged. "Well, I imagine you'll be getting a call from JW soon, but there is going to be a new little Whitlock somewhere around Christmas."

"What!" I shook my head in disbelief. That was certainly not something I expected to hear.

"Alice just found out tonight."

"How are they taking it?"

"They're really excited, believe it or not. It was overwhelming, but they love each other, and they feel good about it."

"Wow," I said. We walked into the living room and plopped down on the couch. I didn't know why I felt like I did. I didn't know how I should feel. Nervous for them? Happy for them? What did it mean for Bella and me?

"I'm sorry," Bella sighed.

"Why?" I couldn't fathom where an apology had come from.

"I guess me showing up and asking for a key and then telling you that news. It's a lot to think about. I wasn't trying to put any pressure on."

I wasn't sure what she meant, but then I put it together. "No, that's not it. I mean. I know what I want with you. I guess I'm sort of . . . I don't know . . . jealous?"

Her face contorted to confusion. "I mean, I want to do the whole thing right, of course, but kind of like the bet. It's easier when you just fall into things than if you over think them. That's when you let fear and what ifs take over. I don't want to do that anymore."

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing."

I reached out to find my favorite spot on her cheek. And then I told her about dinner with my dad. She listened intently.

"It sounds like a lot of progress."

"I think it was."

"So now what?"

"Well, I guess we need to clear some space in the office and find you a closet."

"I don't have much."

It was an incredible understatement. I didn't care about the space of a closet when she had filled my entire life. Not one thing had been whole and right until I met her. Now, I saw hope everywhere I looked. If I hadn't lived the ride I'd been on, I wouldn't have believed it were possible to experience these kinds of highs and lows and eventually find comfortable stretch.

"I'm not worried about it. You'll fit right in."

~*~

CHAPTER 25: TEMPORARY REPRIEVE

THE POP TART GIRL

I ended up going back to my apartment around midnight on Tuesday.

No point in calling it home anymore. It wasn't. It was just a place that housed my clothes and belongings. Home was with Edward.

We spent Tuesday night talking about what we wanted. Hopes, dreams, aspirations.

I think we both surprised each other. Not in bad ways, more in the 'wow, I would have never suspected that' ways.

He wanted a dog. Let me rephrase that; he wanted a horse sized canine that probably would weigh more than I

did.

I wanted a big backyard with lots of trees.

He was fine with the fact that I wanted to work. Even after kids.

The only nanny that would be acceptable would be of the Saint Bernard variety a la Peter Pan. That solved the dog issue.

It was a surreal conversation, but it was incredibly comfortable. Even if he did insist on naming his first born Edward Jr. I told him the kid would get his butt kicked.

We both laughed. And I let it go. For now.

Wednesday morning, I called my land lord and negotiated an out on my lease. There was a waiting list on the building, and he could get a lot more in rent from a new tenant, so he was happy to release me. All of the complaints from building occupants over some of the press antics might have helped too. I had to cover rent until a new tenant was found, but I would be surprised if that took long.

I sat at my desk, staring out the window. I wanted to call Edward and tell him the news, but a phone call seemed so anti-climactic after the conversations of the last 24 hours. Moving in together, life, kids, horse sized dogs.

Kids. That reminded me that I needed to do something for Alice and JW. Maybe Edward had rubbed off on me too much. I felt like I needed to do something to commemorate the moment.

So at lunch, I took a page out of his playbook and headed for Tiffany's. I stood in front of the window for a long moment. It wasn't that long ago that we had lived for those mornings here. The world had moved ahead light years since those February days.

"Bella!" A woman's voice rang out. I turned to see a smiling Esme Cullen walking towards me.

"Hi, Esme. What are you doing out?"

"I was going to pop in and order an engagement gift for a friend's daughter. Were you headed in?"

I took one last look at the window. Oh how things had changed.

"Yes, I was going in to pick up a gift as well."

We walked into the double doors together, slowly browsing and talking. Most of the sales associates seemed to know Esme, and were clearly deferential to her.

"Come on, Bella. I need to introduce you to my personal shopper. She is a god send."

I followed Esme to the back of the store, where a tall woman with dark brown hair stood talking to an older gentleman. She excused herself when she saw Esme, and came over to say hello.

"Jess Stanley, this is Bella Swan."

Jess looked me up and down, a small smile playing on her lips when she saw my bracelet.

"Ah. So you are the pop tart girl."

I returned her smile as I felt my face color. Esme looked at me confused.

"I take it you were the one that helped him pull all of that together?"

She laughed. "I just put the stuff in the window. He mapped it all out. Edward is down right calculating when he goes after something."

Her tone made me want to ask more questions, but the conversation immediately redirected to the gift that Esme was looking for. I left them to talk while I went to look for a gift for Alice. I found a silver baby spoon with a baseball glove and ball on the handle. Given Jasper's excitement and the comment about the Yankees, I thought it would be a safe bet regardless of gender.

The case containing men's accessories happened to be right next to the baby gifts. A classic silver pen caught my eye. Tiffany's had more significance to the Cullens than just a jewelry store.

Maybe it was time that Edward got a little blue box too.

Ten minutes later, Esme and I were walking out of Tiffany's with purchases in hand.

"So what was Jess talking about, calling you the pop tart girl?"

I laughed. Given the conversations of late, maybe it was time to totally come clean.

"I told you that Edward and I met in a coffee shop. It's right over there." I pointed down Fifth Avenue. "We struck up a conversation, and ended up standing here talking for a few minutes. I don't know why, but I told him a story from the previous Valentine's Day about me comparing true love to Strawberry pop tarts. I bolted after that; it's a long story. Anyway, he had Jess put a martini glass in the window with a new charm each day leading up to Valentine's Day as a way of trying to communicate his intentions. That's how it all started."

"He's so much like his father that it's frightening sometimes." She paused and smiled at me. "Well that explains why he didn't bring you along that Sunday."

We both laughed. "Yeah, that would have been a heck of a second date."

Boys to Men

How could I not be in a good mood on Wednesday? Dinner with my father had gone better than could be expected. Bella and I were at "commitment stage," I guess you could call it. And I didn't feel the least bit apprehensive about it. Quite the opposite, in fact. I was excited. Everything about it felt right.

There was only one camera man waiting outside my door this morning. Perhaps the frenzy was really dying down and we'd be able to live as normal a life as we ever would.

I almost called Bella to ask her to take the subway rather than having Demetri pick her up. I missed our daily morning walks. Our window. We had so much more than that now, of course. It was insane to consider how just a handful of months ago; it all seemed so simple on those walks together.

We'd weathered more conflict from one side of the Continental U.S. to the other than many people do over the course of years. We were due for a break. And I was hopeful enough to believe it was coming.

I called Jasper first thing. The news Bella brought home stunned me. If it felt like Bella and I moved fast, then what he and Alice had was lightening. Talk about jumping the gun. I knew the odds weren't in their favor. The odds weren't in anyone's favor for that matter. But what do you have if you don't take the risk?

"Hey, Edward." He sounded groggy. I knew he sometimes wrote late and slept in. I had a feeling he didn't do much writing last night.

"So, I hear soon I won't be the only one waking you up early in the morning."

"I know. Can you believe it?"

"It's something else. How are you feeling about it all?"

"I know it sounds completely crazy, but it feels great. As soon as Alice told me there was a chance, I wanted this. I know it's way too soon, and it was obviously a big oops. Like maybe the first time oops, but I don't care. I love her. And with turning 30 this year, I'd already been thinking about marriage and kids a lot. I'm ready for this."

"Did you talk to your parents yet?"

"Yeah, we went over last night."

"And?"

"Reactions were mixed. My mom was generally supportive. I guess there had been rumors in the family. They all thought I was gay. My mom had taken to describing me as "artistic," since I started writing. And no one liked Maria, so they assumed she was just posing. From that standpoint, I think there was some relief there. My dad reminded us how difficult it would be."

"Ever practical, Mr. Whitlock."

"I know. He's right though. I'm sure it will be hard. And I know people will speculate on how long we'll last. But in the end, I don't really care. All that matters is that we think we can make it."

"I think you can too. Congratulations, Jasper! Oh and thank you."

"Thank you?"

"Your news sparked a rather important conversation for Bella and me. She's moving in."

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

"Japser? Still there?"

"Edward, are you sure about this?" He was quiet and cautious, almost like he was talking to a child. But like last night with my father, I decided to guard my reaction.

"Hey, where's that 'I think we can make it spirit?'"

"Everything I've seen tells me you're in this for the long haul, but if she gives up her place, and . . ." I could only be reserved for so long. I cut him off before he could say anything more.

"I love you, Jasper. And because I know you're just looking out for the best interest of the woman I love, I'm going to let that dig slide. But that's the last one. I'm not questioning your commitment to Alice, and I'd have just as much cause to considering how quickly you two moved. I trust you know how you feel about her. Please do the same for me."

I was met with silence. I heard him breathing, so I knew he was still there.

"I'm sorry," he began. "You're right. I'll try. It's just . . . different. Edward Cullen is really off the market. That's big news."

"Yeah well, I could stand not being the news for a while."

Surprise Visits

"So what did you buy?" Esme inquired as we walked.

"I had originally just planned to get a gift for a friend who just found out she was pregnant, but I ended up getting something for Edward too. He's blue boxed me twice, I figured turn about was fair play."

She laughed. "You keep him on his toes. He needs that. Edward has always been good at figuring people out. It's good that you keep him guessing."

"Esme, can I ask you a question?" She inclined her head, an indication that I should proceed. "Edward told me that things went better than he expected last night. I am not looking to dabble; I guess I just want to know if Carlisle felt the same?"

I wanted to point blank ask if Carlisle was sincere, but knew fully well that Esme would never disclose that. The instinct to try and step in and protect ran deep in both of us.

She looped her arm through mine. "I'm headed to CI to meet Carlisle for lunch. Why don't you walk with me? You can drop off Edward's gift."

Her invitation threw me for a loop. I hadn't been to CI since Carlisle stormed into Edward's office. I hadn't seen him, for that matter, since I told him off. I wasn't looking forward to our first reunion.

"I don't know Esme. Last time I was at CI it wasn't a good scene." Things were just starting to calm down; I didn't want to stir the pot again.

"Things are different now, come on." We continued walking quietly. "I wish you could see how much you've influenced Edward. The conversation last night could never have happened before you."

"I think you give me too much credit, Esme. I don't know the Edward that left here years ago, but I can't tie together everything I've heard with what I see. I believe he was different when he came back; he just hadn't had occasion to show it."

She stopped and turned to face me.

"Edward needed your unconditional love. He needed to learn what it felt like to love someone like that. It was the only way for him to truly reconcile his choices with his needs. He desperately wanted Carlisle's approval, but was never willing to take accountability for his own actions and how they impacted others. It's only since he met you

that he began to show the empathy and compassion that I knew he was capable of. My son has the ability to be a great man, but he needed a way to find it in himself. You helped him do that. Now come on, you are going to say hello to Carlisle and drop off Edward's gift."

I stood, rooted to the spot, dumbfounded by her observation.

"Come on, Bella. Carlisle won't bite. I promise." She smiled and tugged gently at my hand.

"I guess I know where Edward got his skills of persuasion from." I teased.

"Oh Bella, he's got nothing on me."

We made our way up to the 53rd floor. The doors opened, and Esme led me in the opposite direction from the way I had gone last time. She waved to an assistant, and led me into a large office.

Carlisle was seated at his desk, scribbling away on a notepad.

"Just give me two minutes, and I'll be ready. I already called ahead and..."

"Carlisle."

His head popped up as he heard Esme say his name. His eyes widened a bit when he saw me standing there. We hadn't seen each other since the Met.

"I ran into Bella at Tiffany's buying a gift for Edward. I talked her into stopping here to drop it off. "

He studied me for a moment longer.

"That's a nice coincidence. I just came from a meeting with Edward. I don't think he'll be back in his office for a while."

I could feel him studying me, almost as if scrutinizing me. It was incredibly uncomfortable.

"I'll just drop this off then, and leave you two to your lunch." I kissed Esme quickly on the cheek. "Thanks for the walk and conversation."

"Thank you for the story, Bella. I'll see you soon."

"It was nice to see you, Mr. Cullen." I waved awkwardly to Carlisle and excused myself.

"It was nice to see you too, Bella. I'm sure we'll be seeing you soon."

The minute I was clear of his office, I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. That definitely went better than I anticipated.

I walked back down the hallway, following the bend towards Edward's office.

Jane looked surprised when I knocked on her cube wall.

"Hey, Bella! What are you doing here?"

"I had to buy a gift for a friend, and ended up getting something for Edward too. I wanted to drop it off instead of surprising him at home tonight. Is it okay if I leave this in his office?" I held up the light blue bag.

"You have definitely been hanging out with the Cullens. They love Tiffany's. What did you buy?"

I pulled out the boxes that held the pen and the baby spoon and showed them to Jane. I didn't want to give away too much about Jasper and Alice, so I deflected a bit when she asked who it was for, simply stating that friends just found out they were pregnant, and I thought it was an appropriate gift.

"You are so thoughtful. I'm sure they'll be so excited." Jane checked Edward's calendar. "He's not supposed to be back until close to one. Do you want to leave that on his desk?"

She led me into the office, and told me to shout if I needed anything. It was strange being in there without him. I sat down in his chair, and pulled the framed tabloid photo to the center of his desk. I box in front of it, and scribbled a quick note.

'I gave her my heart, she gave me a pen' – isn't that the line? Well turn about is fair play. I am giving you a pen so that you have something from the blue box that you can have everyday as a reminder. Not that you need one anymore.

Love you – see you at home.

B

Climate Changes

My morning was intense. Two meetings and a conference call back to back. The conference call had been frustrating. A little company that didn't want to be acquired was raising quite a fuss about it. I let them vent more than usual because I understood their concerns, but the tension affected my mood.

The second meeting was complicated. My father was there. I knew he would be as I'd insisted on his attendance. He nodded at me when I entered the room. The most acknowledgment I'd received in years. I returned the gesture.

I walked from one heated meeting right into another. There was over an hour of complaining, heads shaking, and hands thrown up in the air before I was able to direct everyone to some sort of compromise.

There was a break in the meeting as the focus shifted from big picture issues to small details. I told everyone to take ten so they could fill coffees. There was a low rumble in the room as people conversed. I added some notes to a file.

"Do you think I'm needed in the next phase?" I looked up to see my father standing next to me.

"No, I've got it from here. Thank you for coming. We knew this one would be contentious, and figured your presence would be persuasive."

"I'm glad to know I'm still of use around here." There was a lightness in his expression when he said it, but a part of me wondered if there weren't more to it.

I stood up to talk to him eye to eye.

"I wanted to thank you again for dinner last night," I said.

He smiled and nodded.

"Oh, and I should probably let you know that Bella is going to move in with me. I mentioned it last night, but it's official." The minute she cancelled her lease, the information would end up public knowledge. I needed to make sure this was one thing he didn't learn from the tabloids.

He cocked an eyebrow and waited. He didn't need to say anything. I knew what he was thinking. It was the same thing everyone would be thinking.

"I know it seems fast, but we're very happy, and I think given the circumstances, it might actually help calm the press."

The last part sounded like a strategic move, but I thought it might be a better argument than anything else I could come up with. Not that I really needed to have my dad's approval on this, but in the spirit of whatever last night was, I wanted him on board.

He looked out the window momentarily, somehow conflicted. I didn't want to press.

"Dad?" I asked gently.

"It does seem fast, Edward. But I have to trust the two of you have thought through this decision." He looked me in the eye, and I could feel the sincerity when he said, "I wish you the best."

"I appreciate that."

"I should be going. Your meeting will be starting back up soon."

I'm not sure where it came from, but it slipped out before he turned around. "Dad, you are definitely still needed."

He looked me straight in the eye, put his hand on my shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze. "Please give Bella my regards."

And then he left the room, smiling and waving to others along the way.

When the meeting finally let out, I didn't have time for lunch. I asked Jane to have something delivered to my office and was about to dig into some research. I told Jane to hold calls and keep visitors at bay, though I was hoping to squeeze in a few minutes to touch base with Bella before the barrage of afternoon meetings began.

I saw something on my desk from the minute I walked in. I almost turned around to ask Jane what had been delivered, but it didn't take long to realize the color. Robin's egg blue.

There was a note, and it had Bella's handwriting on it, but I was eager, so like a little boy on his birthday, I went for the gift first. It was a pen. A nice pen. A silver pen. She gave me a pen?

And then I read the note. I practically doubled over in laughter. I had to rifle through my memory. Bella and her movie quotes. How true it was.

I glanced at the caller id when my personal cell rang. I assumed it would be Bella, but was surprised to see Rosalie's name on the screen. I hadn't spoken with her since the Met event, and I wasn't exactly her biggest fan at the moment. I wanted to let it go to voice mail, but in the interest of trying to move forward with the family, I

picked it up.

In 1492...

I hadn't felt this giddy since, well...February.

That's exactly what this felt like. Waiting for Edward's reaction to his surprise. Anticipation of what would come next.

Only this time 'what would come next' was a heck of a lot longer term than will I see you tomorrow morning.

75 days ago, I had no clue who Edward Cullen was. I was lost in my own world, bumbling through, longing for that elusive 'something.' Little did I know that the 'something' had been aware of me for six months. Watching me every day, but too wounded to ever consider approaching me.

In two and a half months, we had both faced down our ghosts, our issues. It hadn't torn us apart. It had made us stronger, more confident in what sparked that unseasonably warm winter day.

It sounds cliché to say that it was fate, but I couldn't think of anything else to call it.

Very simply, we were meant to be.

I was going to pack up all my belongings, and move them sixty blocks north. Geographically, it wasn't a huge move.

But emotionally, I couldn't help but wonder if this is what Columbus felt like the first time he saw land after all those months at sea.

I picked up the manuscript that I had started to work on in the hallway last night. I needed to get through it and pass on the markups and notes. When I was done, this one was coming home with me.

I knew just the perfect spot for it in the office. It might not be the next great American novel, but it was just as priceless as any first edition that Edward owned.

On a whim, I tore off the back page of the manuscript. It was blank other than the title and the date of the copy. In big old letters I wrote Edward and Bella. 4/22/09 and tacked it to the corkboard on my wall.

Perfection.

Mea Culpa

"Hello."

"Edward?" I sensed the distress immediately. She'd either been crying or was holding back tears.

"What is it?" Suddenly I was in a panic. If she was calling me in the middle of the day crying, this couldn't be good.

"Do you have access to the internet nearby?"

"Yes."

"Pull up Perez."

I hated doing it. Giving any of them hits was like offering them validation. The first thing I saw was a picture of Zac Efron, and Perez seemed to be drooling over it.

"Scroll down to the third item."

My breath caught the moment I saw them. Two pictures. Emmett and Tanya. In the first, they were sitting at a restaurant, tucked in a booth. It was grainy, likely taken from a cell phone. They were leaning in toward each other, whispering I'd guess. The second I recognized instantly. It was from the airport. The group hug. This one not so grainy. His hand firmly planted on her backside.

I re-started my breath and read.

Moving on up?

Spurned by her former fiancé, hot single socialite Tanya Romanov seems to be making a play for the eldest Cullen. From the looks of things, she scored. All reports seemed to indicate that she's been getting very friendly with Edward Cullen's girlfriend, Bella Swan. She's already part of a Russian dynasty, could she be trying to push Rosalie Cullen out to claim part of an American one?

"Rosalie, you can't believe any of this."

"I don't want to, but I don't know what to think."

"Did you talk to either of them?"

"Yeah, I talked to Emmett. He claims it's all out of context. They met last week while you were in Washington. Tanya was giving him shit about how he reacted at the Met." I cringed at the last statement. It meant once again, I was somehow to blame for family drama. "Tanya left a message, but I can't . . . yet."

"Well, I was at the airport, and it was just a stupid Emmett joke. I'd be inclined to believe him, Rosalie." There wasn't the slightest hint of doubt. I knew them all too well. My heart broke from them all, but my head nearly exploded at the thought of poor Tanya's reputation being ruined at the hand of another Cullen incident.

She was crying lightly on the other end.

"Edward, I can't lose him."

"I don't think there's a chance of that. He loves you, Rosalie. He would take on the world for you."

"I'm sorry," she said it so quietly I almost didn't hear it. "God, I was a bitch to you."

Knowing Rosalie, that was about the extent of it. She wasn't going to give a long diatribe on her wrong doings in this. What she gave was enough.

"I'm sorry too, Rosalie. I know I haven't made things easy for you lately. And these pictures, I suppose that's my fault too."

She sighed. "You can't be blamed for this. I tried to. I really did, but it's not fair."

"Why did you call me?" I assumed she was going to go off on me, but this reaction was a little unsettling.

"I needed reassurance. Sadly, most of my girlfriends would tell me to hire a private investigator. I figured if there were any truth to it, given how angry you must be with me, you'd throw it in my face."

I laughed at her. Rosalie's logic was unique. "I'll talk to him."

"Thank you. I have to go. Haley's fussing." The mention of her daughter choked her up again.

"It's going to be okay, Rosalie."

When I hung up, I noticed a text from Bella, and 3 missed calls: Emmett, Tanya, and Bella.

So much for a break from conflict.

~*~

CHAPTER 26: WHO YOU CALLING CUTE? UNLUCKY

I was still lost in my reverie when Eric Yorkie popped his head in my office.

"Hey lucky bitch. You still have the man meat around?"

It had become a goofy little exchange between us after that day in the hallway. I liked Eric. He was a bit avant garde for my taste, but he meant well.

"Yep, he's still around. Sorry about that."

He laughed and waved it off. "That's okay, based on what I saw of his brother, he's so much more my type. I like 'em big and brawny like that."

I was ready to laugh it off, but his comment triggered a warning flag.

"Where did you see Emmett?"

"On Perez, honey. If he's not serious with the strawberry tart, can I get a shot at him?"

I quickly shooed him out of my office, and pulled up my browser. There were pictures of Emmett and Tanya, front and center. He was grinning over Esme's shoulder at Tanya, his hand on her butt.

Shit. This is my fault. They were at the airport because of me.

How the hell am I going to fix this?

I tried calling Edward. I got voicemail. Crap crap crap.

My phone rang, I answered without looking.

"Bella? Oh god, what am I going to do? I can't live through this again!" Tanya was sobbing.

I looked at my watch. 1:30.

"Tanya, can you get out of your place without being followed?"

I heard her snuffle a few times. "I think so."

"Do what you need to get out, and meet me at Edward's by four. I'll bring the ice cream okay?"

She took a deep breath. "Okay."

I disconnected and left Edward a quick message to let him know I was in the loop as to what was going on, and would take care of Tanya. I'd see him at home.

I quickly shuffled around my afternoon and focused on getting a few things wrapped so I could be out the door at 3:45.

Mr. Calm

I had always been a man of action. Decisions came quickly to me, and I stuck with them. Looking back, I suppose my commitment to a decision wasn't always a good thing. I never thought such a simple choice as which call to return would have me completely frozen. I listened to Bella's message, and immediately shot her a text, letting her know I was also aware of the crisis and was dealing with it on my end.

Emmett's message was vague.

"Hey man, um, I've got a problem, and I need help. Please call when you get a chance." I would never have known the severity of the situation from his words or tone.

Tanya was more direct, and she had clearly been crying. She sounded as much a mess as Rosalie had.

My gut said I should call Emmett first. I'd just been on the phone with his wife; I knew she was torn up. He was my brother; had always been there for me. Helped me out of more than one jam. For the most part, our tension had been resolved.

On the other hand, I felt responsible for all of this. They had met to discuss me, because of my issues with my father. This was now the second time Tanya had been raked over the coals, her entire public image destroyed because of my actions. She had been steadfast in her support and deserved the same in return.

In the final analysis, the fact that Bella's message indicated she had already spoken with Tanya sealed the decision. It had to be Emmett. Who else would he be able to talk with about this?

I twirled the silver pen in my hand as I waited for the call to go through. I didn't get to the second ring before there was a knock on my door.

"Can I come in?" It was soft and pleading. Something I wasn't used to in Emmett's voice.

"Of course."

He entered quietly and shut the door behind him. "You heard?" He asked.

I nodded, and he walked over to the couch, sat down, and put his head in his hands.

"How the hell did this happen?" he asked, though I don't think he expected an answer.

"I'm so sorry, Emmett. I guess Dad is right. Somehow I seem to be a poison to this family."

"What?" he looked up.

"If it weren't for me, you and Tanya wouldn't have been meeting."

"Fuck that," he said with a wave of his hand. "In the spirit of my wife's speech, the world doesn't revolve around you, which means you can't always take the credit or the blame."

"But Emmett . . ."

"But nothing. It's not your fault. It's mine. None of this would matter if I'd been honest with Rosalie. She'd be laughing it all off. Tanya and I went behind her back because she was still sour about the whole thing. We were trying to figure out how to make things better. Our intentions were good. And yes, we were talking about you, but I'm the one who lied when Rosalie asked me where I was going that day. So, what is she supposed to think when she sees the pictures?"

"She called me."

His head snapped in my direction.

"She's confused, but I don't think she wants to believe it."

"You don't believe it do you?"

"Emmett." I said it with finality. Ending that part of the discussion.

"I kind of thought once I talked to her, she would get over it, but for some reason she's still doubtful, and I don't know what to say to make her understand."

"Do you think maybe the fact that it's Tanya has something to do with it?"

"Huh? They're friends."

"I always got the impression things were less concrete than you might have thought."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever find Tanya attractive?"

"Well, yeah, but who doesn't? But I never messed around with her like you and Jasper. Besides, why would that matter to Rosalie?"

"Maybe Rosalie isn't as secure as you think. I wonder if Tanya's history with us might have been a little intimidating."

"Really?"

"It's just a theory. " I was also pretty certain that if anyone would to bring out Rosalie's insecurities, it would be Tanya. Why none of the three of us could have fallen head over heels with her, I'd never understand.

"What do you think Dad is going to say?"

"You haven't talked to him?"

"No. He was in a meeting this morning, and he's out to lunch with Mom now. He turned off his phone."

"Would you like me to speak with him?" It was a knee jerk reaction. Emmett raised his eyebrows.

"Are you sure? Because I don't think I can."

"Of course." I took a breath and tried to hide my hesitation. I felt relatively sure my father would blame me anyway, but on the off chance he gave me the benefit of the doubt because of last night's progress, my marching up to him with news like this wasn't going to help mend any more fences.

"What should I do? I don't know how I'm supposed to deal with all of this . . . I haven't . . . I mean . . . it's been a while."

"You aren't in the press much other than as the good Cullen son are you?"

He snorted. "No."

"Are the PR people on it?"

"Yes."

"Go home."

His rested his hand on the back of his head and began scratching absent mindedly. "I don't know about that. I'm not sure I'm welcome."

"Go to Rosalie. She needs you there whether she wants you or not." I didn't mention it, but it's also what Dad would expect. If Emmett wanted to avoid any wrath, he had to play that right as well.

He leaned his head back on the couch and let out a long breath. Before he left, he thanked me. I apologized again. He told me to "Shut the fuck up."

I got Tanya's voice mail, so I told her I was thinking of her and offered Demetri's services until things cleared up. Of course, I apologized to her as well.

I called Jane in to go over my afternoon schedule. "Can we postpone the 2:00?"

"I think so. It's internal, so I should be able to get that moved to tomorrow."

"Thanks. I've got some family things to deal with."

"Yes, I heard."

"Really? News sure travels fast."

"Some of the assistants were talking over lunch. Is it true?"

"True in what sense Jane? Is it true that the tabloid posted personal pictures of a private meeting? True that people seem to have no regard for how rumors and unnecessary attention are ripping my family apart? What truth would you like to hear?" By the time I ended, my volume had raised, and Jane's eyes were wide.

She looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry, sir," she said softly.

"Me too, Jane. I guess that wasn't fair. I just have a lot on my mind."

"Are you sorry you came back?"

"No." How could I be? I had never really been terribly personal with Jane, and I didn't feel the need to give her more information.

"I like Bella. She seems very genuine. It's too bad she's caught up in all of this."

"Jane, I'm the only one who ever deserved it, and even I should be free of it by now." She looked up and thought for a second.

"Does it still go back to Bree do you think?"

I coughed. "Bree?"

She met my eye and shrugged.

"I suppose yes, it probably does go back to that."

"We were friends, you know. She got caught in the middle too."

Her expression turned. This wasn't casual curiosity anymore.

Unlikely Friends

I juggled all my afternoons, and was out the door at 3:45. Demetri was waiting for me at the curb as I rushed out of the building.

"Have you talked to Tanya?" He asked. His concern was evident.

"Just briefly. She's meeting me at home."

He nodded his head and focused on driving. "I had just started working for the Cullen's when everything blew up the first time. Before he left, Edward made me promise I'd do whatever I could to help her out. She and I worked our way out of a few tough pinches together. She's a good girl who keeps getting dealt a crappy hand."

He focused on driving, not looking back as he spoke.

"I called my brother. He's resigned from the FBI a few years ago. Got fed up with the bureaucracy and all that. He runs a pretty successful private security firm now. I filled him in on what was going on, and he said he'd do whatever it took to help her out."

"Wow, that is really nice of him, Demetri." I was touched. There were people around Edward who really cared about him and his friends, even if it wasn't always the ones you expected.

"Edward backed him when he resigned from the FBI, put up the venture capital to fund him the first few months. It's the least Felix could do for all that Edward did to help out."

I smiled and looked out the window. It seems like the layers to Edward were never ending. How could people believe the worst in someone so selfless?

When we pulled up in front of the building, Demetri handed me a business card. A phone number was written on the back.

"Tell Tanya to call Felix, okay? That's his direct number on the back. He'll make sure she's taken care of."

"Thanks Big D, you really are the best."

"It's what friends do, Feisty One."

I quickly climbed out of the car and made my way into the building. There were no photographers waiting today. My guess was that they were all at CI, Tanya's loft in the Village, or god forbid, at Emmett and Rose's.

I wasn't in the apartment five minutes when I heard a knock at the door.

Tanya stood there in a trench coat, baseball hat and fedora. I couldn't help but laugh.

"You look very cloak and dagger," I teased her as I held open the door.

"I have the look perfected. Although I'd much rather be wearing Dior; Burberry is a bit stuffy for me."

I took it as a good sign that she was joking. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Anything that will get me shit faced fast. I need numb."

I pulled a vodka bottle out of the freezer, and two tumblers out of the cabinet, and joined her in the living room.

She grabbed the bottle, poured a few fingers, and tossed it back in one gulp.

"Woah, slow down there! I'll be peeling you off the floor."

She poured another few fingers, polishing it off as quickly as the first. "Vodka's in my blood. I'm Russian nobility, remember?"

She poured yet another drink and slammed it down, then wiped her mouth on the back of her hand.

"I can't do this again, Bella. I don't know what was worse, being the charity case while Edward was off fucking his assistant, or being the home wrecker to Emmett's marriage. Why does this keep happening? All I've tried to do is help."

I couldn't say anything, too stunned by her tirade. Tanya didn't notice, and continued to rant as she started to pace the room. Droplets of vodka splashed out of her glass and onto the hardwood.

"It took ages to rebuild from the first time. Do you know for months people would make comments to me like 'where are your pearls, Tanya?' Or 'get any new jewelry from your fiancée Tanya?' We would have been fine if Edward hadn't bought that damn necklace. Wait, scratch that, if *her* necklace hadn't broken and he hadn't felt the need to replace it. This time will be worse. I'll be a home wrecker, a husband stealer. I can already see the line of people forming to ask me how I feel about being a step mother."

She turned back to the table to pour another drink. All the color drained from her face when she took in my shocked expression.

"Shit. He said that he told you everything." She looked like a deer in the headlights.

"I think he might have left out a few details."

The Natural Leader

I didn't have time to ponder Jane's reaction, though I couldn't quite get it out of my head. I tried my dad's cell, but no one picked up. That wasn't unusual. He was a stickler for not allowing modern technology to invade personal relationships. If he scheduled time with you, the phone went off.

I wheeled my chair around to look out the window.

I allowed myself exactly 2 minutes of nothing. Just staring out the window. Breathing. Not thinking. Losing myself in the view. Just 2 minutes. This was why I needed a view. Some people drink. Some people smoke. The view was my calm, my oasis. Before Bella, it was about the only one I had.

I didn't use the time to process what I would say to my father. Was it really too much to ask for more than one day's reprieve? I envisioned us living in a snow globe. Trying to go about our business of managing a relationship, doing our jobs, and fixing our families. We were happy just sitting on a shelf. But someone wanted to shake it up and watch the snow fall. I was sick of shoveling.

When 2 minutes were up, I willed myself out of my chair and stepped out of my office. I noticed Jane wasn't at her desk, which was good since I couldn't deal with her just then.

The idea that I was going to see my father, that I was about to have the third conversation with him in two days was . . . odd. Almost funny, but not quite.

His assistant looked a little confused as I approached. I suppose she'd never seen me in this part of the building.

"Is he in?"

"He just came back from lunch, and Mrs. Cullen is in with him. Did you want to see him?"

"If I might."

She picked up the phone. She was a good assistant. Not wise to ask that question via intercom. She nodded to me. "Go head."

They were sitting around the small conference table in his office with some papers laid out in front of them.

My mom looked up and smiled brightly. "Hello, dear. I hear congratulations are in order."

I must have looked confused because she answered the silent question. "Bella is moving in?"

"Yes, she is."

"We're very happy for you," she said nodding toward my father. He looked from her to me slowly, but he didn't say anything. "I'm glad you're here, Edward. Perhaps, you could help us with some decisions about a renovation."

"Actually, mom, I came because I need to talk to you about something."

My dad raised his eyebrows. My mom motioned to another chair at the table. "What is it?"

I sat down taking a deep breath as I did. Then I just let it out. I told them about the pictures and the meeting.

"Oh dear lord," my mother sighed. My father put his head in his hands, and rubbed his eyes with his palms. "What is the plan, Edward?"

"Well, I sent Emmett home to Rosalie, and Bella said Tanya is coming to our place." My mother smiled slightly, but I wasn't sure why. My father's head snapped up.

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Yes," I answered simply and directly.

"Do you think it might lend credibility to the story if Bella and Tanya are both in your apartment? Doesn't it appear as if you are choosing Tanya over Rosalie?"

"With all due respect, I don't care."

He inhaled sharply and let it out almost instantly, seemingly in a calming move. My mom reached over and put her hand over his.

"The thing is. I don't think it matters. We all know the truth. The press is going to print whatever it wants. I am tired of being ruled by public perception, Dad. I keep trying to get ahead of them or to hide in the back somewhere, and none of it's working. So, I give up. I'm going to live my life by what feels right, not by what others might think. Bella invited Tanya to our place because she supported us immensely the last few months. She deserves the same. Especially from me. It doesn't mean I'm not there for Emmett and Rosalie too. They know that. Besides, it's not as if there are two sides anyway; we're all on the same one aren't we?"

My mom was looking at my dad. Waiting. She urged gently. "He raises a good point, don't you think Carlisle?"

He thought for a couple of minutes longer. "There is some merit there. Do you understand though, Edward, the cause of all of this?"

"Me?"

"Indirectly."

"Carlisle." My mother pleaded.

"No, he's right, mom. Yes, I understand that I attracted the press. I get it. But do you also see that's not the same game now. Not with them, not with Bella."

"Perhaps." It was all I would get, but it was another small step.

"It sounds to me like Edward has a plan and is in as much control as is possible given the situation, wouldn't you agree, dear?" I had never seen my mother put my father on the spot in regards to me before. He pinched the bridge of his nose.

He nodded my mother's direction and then turned toward me. "Please let us know if there is anything we can do."

"I will. For now, I should get back to work, and I want to check in with everyone." Before I got out the door, I remembered to ask, "Do you mind if I borrow an assistant for a few tasks? I don't want to add anything else to Jane's plate."

I didn't know where things stood with her, but for the time being, I decided to pull back on what kind of information to which she had access.

Jane was back at her desk. I'd never seen her look nervous when I approached before. She shifted papers aimlessly on her desk. And she didn't look up when she greeted me.

Damn. I didn't want to believe it.

Mr Wonderful

"You know, it took forever to get a date after the first time..." Tanya was draped across one end of the couch, gesturing sloppily with her glass.

She was totally wasted.

"And then the guys that did ask me out never came close to what I wanted. Disappointment after disappointment." She took another long drink. "Do you have any brothers Bella? Maybe a male version of you would work."

I finally gave in and poured myself a glass of vodka. My brain was going a million miles a second, trying to process her comments from earlier and still pay attention to her drunken ramblings.

"Sorry, Tanya. I'm an only child."

She sighed and leaned her head back against the couch.

"it's okay. He probably wouldn't have lived up to the ideal either."

"What is your ideal?" I took a sip of the vodka, wincing at the burn as it ran down my throat.

She laughed bitterly. "Physically? Emmett's body, Edward's hair and smile, Jasper's eyes. Intellectually? Emmett's joy and spirit. Edward's wit and devotion. Jasper's creativity and sense of adventure. Know anyone like that?"

I had never considered how growing up with the three of them would create an unrealistic expectation for any woman. I felt truly sad for her. Tanya deserved someone of her own. I couldn't imagine how difficult it was to be

on the outside looking in as all of your friends found what they were looking for.

"I know things didn't work out with Edward, but how come you never tried to date Em or Jasper?"

Tanya laughed, truly entertained.

"Jasper is a fabulous kisser, but I think I would have killed him if we had dated seriously. He's too moody for me. And it seems inappropriate to say, but I did have a little bit of a crush on Emmett in the day. He never saw me as anything other than a kid, and then he started dating Rose. He was so cute when he met her. Always sending her flowers and doing sappy little things. He is such a cream puff."

"Somehow I don't know if he'd like being called cream puff."

Tanya laid her head back against the couch and stared forlornly at the ceiling. "What am I going to do now, Bella? I am not as strong as you are, I don't know if I can do this again."

I didn't know what to say. So I went with the only thing I could, the truth.

"Emmett and Edward will figure something out. We'll find a way to make something good out of this, I promise. I can't say that there is any silver bullet to fix it, but we'll figure out a way to make things better somehow. Just stay close to your friends. We won't abandon you."

Her head was still resting against the back of the couch. She gave me a lazy smile.

"You really are a good person, Bella. I'm glad he found you."

We sat there in silence. After a few minutes, I realized that Tanya was asleep. I slipped into the office and pulled out the card that Demetri had given me.

After a few rings, a deep voice answered.

"May I speak to Felix, please?"

"Speaking."

"Hi Felix, my name is Bella Swan, Demetri..."

"Demetri told me to expect your call. What can I do?"

I thought for a minute, trying to decide the best path. "Well, Tanya is passed out on my couch right now. She's in a pretty bad place, and played a little Russian roulette with a bottle of Chopin. I need to figure out a way to get her back to her apartment."

"Call down to the front and let them know that I'll be parking at the service entry. I'll get her home."

He disconnected without a goodbye. I guess Demetri got the charm in the family.

I called down to the front to relay Felix's instructions, and then tip toed back into the living room to check on Tanya. She was out cold.

I took the silence to process everything that had happened. The photos, Tanya's breakdown, her admissions. I

knew that I should be going back to her comments about Edward and his assistant, but all I could think about was how lonely she was.

We all deserve to feel loved, to not be alone. Tanya deserved her happily ever after too. She needed to find someone who could look beyond the trappings, the rumors in the past, and see who she really was.

Just like I had done with Edward.

That's when it hit me. He might have done things that he wasn't proud of. Things that hurt other people. But the fact that they happened put him on the road to who he is today.

I couldn't let myself get hung up on the past, because if it hadn't happened, I might not be here. That's all that really mattered.

A quiet knock on the door broke me out of my thoughts. I opened it to find a tall, dark haired man with piercing blue eyes.

"Bella? I'm Felix."

I shook his hand and led him into the apartment. "She either fell asleep or passed out. It's been a nasty day for her, and she decided to use vodka to self medicate."

Felix stopped short when he saw her, and muttered something under his breath.

I knelt down on the floor next to the couch, gently shaking Tanya.

"Hey, you need to wake up. I called someone to help you get home."

Tanya opened her eyes and leaned her head to the side to assess the new comer.

"Who are you?" She asked, sounding very childlike.

"I'm Demetri's brother, Felix. He's told me a lot about you."

She smiled. "You're cute."

He laughed and walked over to the couch. "Up and at 'em princess, I am going to take you home."

She sat up a bit and threw her arms out. "Best offer I've had all day."

Felix slipped an arm behind her back and underneath her legs and lifted her off the couch.

"Come on, my car is out back where no one will see you. It will all be okay now."

I followed along behind them, trying not to smile.

"You have my number, Felix. Please call if you need anything. And thank you."

He looked back over his shoulder to smile at me.

"Edward would do the same for me."

I closed the door behind him and leaned up against the wall. I was mentally exhausted, and there was only one thing I could think of that could make it better.

I pulled my phone out of my bag and shot Edward a quick text.

T okay, on her way home with a very cute Felix. My very cute boyfriend needs to come home now. ILY.

The day had been a disaster, but out of the ruins might spring something good.

Maybe I'm Amazed

I'm there.

I got Bella's text when I was almost to the door. It had been a rough walk home, and I'd considered calling Demetri or someone else, but I hated to bother him when he was already doing so much for Bella. It wasn't that there were a huge number of "reporters," but a couple of very persistent ones. I swear the one kid recorded my entire walk home. I'm not normally a self conscious man, but at this point, I worried over every step I took.

After my talk with my parents, I'd gone back into work mode. I refused to give my father a reason to take a giant step backwards now. If I started failing at work, he'd let me know. And I still had my pride. It was the one area where I'd technically never failed.

As I walked, I pondered the entire relationship with my father, the conflict in my brother's marriage, and the potential that my assistant was selling me out. It didn't exactly mesh well with a camera about a foot from my face. I was hoping no one would be in the elevator, and I could have a moment to decompress or explode, whichever worked.

But then I got Bella's text, and I didn't care about the elevator anymore, just what was waiting at the end of the ride.

She was in the kitchen. I couldn't resist. "Hi, honey, I'm home."

She laughed. "Yes, dear. Dinner will be ready soon."

I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a shrimp off a plate.

"Hey, that was for the pasta."

"What can I do to help?"

"Set the table?"

"You got it." I started toward the utensil drawer, but I stopped myself. She was stirring the pasta, and I snaked my arms around her waist and buried my face in her neck. She leaned her head into mine as a makeshift hug as she continued to stir. I kissed her cheek before following through with the table.

I'm sure we were both spent, but we filled each other in during dinner. She told me about Tanya and Felix, and I shared my conversations with Emmett and my parents.

"Was it always like this for you before you stepped out of the public eye?" She asked.

"No. Never this bad. Most of the time the attention was just stupid things. No one got hurt. The only time it was bad was the other Tanya situation."

She took a quick breath and looked down at her plate.

"Bella?"

"It's nothing. Really."

"Don't do that."

"Okay, and I mean it. It's nothing. It's just... Tanya was ranting earlier, and the way she talked about being hurt and her phrasing of what happened hit me harder than I expected. I'd always thought of it in more of a big picture way. But the image of what happened wasn't pretty."

"No, it wasn't. I'm sorry."

"How long did you two pretend to have a relationship?"

"It was a little over a year."

"So you must have spent a lot of time together."

"Yes."

"That had to be . . . confusing . . . for everyone." I nodded. She hesitated. "Did you tell her specifically about the other women?"

"I did." I had a knot in my throat. I didn't know how much to go into here. How much detail did she really want? "There were only two. The first was someone I'd seen occasionally over the years, you know?" I waited for her to acknowledge she understood before I moved on.

"And the other was the one you were caught with? What was her name?"

"Bree."

"Did you have feelings for her?"

I had to think about it. "Not really. I mean I liked her. We had fun, but I didn't think there was much more to it."

"Didn't think?"

"I learned afterward that she was expecting something more. But I ended up taking the job in LA."

"And that was it?"

"No, not exactly. She called me a lot. I felt bad because her life was falling apart, and it was my fault. She couldn't work at CI anymore, and she begged me for a job at my new firm, but I wasn't really comfortable with that, and I didn't want to let her think there was going to be a relationship. I tried to let her down easily, but I don't think she took it well." Bella was looking at me curiously. "What are you thinking?"

"I don't know. I guess I was thinking about the mistakes I've made. Like when I dated those two guys. I don't think what happened with you was necessarily any worse, but somehow it's still haunting you. It doesn't seem fair."

I let out a breath, and I think some sound came with it.

"What?" she asked.

"Some days, I think, this has to be it. This has to be what breaks her. And every day, I'm relieved when you're still here."

"Well, I don't have a place to live anymore, so I guess I'll be here every day."

"And I will be amazed, each and every one."

We cleaned up the dishes, playfully flirting and stealing kisses. We were going to lose ourselves in a movie so we both got changed into pajamas. I thought about calling Emmett, but wanted to leave them alone as well.

Right before I hit play on the DVD player, I heard my phone.

"Hey, Mom. Any news?"

"Actually, I was just calling to ask you the same thing. Is there something you failed to mention today?"

~*~

CHAPTER 27: SCREW 'EM ALL A WOMAN IN YOUR CONDITION

Edward sat up, looking confused.

"What do you mean, Mom?"

I couldn't hear the conversation on the other end of the phone, but his expression scared me.

"WHAT?" Edward launched off the couch, and was halfway down the hallway before I registered the anger in his voice.

"No! Of course not! Do you really think...?" The silence was punctuated by clicking on a keyboard.

"No mom, it's not true...I don't care what it says, it's not true, okay? Just...just give me a few minutes, and we'll call you back, okay? No, of course not! Why would you even believe this?"

There was a moment of silence before Edward started speaking again.

"I know that, Mom, but come on; do you really think that I wouldn't tell you about something big like this? You know me better than that, especially given all the attention lately."

There was another stretch of silence. I sat, unmoving. At some point I had started holding my breath.

"Let me show Bella, and then we will call you back." He sounded absolutely livid. I'd heard him upset, heard him sad, but never truly angry.

It was quiet for a moment, and then I heard a slam.

"Edward?"

I was up off the couch and running down the hallway.

He sat in his office chair, head resting in his hands. A book lay on the floor in front of the door.

"What's wrong?"

He pulled in a long breath. "You need to see this. Just please remember what you said about not having anywhere to live, okay?"

His tone was one of total defeat.

I walked around to stand by his chair. On the screen was that obnoxious pink background that I had come to dread. The photo was one of us standing arm and arm at the Met:

Canoodling at the ballgame on Saturday. Buying pregnancy tests on Tuesday. Lease terminations and baseball themed silver baby spoons that come in a blue box on Wednesday. Looks like both Cullen boys have been 'busy' lately.

My hand instinctively flew up to my mouth. I couldn't help it, but I laughed.

"Sorry, I should have told you. So what do you think, boy or girl?"

It was probably bad to joke, but the whole situation was so ridiculous, I couldn't think of anything else to do.

Edward's eyes went wide for a second.

"Oh come on, give me a little credit..." I teased.

"You have the most inappropriate sense of humor."

He slipped his arms around my waist and pulled me into him. His head rested against my torso.

"My mom was about to rip my head off. I told her we'd call her back so that you can give some context?"

I ran my hands through his hair. "That's fine. I can only imagine what she must be thinking."

"Why are you so calm about all this?"

"Honestly? I know it's not true, but I can't do anything to change what's out there. And as upsetting as it might be, it's no where near as hurtful as what came out today regarding Emmett and Tanya."

I paused, something just registering. I turned my head to take in the type again.

"Fuck."

"What?" Edward was immediately on the alert.

"Only two people know about me buying the baby spoon for Alice. The clerk at Tiffany's..." I hesitated for a moment, not wanting to admit it, "And Jane."

Edward let out a long sigh.

"I didn't want to believe it, but I couldn't help but wonder today. She brought up Bree after the whole Emmett thing. It was just too much of a coincidence."

I continued to run my hands through his hair, trying to think through what to do next.

"Okay, first things first, let's call your mom back. I am going to have to tell her about Alice and JW to explain the baby spoon purchase, but we'll set that straight. Then I need to call Alice and give her the heads up that I told someone and why. That is assuming she doesn't know about the article already."

Edward sat up to look me in the eye.

"Why are you taking this so well? Why aren't you more upset?"

It was a good question. Not to long ago I would have been freaking out. And in a way, internally, I was. I just knew that it wouldn't accomplish anything.

"I only have two options; laugh or cry. And candidly, I am tired of crying. We know what's real and not real. We'll figure out a way to set the record straight."

Edward pulled me in tighter, and leaned down to kiss my abdomen.

"Soon enough." He murmured against my skin before straightening up to the hands free button on the desk phone and dial his parent's number.

"Edward?" Esme sounded panicked.

"Hi Esme." I greeted her. "Don't worry; there is no holy terror part two on the way. I think one Edward is all we can handle for a while."

"So it's not true?"

"It's twisted. I did buy pregnancy tests on Tuesday, but it was for a friend, not for me. The baby spoon is for them as well."

"A friend?" Esme asked pointedly. It almost sounded as though she was questioning the honesty of my statement.

I looked to Edward and shrugged my shoulders. He nodded.

"Alice and JW. Please don't say anything yet, as it's not my news to be giving out."

She let out a long sigh. I couldn't tell if it was relief or sadness.

"Well it makes you two moving in together look anti-climactic now, doesn't it?"

"Come on, Mom, that's a low blow." Edward interjected.

"I'm sorry. It's just that, when I heard about the clip...well after what else happened today, I guess I just reacted. I should have known better."

"Mom, it happens. I guess I just hoped by now that you'd know how everything gets twisted."

"Some things do, Edward. Some things don't. I believe that is why we met Bella in the first place."

There was a pregnant pause as we considered her statement. It wasn't far off, but it was still a reminder of the fishbowl that we lived in.

"I'll let you go. When you speak to Alice and Jasper, please give them my best and tell them that I wish them well."

We said our goodbyes and hung up.

"I'm going to go get my phone and call Alice to give her a heads up on the article; I think she was staying home tonight. Can you call JW? We probably need to let them know what's going on before we figure out how to address it."

I started out of the office, pausing in the doorway.

"Edward, what are you going to do about Jane? It seems like this about more than a baby spoon."

"I'll figure it out; don't worry about it, okay? We don't want you stressing Junior." He reached out to jab at my stomach.

"Smart ass." I taunted him as I went to find my cell phone.

Honesty from Old Friends

One more phone call; one more important conversation. It was becoming a full time job. Sometimes, it felt I'd been dropped in a war zone. The attacks were coming from all angles.

What made it all particularly difficult was that I hadn't been in combat for so long. I'd been living in détente with regards to my father. All the years I was gone, and even the months until I met Bella, I kept to myself. I let my relationships stagnate.

It became obvious that picking sides in this war had been challenging for everyone at times. Allegiances weren't as clear as they once were. But maybe that wasn't a bad thing. Maybe there were too many conflicts festering below the surface, and it had simply been time.

I began my own re-birth over a year ago, and no one noticed, not my family, not my best friend.

Only in the past couple of months had I been given any credit. It had me doubting the adage "actions speak louder than words." It left me nervous every time I talked with people who usually put me at ease.

Jasper was no exception.

"Hey man," he answered. "What's up?"

"I've got a problem that involves you."

"I already talked with Tanya today. She was really torn up. What can I do to help?"

"Actually, this is different."

"Another one?" I didn't doubt that people were sick of it; I was too, but it wasn't as if I were asking for it.

"Well, I guess you could say this one is more . . . about you."

"What do you mean?"

"It's been a red letter day for the Cullen's in the news, but the most recent is that Bella bought a pregnancy test and a baby gift."

"And?"

"And they are saying she's pregnant."

He laughed. "That cracks me up."

"Jasper, it's not really funny to my family. They've been put through the ringer."

"But everyone knows it isn't true, so what's the problem? In a few months, it'll be clear to everyone."

"I don't think I can take a few more months of this. Imagine what it will do to Bella. They'll be trying to take pictures of her from every angle to analyze a potential baby bump. My father and I are trying to repair our relationship, but with when we're constantly battling rumor and innuendo, it doesn't leave much time for anything else. It doesn't matter what we know to be true; they aren't going to let this rest. My family has been through enough. Bella has had more than her share, and I'm just done. We need a break."

"So, what do you want?"

"Come clean. Let everyone know who's really pregnant."

"Edward, it's awfully early for that."

"I know, but you've already told your family. Maybe we could get some peace."

"It's not just about that; there are other things that could happen. We were kind of planning to wait until she gets to the second trimester."

I hadn't considered that perspective. I didn't know much about pregnancy or babies, but I did remember Rosalie and Emmett being on pins and needles until they reached what they considered a magic number . . . 12 weeks.

I didn't have time to come up with an argument because he moved on.

"Plus, you know why I stay out of the public eye, Edward. Do you know how easy it would be for people to start putting things together?"

"Don't you think it's inevitable at this point anyway? Someone will eventually link you to Bella."

"You want me to turn my entire life upside down so you don't have to face a rumor?"

"Jasper, I have to face a rumor regardless. I want you to stop hiding and to step up as my friend. And even if you won't do it for me, I would think you'd be willing to help Bella."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Let's not pretend our friendship is what it used to be. Where have you been all this time?"

"I'm not the one who left, Edward." We were both still guarded in our tone, but the tension was mounting.

"I came back, though. You didn't."

"That's not fair. I've always been here. I've been trying to help you all these months." I don't know what it was about that statement, but it set me off.

"Have you? Or have you been supporting Bella? And I'm okay with that because she needed it as much if not more than I did. But please don't fool yourself into thinking it was about me."

"What would have led me to believe you wanted my support, Edward? When's the last time we hung out? Talked about something other than the problems in your life? I'm dating Alice, Bella's best friend, and have you called to invite us over?"

"We've been a little busy." I wasn't shouting, but the strain was there. He met my tone and raised it.

"Fighting fires. I know, but we can't get close enough to help put them out if you put up a barricade."

I wanted to hang up, but that would have been the old me. So, I took a deep breath and looked out the window briefly. It was enough to calm me.

"I don't want to fight with you, Jasper."

"Could have fooled me."

"I mean it. I know this is all very complicated, and I hate that we're all in this position. I didn't ask for it any more than you did. But I've been running and hiding for a long time, and it doesn't work. You just end up isolated. "

It was his turn to ponder for a moment. When he spoke, his hesitation clung to each syllable.

"Let me think about it, okay?"

"I won't out you. It's your story to tell."

"Thanks. I appreciate that. I'm just not sure I'm ready."

"And Jasper, I do miss hanging out with you. I'm sorry I haven't made it more of a priority."

I heard him inhale and exhale slowly.

"I know. And maybe you're right. I have been thinking more about helping Bella through all of this than you. I just figured you'd have it under control."

"Not entirely."

"You've got to let people see that, Edward."

"I'm learning, Jasper. It all comes back to not hiding doesn't it?"

The conversation ended with plans to get together, just the two of us. We needed to reconnect. I had a lot more of that to do than I'd realized.

I walked out to the living room to see Bella lounging on the couch flipping through channels. I walked over and sat down next to her. I reclined back on the arm, and she put the remote down.

"Hey, nothing's on. How was JW?"

I filled her in on the conversation. Alice had been less hesitant to reveal their secret, and even offered to call the tabloids herself. They ended up talking more about Tanya and what they could do to lift her spirits. Bella hadn't expected that reaction from "JW," so she was a little taken aback by my altercation with him, but she figured Alice was working her magic at that moment. I could only imagine the conversation they were having right now. I almost felt sorry for Jasper.

"What a day," Bella yawned.

"What a week," I laughed.

"It's been a heck of a month for that matter," she retorted. I pulled myself to sitting position.

"But it's been the best year of my life so far," I replied before I lay back down on the couch, pulling her on top of me.

"The year is only beginning," she sighed, and I began running my hands down her back.

"The day certainly isn't over for that matter," I answered. And then the words stopped.

Parents

"So help me, Cullen, if you give me a hickey, you will never hear the end of it!"

"It's not my fault. I just like this spot." Edward murmured against my neck. His hand traced down the side of my body, tracing the outline of my breast. I pulled in a sharp breath in reaction.

"You are way too easy," He teased.

"I'm not easy!"

He repeated the circuit, a bit more pressure this time. Same reaction.

"See? Easy."

"You are evil."

He laughed at my half hearted declaration. "Yes, and you love it."

"No, I love you. This is just a fringe benefit."

Another repeat of the circuit. Oh my god that felt good. He was hardly touching me, and I felt like I was going to combust.

"You would think I'd be immune to this by now," I gasped as I arched further into his hand.

"You'll never be. We don't work that way." His hand dropped to slide up under my shirt, repeating the pattern.

"God, Edward..."

He nuzzled into my neck. I could feel his breath as he spoke.

"I think my mom's right, it's a Cullen thing. Rosalie and Emmett are disgusting. They can't keep their hands off each other. And honestly, my parents are just as bad. You don't want to know some of the things I've walked in on."

He paused for a second, and then started laughing. Full out belly laughs.

"One night, when I was maybe twelve, I couldn't sleep. It was summer time, so we were out at the beach. I decided to go down to the library and get a book. I'm halfway into the room, and I realize that my parents are in there. I had been so focused on the stacks that I didn't even think to look around."

He was laughing so hard he could hardly speak. "You know those leather chairs by the windows? Well there were my parents, totally naked."

The laughter was infectious, and I had started giggling with him. The thought of Carlisle and Esme going at it in the library had me in tears.

"So what did you do?"

"I left as quickly and quietly as possible, and then wished for bleach for my eyes. I was so freaked out by it the next morning, that I said something to Emmett. He told me I got off easy. He has apparently walked in on them multiple times, even once in the music room."

Tears were running down both our faces now, we were laughing so hard.

"No! Oh man, I don't even want to know..."

"Yeah. Took me a long time to ever look at that chaise the same way again."

We continued to laugh as he told stories of how grossed out he and Emmett were over their parents when they were younger.

"I have to give them credit; they set a great example for what marriage can be." Edward shifted a bit, pulling me in a bit closer to him. "I think that's the way we'll be in thirty years. We'll just be smarter about not getting caught."

We continued to laugh and tease each other. Just at the point that my shirt was coming off, my cell phone rang.

"Who is calling you at 10 o'clock at night?"

"I don't know, but they are going to get an earful." I reached over to grab my cell phone off the table and flipped it open.

"This better be damn good, I am trying to get laid here!"

"From what I hear, you've already done that Bella. Be careful you don't hurt the baby."

I sat bolt upright.

"What do you want Renee?"

At the mention of her name, Edward sat up as well. His arm immediately went around my shoulders. It was instinctive movement on his part. His way to try and protect me.

"So is it true, am I going to be a grandmother?"

It was always about her. Never a 'how are you' or an 'are you okay.'

"No, Renee. It's not true." There was so much more I wanted to say, but it wouldn't accomplish anything. She wouldn't listen.

"Well, I guess it will happen soon enough. I can only imagine how great that baby shower will be."

I took a long, slow breath, trying to control my anger.

"Is there anything else you wanted, Renee?"

"That's no way to talk to your mother, Bella. I was calling to find out about the baby and your new boyfriend. I need to make sure my little girl is taken care of"

There was always an angle with her. I saw it a mile away.

"Renee, you are not my mother; you relinquished rights to that a long time ago. My life is none of your business. Please do not call me, do not ask people about me, and do not come see me. Just leave me alone."

I heard her start to speak my name, but I flipped the phone shut. Then I stood up and threw it at the wall.

It didn't break, but it left a nice divot.

No More Super Bella

She let out a scream, and I let her rant for several minutes. "How dare she!" was interspersed with "I can't fucking believe her!" and "who does she think she is . . . my mother . . .HA!" I couldn't make out everything, but I got

enough.

Her second scream was the calming one, indicating her tirade was over. She fell on the couch and sank into it.

"I'm sorry," she began softly. "She just infuriates me so much."

"I gathered. Anything in particular?"

"Everything in particular. It's just her. It's always about her, not about me. She only calls when there is something in it for her. She doesn't ask about me. She knows nothing about my life, other than what she's been able to read in the tabloids lately. She's called me 5 times in the last couple of months. Before that, it had been about eight months. And that was because she needed money wired to her when she got stranded in the Bahamas by some guy."

I was shocked. I had no idea that Renee was in her life at all, let alone had called recently. I wasn't happy she'd kept that news from me, but it wasn't the right time to address it.

I was more concerned with her emotional state. I'd witnessed her rattled before, but I'd been led to believe she had come to terms with her mother and that relationship. The parallel between us had always been there. The one parent who didn't seem to be interested, who didn't care enough. Their indifference didn't manifest itself the same, but it was there.

Renee had taken more from her than my father had from me though. Yes, I knew there was insecurity. I'd already seen that in Washington. She didn't feel good enough for anyone. I understood that. But her parents' divorce and the subsequent lack of any good relationship model left her thinking alone was better.

Hope. Renee packed that in her bags when she left her daughter behind. Her father either never noticed or never knew how to replace it.

I remembering thinking Bella was my hope as well. But it was different; she was the hope of my personal salvation, but I'd never lost hope that love was worth fighting for. My parents had always shown me that. They gave me a reason to wait for someone like Bella.

We were the perfect fit. A complement of needs. Ever since we left our island, we'd been paddling in a large sea in too small a boat. Despite storms and high winds, we were still afloat.

I held her, feeling her breathing change.

"How are you feeling now?"

"I don't know. I'm mad, but better. It's so typical. I usually blow her off, but maybe I was just emotionally spent today."

"It's okay to get angry. It's a messed up situation." I pulled her a little closer, and I reached up to let my thumb ghost her cheek. "I didn't know she'd been in touch. Will she call again?"

"It's hard to say. One thing about Renee. You can never predict her next move. But my guess would be yes. She won't be able to resist trying to get her piece of the Cullen pie."

"Bella, why didn't you tell me about her?"

She sighed. "I don't know. It's all been so much. I guess I just thought it was a small issue. I was dealing with it, and I figured you didn't the stress."

I looked at her and shook my head slightly. "I don't think it works that way. I've been guilty of it too, but we can't keep things like this from each other. I need to be able to support you, and I can't do that if I don't know what's going on. And I hate to say it, but it sounds like we can't discount what she might do down the road. Just seems like another scandal waiting to happen."

"I know. I'm sorry. Apparently, I'm not as used to all this as I thought. I didn't really think about buying that test for Alice. And I can't even process what kind of damage Renee could do. Do you ever get used to not knowing who you can trust?"

"For the most part, I think trust is instinctual, Bella. You go with your gut. Sure, sometimes you lose, but when you win, it's worth it."

Eventually, she settled into me on the couch, and I let my fingers travel up and down her arms. "Mmm, that feels good" was the last thing I heard. Within minutes the rise of her chest slowed, and she grew heavier in her sleep. It was an incredibly awkward position, and after an hour or so, I carefully slid out from underneath her and carried her to bed. The disruption in her sleep must have prompted the talking. Usually, I only got to hear her in the morning when she was close to waking up.

For a while, she was reciting a grocery list; then she was editing a novel. But the last thing I heard before I went to sleep was, "I like Iowa, Edward."

When the alarm went off, I noticed I was in the same position as when I fell asleep.

Bella wasn't in the bed. I listened for the shower, but the bathroom was quiet. I heard water running in the kitchen though.

She was already dressed and eating a bagel when I got there.

"Morning sleepyhead."

"Why are you up so early?"

"I couldn't sleep, and then I remembered I have an early meeting this morning. I wouldn't have left without saying goodbye though."

"Are you okay?" She seemed too relaxed or chipper or something.

"I'm fine. Really. It was just a momentary vent. I decided long ago not to let her get to me, and I'm not going to go back on that now. But I am going to give her a call today. I don't need that ranting to end up in the tabloids on top of everything else."

"Promise me you won't try to be Super Bella and handle things like this by yourself again."

"Don't tell me you have another fantasy there, Cullen."

I had to admit the thought of Bella with a cape and tight Lycra wasn't exactly unpleasant. One corner of my mouth turned up, and I raised my eyebrows.

"Forget I asked!" She laughed. "My day is pretty crazy. I got sidetracked yesterday, so I'll probably have my phone off quite a bit. What's on your agenda?"

I sighed. "I need to dig a little deeper into the source of last night's baby drama."

She giggled. "Do you have any idea how bad that sounded?"

"Seriously, how you think I'm the one with the dirty mind is beyond me."

"On that note, I've got to go."

She elbowed me, and I pulled her into a hug and whispered, "I love you" before kissing her goodbye.

"Good luck with Jane," she said on her way out. "I don't envy you."

I nodded, but I wasn't going to start with Jane. I had a pit stop to make on the way to work.

~*~

CHAPTER 28: FIXING LEAKS THE DROP IN

I didn't give a warning call, preferring to catch her off guard. It was time for answers, and if she had any time to prepare, I had a feeling I'd end up with the same vague responses I'd been getting for months, years really.

She was in her tiny office. Fingers flying on the keyboard. Her back was toward me, and I cleared my throat to get her attention.

"Be with you in a second; just entering some numbers."

I let my eyes roam. The walls were bare. Furniture was sparse. A small desk. Her office chair and another in the corner for visitors. Papers were strewn across the small work space she had. Two pictures were propped in a corner, one of them nearly falling off the desk. One was an older couple, whom I assume were her parents. In the other a man had his arms around her. They were smiling into the camera. I couldn't make out all of the details, but something about him seemed very familiar.

"There," she said with a sigh as she turned her chair around. "Now what can I . . ." She stopped cold when she saw that it was me.

"Good morning, Jess."

"Edward." I had to give her credit. She didn't reveal any emotion. "Shopping today? Your mother and girlfriend were here yesterday."

"Yes, I know, but I'm not actually shopping, more like fishing."

She rolled her eyes. "I don't know anything."

"I don't believe you." Our eyes engaged in their own battle, neither of us wanting to break contact or reveal a

weakness.

"Why is it such a big deal? You're a popular man. People are always going to be angling for information and taking pictures. You put yourself out there. Don't you have to deal with the consequences?"

"May I sit?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not really."

She motioned toward the chair, and I closed the door behind me.

"Jessica, people do get hurt. If it were just me, I'd deal with it. But my friends and family are in pain. Marriages are affected. There are real people behind the pictures, behind the rumors. I really thought we covered that last time. You spoke with Tanya."

I could see her eyes change. They softened. She sighed. Whatever she thought about me and my behaviors, clearly didn't apply to Tanya.

"I really don't know anything."

"I don't think I believe you would be so stupid as to be involved this time, and there are implications that go far beyond you. But I think you have a hunch."

She didn't say anything, so I attempted a new tactic.

"Okay, so why don't you tell me a little more about six years ago."

"We've been over all that."

"Humor me," I said curtly. "From what I recall, you said you sold the delivery address of the pearls for a couple of hundred dollars right?"

"Yes."

"How did they know to contact you again? I'm not sure I remember all the details." She looked at me suspiciously.

"I don't really know."

"What I remember is that they called you out of the blue. But I'm wondering if things weren't a little more connected. My being caught at the office, your being contacted. I got your name from Bree. She said you were a friend of a friend. Who was the friend, Jess?"

"Please don't."

"It was Jane, wasn't it?"

"You're aware we know each other."

"Present tense?"

She broke eye contact then, looking up at the ceiling in thought.

"Yes."

"Tell me, Jess. You know damn well I will make your life miserable. You kept your job last time. I even sat back and watched you climb the ladder. My mother uses you as a personal shopper. There would be no chance of you getting off the hook now."

One hand was resting on her desk, and she began tapping her fingers mindlessly.

"Yes, I know Jane." She motioned casually to the picture on her desk. "That's her brother." I exhaled. What a web. But I was confused. I didn't want to react too soon though. I needed more information. "What really happened?"

"I can't. Don't make me. You talk about people getting hurt. I got hurt too, but I got past it, and I'm not involved this time. Please just leave me alone."

I could hear the pain in her voice. Something just clicked. And I acted on impulse. "Jess, did you take the fall?"

Her eyes opened wide, but she said nothing. I watched her swallow and blink back tears. "Just do whatever you're going to do okay. Get me fired. It doesn't matter. I'll survive."

"You didn't do it."

She gave the slightest nod of her head, but she gave nothing else away.

So many things became painfully clear. Jane always had all the information. She was the common thread between them all. But why? Why would Jess risk everything to protect Jane? If I were in her shoes, what would cause me to make that kind of sacrifice? The picture on the desk caught my eye again. And it was all I needed.

"You must really love him."

A very weak voice answered me. "More than anything."

Damn. I couldn't find it in me to be mad at her. She played a role in all of this, and she knew more than she was telling. I didn't think it was healthy for her or for her relationship to harbor such secrets, but I understood the motivation at least.

It was a reminder of sorts. Life is messy. Humans are stupid. Right and wrong are not as clear as fairy tales would like us to believe. I thought of my father, but only briefly. My focus was directed only on one person. And she was waiting for me at my office.

"I have one last request, Jess." She nodded in acknowledgment. "Please don't inform Jane that I know."

She thought for a moment. "She's made her bed. She knows how I feel about her actions. She'll have no warning from me."

Making Amends

People shot me funny looks Thursday morning. Their eyes invariably went to my stomach.

It didn't help that a grainy photo had appeared of me, consulting the fine print on the back of a pregnancy test box.

To the general public, I was pregnant.

A woman in my 9:30 meeting had the audacity to ask me if I should be drinking coffee. I grabbed a stack of books at the end of the session to carry back to my office, and was told by the guy down the hall "I shouldn't be carrying such heavy loads in my condition."

Of course, he didn't get up to help out.

I went back to my office, set down the books and shut the door. I wanted to call Edward, but he had his own issues to deal with this morning.

Short of a day here or there, it felt like all we had done for the last few weeks was deal with 'issues.' Be they about family or friends, it always seemed to come back to rest squarely on the two of us. Why did we always have to shoulder it all?

Had we made a mistake with our 'us versus' the world approach? In supporting each other unconditionally, had we tempted fate to throw everything at us?

The more I thought about it, the angrier I got. What had we done to deserve any of this? The most recent set of rumors and innuendo hurt the most. It wasn't simply the inference that I was pregnant. That I could deal with. I was disappointed at the lack of support, especially given everything we had done to try and help.

Part of me understood the lack of acknowledgment from Emmett, Rosalie and Tanya. They were dealing with their own frontal assault. But for Esme to react the way she did on the phone hurt more than I had let on.

Maybe I was naïve to expect something from Edward's parents. I knew that they were not ones for public statements. Yet there was only point of conversation in Esme's call the night before. Once the rumor was debunked, she seemed fine to let us figure it out on our own.

They kept things private. I understood that. But it would have been nice to have some internal moral support.

The one that disappointed me the most was Jasper. It was in his power to help resolve the issue, to set the record straight. Edward had spoken to him last night, and Jasper had been fine with letting it hang. He justified that it would go away when I didn't look pregnant.

I had expected better from him. He was supposed to be Edward's best friend. I thought he was my friend too.

The rejection stung. Those old feelings of being left alone threatened to crash in. I kept trying to rationalize his behavior. I didn't want to believe that he had abandoned me too.

There was a sharp knock as my door cracked open.

"Hey there." Alice looked tired as slipped in and settled into a chair. "How are you holding up?"

"Don't ask for answers you don't want."

She nodded, as if she expected the response.

"We got into quite a knock down drag out after I got off the phone with you. I told Jasper that he should come clean, that this wasn't fair to either of you. He told me Edward was capable of handling it."

I propped my chin on my hand and waited for her to continue.

"You know me. I called bullshit on him. He's being selfish. More worried about how his family would react." She laughed and leaned her head against the back of her chair. "We haven't been dating two months, and we are pregnant. I would think that would be a bigger issue than his precious writing. It makes me feel like everything else will always take a back seat to his 'secret identity'."

I was torn. I had the same reaction, yet it gave me a different perspective on the entire situation.

"Alice, I'm sure you are way more important than his writing. He's just spent so long hiding, that it's become a bigger issue to him than what it should be."

She sighed and rubbed her stomach. I wasn't sure if the gesture was intentional or subconscious.

"Who would have thought that having money was so difficult, huh?" She mused. I had to laugh; she hit the proverbial nail on the head.

What do you want to do, Alice?"

"I'm having lunch with Nettie today. Come with me. Maybe she can help talk some sense into that thick headed boy of hers." Alice looked down at her watch. "I told her we'd meet her at noon. Are you free?"

I pulled up my calendar and consulted my afternoon.

"Let me juggle a few things, and I'll meet you there." Alice jotted down the name of the restaurant and the cross street and stood to leave.

"I'm sorry about all this, Bella. All you have been is a friend. It's bad enough that you've been through the ringer lately, let alone because of us."

I nodded, not trusting words.

Once Alice was gone, I shot out a few quick emails rescheduling my meetings. It was 11:20. Edward should be in the office by now.

I called his cell phone. He didn't answer. I shot him a quick text.

Lunch with Alice and Nettie. Hopefully dealing with this mess. If not, wearing cropped shirt to work tomorrow.

I thought for a moment longer. We were dealing with this head on. To really do that, we had to cross every bridge. Even the shaky ones.

I dialed the main number for CI. When the receptionist answered, I asked for Carlisle Cullen's assistant. I didn't expect to reach him, but I had to at least try.

As soon as I identified myself to Heidi, his assistant, she asked me to hold. I sat through two minutes of painful muzak, and was about to give up, when the line went live.

"Hello, Bella."

It wasn't Heidi. It was Carlisle.

"Mr. Cullen..." I stumbled for words, not expecting that he would answer the phone. I hadn't thought out what I wanted to say to him.

"Is everything okay? I was concerned when I heard that you were calling."

I took a breath and launched in. "Yes sir. Everything is fine. Well, actually, no sir, it's not, and I wanted to call and apologize for all the..."

I was tripping all over myself and not making any sense.

"Bella, calm down. You are going to make yourself sick. Now take a deep breath and tell me what is going on."

I closed my eyes and tried to collect myself.

"I wanted to apologize for everything that happened yesterday. Emmett and Tanya were together because of us, and then the rumors about me being pregnant....I did buy the test, but it wasn't for me. I have a friend who thought she might be pregnant, and I was trying to help her out. I honestly didn't think that any of this would come out. I am so incredibly sorry. I don't want this to reflect badly on Edward. It wasn't his fault..."

He interrupted before I could continue. "Esme told me about Jasper. I know Bella."

There was a long pause as I waited for him to continue. "I don't blame you for what happened. It's not your fault. I'm not sure if it was Edward's either. It just happened."

"I really am sorry, I..."

"Bella, I won't lie, yesterday was a less than red letter day for the Cullens. But we know what is true, and that is what matters."

"I'm just so incredibly sorry, it seems like all I've done is cause problems, and I don't want to mess up any progress that you and Edward have made. I felt that I needed to apologize, and let you know I'm doing everything I can to make things right."

Carlisle laughed softly. "If anything, I should be apologizing to you. I have not been very fair to you, Bella. I let things cloud my judgment about both you and Edward. You've stood by him unconditionally, and I respect that. While I might not always agree with your perspective, you may have made us all realize that we might not have given Edward a chance to prove he's different. While humbling, I can't be upset with you for that."

I was stunned. I had placed the call in an attempt to help. I didn't anticipate this response.

"Bella, for what it's worth, I realize that this phone call was not easy for you to make. I respect your courage and your devotion to my son, even if it always doesn't come across that way."

"Thank you, Mr. Cullen. I don't know what to say."

"I have a meeting to go to. But I appreciate your call. It took a lot of nerve. Thank you for calling." I was about to hang up when I heard him say my name.

"Oh, and Bella? I really think that it's about time for you to start calling me Carlisle."

Sycophant

Jane was on the phone when I approached, taking a message. When she hung up, she smiled at me.

"I got your message earlier. I moved your 9:30 back to 11:00. So, you are free until then. Can I get you anything?"

"Actually, Jane, why don't you come into my office?"

"Sure, just let log out, and I'll be right in."

I nodded in agreement and proceeded to my desk. I'd spent the entire walk trying to figure out how I was going to approach this. I couldn't believe it was Jane. She'd been with the company since she graduated college. She worked her way up to executive assistant status. I remembered her from when I was here before. She was a go getter. Someone we all respected . . . and trusted. Up until recently, I never would have suspected her capable of betraying the family. The idea that she had done so more than once was disturbing. The fact that she knew what damage she caused and continued to work here made me sick to my stomach.

Still, I would hear her out. We'd all been responding too much based on assumption. We'd been overreacting to things that were far simpler than we'd allowed them to be. I needed to know where she was coming from.

Jane walked in, carrying a cup of coffee. I hadn't asked for it, but she anticipated. She was the best assistant I ever had. And obviously, the worst.

I motioned to the chair across from my desk. She sat down and crossed her legs. "What can I do for you?"

I wasn't about play games. I began with the most basic question. The only one I really needed the answer to.

"Why, Jane?"

"Why what?"

I took a deep breath. "I know, Jane. It's been you all along hasn't it?" She was still looking very confused. "Pictures. Tabloids. All of it?"

She looked down at her lap. "I don't think I know what you mean."

"Yes you do, Jane. It would be easier on both of us if we don't try to dance around the issue."

"What makes you think . . . I mean . . . I . . ." But she didn't finish. She was choking up.

"Too many coincidences, too many times. How I know doesn't really matter. I need to know why."

She burst into tears. Sobbing was more like it. "Oh my god. I'm . . . so . . . sorry. I really didn't mean . . . I can't believe I . . . how could I think . . . I just . . . I don't know . . ." I could barely understand her. I handed her a Kleenex, and I waited a few minutes. I wasn't going to offer her sympathy, but I didn't want to be a bastard either.

When she started to settle down a little, I said very calmly. "I'm not going to attack you. Just explain please."

"It's so stupid, Edward." I raised an eyebrow. She looked terrified. "I mean, not you, Mr. Cullen. God, I don't know where to start."

"How about the beginning? Take me back. I need to understand it all."

She took a deep breath and did her best to explain.

"It was an accident at first. Honestly. When you were mess . . . with Bree, Jess made some flippant comment about you buying her jewelry. We teased her, but Bree was so damn excited. You should have heard her talk about those pearls. She really thought they meant something." She looked up at me sheepishly. "And then there were all those rumors, and you and Tanya announced an engagement, and Bree was crushed. She was my friend. I just thought if your engagement was off . . . well I thought you could be with Bree then. I know it was dumb, but I guess I thought you were with Tanya because of who her family was." She was talking through tears.

I withheld reaction. I needed more.

"I don't understand. Why did you leak the fact that I bought jewelry in the first place?"

"I didn't." I raised an eyebrow. "Honestly. Bree was just as torn up about that because it drew you away from her. Jess and I tried to figure out how that got out back then, and all we could figure out was that it was just one of those things. Someone saw you at Tiffany's or something because it didn't appear to be anyone we knew."

"But you let Jess take all the blame. Why would you do that?"

"She offered. I didn't say no. It was a totally selfish thing. She was interested in my brother, and I used it to my advantage. I knew how bad things would be for me if anyone learned I was the one called the press. So, I just went with it."

I shook my head in disbelief, and I could no longer control my anger.

"You saw how it affected everyone. My family. Tanya. But you started doing it again. I don't understand how you could work here. How you could see this mess and keep adding more dirt."

"I'm sorry, but there was plenty of mess you didn't see either."

"Excuse me?"

"Bree, Mr. Cullen. When you ended things with her, she was destroyed."

"Please, Jane. But people break up all the time; it's not really an excuse."

"Maybe, but you were pretty cold to her. She had to leave town too, you know. People called her names. She couldn't get a legitimate job around here. She didn't exactly have a good reference from CI, and most people had seen pictures and just thought she was a gold digger and a cheater. . . She wasn't really in the mental state to be interviewing anyway. She really thought you two had something. And you wouldn't return a phone call. She was very bad off for a long time."

I swallowed hard. I honestly hadn't followed up on Bree. Maybe I should have, but really, I didn't think most people would in that situation.

"And now?"

"She's better. Not perfect, but better. Anyway, it was wrong, and I know it, but like I said it was all kind of an accident. Well not really an accident, but I didn't intend it. I don't know maybe I did. I was still so mad at you for what you did to Bree, and I didn't think it was fair that you should be happy. And the offers they made were too good. So, I started with little things. I kind of thought I was protecting Bella too. I like her, you know? I didn't want to see you do the same thing to her that you had to Bree. I didn't actually think it would hurt anyone. I didn't think you really cared about Bella. And it wasn't bad at first was it? You were just having fun in the snow or going on dates. There weren't any lies or anything, right? Not in the beginning anyway."

I was nearly shaking. I didn't know if it was worth explaining. Through gritted teeth, I responded.

"You could have cost me the best thing that ever happened to me. My brother's marriage has been shaken. Tanya has been deeply embarrassed, and you added serious strain to my family relationships. Is that not bad?"

"I didn't know. I really didn't." And with that she was sobbing again. She managed to squeak out a few more apologies. My emotions fluctuated between rage and guilt. Could this really all be my fault? Was my father right? Did it matter?

I dismissed Jane. We both knew her job at CI was over. I asked her to gather her things and go. There were other decisions to be made. She was in violation of a non disclosure clause, and a part of me wanted to make things much more difficult on her. I stared out my window for a while hoping the view would give me answers. When it didn't, I picked up the phone.

"I need to tell you something."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"No, I'm afraid not, Dad." And I explained the situation. He was livid, as I expected. He did not tolerate betrayal well.

"Is she still in my building?" He was seething.

"She's on her way out."

"That's not enough. She is responsible for all of this. Emmett stayed at our place last night. Tanya's father told me today that she's thinking of moving abroad for a while. Jane cannot be allowed to just walk away."

"I don't know. I'm trying to decide if it's worth it. Maybe I'm the one who's to blame."

"Edward, I've blamed you for far too long. You cannot take responsibility for this. I realize I've been asking you to bear too many burdens, and it wasn't fair."

"Which is why I'm thinking maybe we should let it go. It's bad enough that she'll lose her job with no severance and no support in this economy."

"I do not agree. What she did was unforgivable."

"Do you really believe that? Don't we all deserve forgiveness, Dad?" I heard a sound like he was about to say something, but he stopped.

"Yes, son. I suppose we do."

The Crazy Whitlocks

Alice and an attractive older woman with silver blonde hair were seated in a discreet corner of the restaurant when I arrived. It was quiet, and we would most likely go unobserved.

"Hey Bella." Alice stood and gave me a quick hug. "Jasper is on his way."

She hadn't mentioned Jasper coming.

"Don't look shocked. It wasn't Alice's doing, it was mine." Nettie Whitlock eyed me up and down. "So you are the girl that sunk the unsinkable Edward. I never thought I would see the day that he would go down for the count. And from everything I have heard he's gone down hard."

Outside of Edward and Alice, I had forgotten what having a simple, uncomplicated conversation felt like. I had a feeling that Nettie Whitlock might be included in that small circle soon.

"I ordered us a bottle of wine. Not that you..." She gave Alice a pointed look, "Dare do anything to jeopardize the health of my grandchild, but dare I say it, the rest of us might need a drink before this is over."

The waiter presented the bottle, and on approval, poured glasses of wine for Nettie and me.

"Hey Mom, sorry I'm..." Jasper stopped dead in his tracks when he realized I was sitting at the table.

"Sit down, Jasper." Her tone was much cooler than it had been minutes before. "Mummy Dearest would like to have a talk."

Alice covered her mouth, trying valiantly not to laugh. Jasper kissed Alice on the head, and sat down without acknowledging my presence. He knew why he had been called here, and would not go easily.

"What is this I hear about you refusing to help your best friend out of a mess that you created?" She looked directly at him, and for a moment, I had a mental flash of Jasper as an awkward teenager, in trouble for sneaking in drunk.

"Mom, come on, you don't know..."

"Jasper, I told her about it this morning. She agrees with me," Alice chimed in. "You've been all over Edward to take care of Bella, to protect her, yet you are willing to let them deal with issues that aren't even theirs. It's not right."

Nettie leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table. "I raised you better than that, Jasper Whitlock. And Edward has been a better friend to you than that."

"Has he, Mom? He disappeared and left a big old mess for us to clean up. And since he's been back..."

"And since he's been back, he's been through more than his fair share of malarkey. And so has this poor girl here." Nettie nodded in my direction.

"Edward has been like a brother to you. He's the one who encouraged you to write, and if it weren't for him and Bella, you would have never met Alice. He's always been your biggest supporter, even when he lived out West, and this is how you repay him? I expect better than that out of a child of mine."

Jasper rubbed at the back of his neck uncomfortably. "What do you propose I do, Mom? Call a press conference and say 'oops, sorry. That's my kid with Alice. Bella isn't knocked up?' You know that it would only be a matter of time before they dug everything else up. And then what?"

"And then we deal with it," Nettie said confidently. "Just like we always have. So what if the family knows your dirty little secret. You are helping keep their albatross of an estate from the developers. They should be thanking you."

Nettie paused to take a sip of her wine. "Besides, this will be a walk in the park compared to when those topless photos came out of your cousin Lucy."

There was a moment of awkward silence before Jasper started to chuckle. "That was a pretty bad sunburn she had. She knows how strong the sun can be at Lake Como."

Alice and I frowned at each other, confused by the conversation.

"Lucy is one of the Whitlock cousins," Nettie explained between fits of laughter. "She's always been a bit of a free spirit. Anyway, she had a brief fling with an actor, the one that was in the remake of the old Sinatra movies. The family was mortified. Definitely a case of 'Not Our Class Darling.'"

Old Sinatra movies....she couldn't mean....

"They took a jaunt to his place in Lake Como, and she was caught sunbathing topless. Or sun burning topless is more like it."

Jasper had managed to catch his breath. "Did she seriously expect that actor would have told her to put on sunscreen? I've seen him in those Oceans movies; he's darker than George Hamilton."

The laughter seemed to diffuse the situation, everyone relaxed. We actually enjoyed ourselves.

After a long and very honest conversation, we agreed that I would organize a press conference for next week. It would give Jasper enough time to round things up on his end. Have some internal family conversations, beef up security around his loft. I would work with the press department at work to line things up, as they would most likely want to do the first ever Jack Hale press tour when this was done.

I didn't stick around for the actual meal. Instead, I grabbed a vendor dog and walked back to the office, thinking about what to do next.

My phone chirped just as I rounded the corner. The CI building loomed ahead of me.

The display showed Edward's name.

"Hey."

"Where are you?"

"Look out your window."

I knew he was too far up to be able to see me.

"Want to come up? It would be nice to see you after the morning I've had."

"I'd love to, but I really need to get back to the office. I have an outing to arrange." I didn't want to go into details on the street. "You know what; maybe I should pop up for a couple of minutes so that we can talk."

"I'll meet you at the elevators."

He was standing there when the doors slide open. Tie loosened. He looked tired.

"Outing? As in?"

"As in I had lunch with Alice, JW, and Nettie Whitlock. He is going to come clean on everything."

Edward leaned back against the hallway wall, and ran his hand through his hair. "This whole mess may finally be over soon."

"I take it you dealt with things here?"

"Yeah, it was what I was afraid of."

It was instinct. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him. "Oh Edward, I am so sorry."

I hugged him hard. As I squeezed, something jabbed me in the chest.

"Ouch!" I pulled back and pushed back his jacket pocket. A silver pen stuck out of his shirt pocket.

"Nice pen, Cullen."

He smiled, and pushed my hair back from my shoulder.

"Nice earrings, Swan."

Simple reminders for everyday. Maybe I shouldn't scoff at them after all.

~*~

CHAPTER 29: LEVELING OUT THE TICK LIST

After spending some time with the PR folks and Jasper's publicist, we decided that that a live interview was a better choice than a press conference. They quickly booked Jasper on one of the morning news shows. A press release would go out in tandem.

They moved fast, for fear that he would change his mind. But I knew he wouldn't. Jasper told me himself when he called to apologize for his actions. It was hard to be angry with him, his heart had been in the right place, even though it might not have seemed that way.

It turns out that one of the anchors was a huge Jack Hale fan. When approached about an exclusive 'get,' the network had gone crazy, bending over backward to accommodate Jasper. They offered to come to his loft to make

it more personal, but Jasper drew the line at that.

Tuesday morning, instead of heading into the office, I sat cross legged on our couch, the remote in hand.

"Is it on yet?" Edward called from the bedroom.

"They just ran the teaser for it. Commercial is on now."

He walked out of the bedroom, collar on his dress shirt up, tie draped loose around his neck.

"I am not missing this for the world."

He sat down on the arm of the couch next to me, and focused on knotting his tie.

"That one is my favorite, you know." I smiled at the memory. His expression of confusion was so similar to the one he wore the first day we met. "That tie. I think that's the first one I ever grabbed."

"Then I should get it framed, huh?" Edward teased back as he cinched the knot tighter and folded down his collar.

"Nah. Then I couldn't do this." I reached out to tug on the tie, pulling him down close enough to kiss.

We broke apart when the commercial ended. The female anchor was seated in an overstuffed chair, holding a book on her lap.

"I'm here with Jack Hale, the best selling author of five books. This is a rare treat. I, like many of you, am a big fan, and have always wondered about the elusive author."

The camera pulled back to show Jasper seated in the chair across from her. He looked more like an eccentric poet than a writer of westerns. Black sports jacket, white shirt untucked and unbuttoned over a concert t-shirt, faded blue jeans, doc martens.

"So tell me, what made you decide to grant an interview after all this time, Mr. Hale?"

"Actually, Jack Hale is my pen name. My real name is Jasper. Jasper Whitlock."

"Holy shit. He really did it," Edward murmured from beside me.

They spent a minute talking about his background, why he chose to use a pen name, and how it was actually chosen.

"You mention your editor. I think everyone would be interested to know that your editor is Bella Swan, girl friend of your life long friend Edward Cullen. Did they meet through you?"

Jasper laughed and crossed his leg so that his ankle rested on his knee.

"No, I get to take zero credit for that one. Actually, Bella is the one that introduced me to my fiancé."

"Fiance?" We said it at the same time, both shocked at the news.

The anchor congratulated him, and asked if they had set a date.

"I'm not 100 percent sure yet, but most likely before the baby arrives."

"Baby?" It was apparent that the anchor had not known this little tidbit. She must be thanking her lucky stars for this interview. "When are you due?"

"Around Christmas. We just found out last week. Bella and my fiancé have been friends since college, and she was nice enough to buy the tests and hand hold through it all."

"There were rumors out last week that Ms. Swan was pregnant..."

Jasper laughed and draped his arm over the back of the chair. "No, she's not. She just helped us out. Unfortunately, some people got a hold of it and spun it a different way."

He paused for a moment before looking directly into the camera.

"So after some encouragement from my family, I decided to man up and be the type of friend I should be, so, in two hundred words or less..." He held up his hand and began ticking off points. "I am Jack Hale. I am engaged to a wonderful woman. I am going to be a father. Edward Cullen and I have been best friends since we were six, and none of the things that you have read about him are true. Nor are the things true about my other good friends, be they Cullen or Romanov. I agreed to this interview to set the record straight, and do right by them. They would have done it for me."

We sat there, stunned into silence.

The anchor and Jasper bantered a bit more about his books, and she wrapped up with a quick summary of his work to date along with a quick mention that he had a sixth book due out in the fall. They cut away to news.

"Wow."

"I know." I was at a loss at words for what to say. I hadn't expected Jasper to take it that far. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate it. I'm sure everyone did. It was just...wow.

"Well, I guess you don't have to worry about people lecturing you when you eat sushi now," Edward teased.

"True that." I stood up off the couch, and took advantage of the height distribution to kiss the top of Edward's head. He always did it to me, turnabout is fair play. "So you want to go to Nobu tonight for dinner? I actually think I might enjoy flaunting eating raw fish."

"You are trouble." Edward tugged on my ponytail.

"Would you expect me to be any other way?"

No Expiration Date

For the first time in months, I could see a light at the end of the tunnel. Everything was on track. With the luck we had, only one thing kept me from believing something had to be waiting to ambush us when we stepped out of the tunnel. Hope. Bella. Same thing.

We started to slip into a semblance of normalcy.

Yes, there were still photographers sometimes, but not every day. Once Bella moved in, we found that we could

walk to work together again many mornings. That is when we hadn't distracted each other while getting ready. We had a few emergency calls to Demetri when we ran late as a result.

Things with my family were on the mend. You could say the wound was about seventy five percent healed. We still needed to apply salve and cover it to keep it free from infection. A scar was inevitable, but with proper care, I hoped that soon it would barely be visible.

My mom and Bella were growing close. They started lunching together, and somehow that launched the idea of a party for Jasper and Alice. Bella wanted to call it a 'Coming Out' event, but my mother didn't think that would go over well with the Whitlocks. So, they settled on an engagement party.

My mother folded Mrs. Whitlock into the planning. I can only imagine how many bottles of wine they went through in the name of brainstorming. They weren't opting for a high society affair, something simple with friends and family. Of course, names like Cullen and Whitlock meant there were plenty of people to invite. That ruled out our place as a location. The apartment was just too small.

Ultimately, I think we were both a little relieved by that. Though we'd abandoned the concept of the island, it was still the place we could avoid everyone and everything if we wanted to.

My mother eventually decided on the Southampton house. It was simply a better location for such an event.

The entire family hadn't all been together at the same time yet. Emmett and I had spoken on several occasions. He and Rosalie were just fine. More than fine really. I think the controversy solidified for them both how much they loved each other. The idea that something could come between them suddenly seemed preposterous.

Rosalie stopped by my office one afternoon with Haley in tow. I was surprised to see her. I'd talked with Emmett about her, of course, but had not seen her in person since the disastrous night at the Met.

"I'm sorry I didn't call first. I met Emmett for lunch. Do you have a minute?"

I checked my schedule.

"I'm free."

She spread a blanket out on the ground, which was ineffective because Haley was crawling now, and she couldn't keep her on it anyway.

"She's grown a lot. It's been a long time since I saw her," I said while walking over to the makeshift play area on the floor.

"She really took off in the past month. It goes way too fast."

I sat down on the floor and reached out to tickle her belly. She laughed but then distracted herself with a toy Rosalie had placed next to her.

"I'm glad you brought her by." I had always envisioned myself as the "cool uncle." I didn't know much about babies or little kids, but I figured I could dazzle her with fabulous birthday gifts and take her to the zoo when she got older.

"It wasn't the only reason I came."

"I figured." I wasn't going to press her. I respected Rosalie, but you had to treat her with kid gloves. If you came out swinging, you were likely to end up on your back.

"I should have come sooner. I hope I'm not too late."

I shrugged at that. "One thing I've learned is that apologies and forgiveness don't have expiration dates."

Every few seconds, Haley would get a devilish look in her eye and take off for some unknown destination. Rosalie would absentmindedly pick her up and place her in the middle of the blanket, eliciting a squeal of delight.

"You know that I do love you, right? And I would never want to come between you and Emmett." She said it quietly, and I could swear I heard her voice tremble.

"I would say the same thing, Rosalie." She smiled in return. I continued. "I've thought a lot about that night, and I admit I wasn't happy with you, but I did miss the forest for the trees for a long time. I never saw how my relationship with Dad, or lack thereof impacted Emmett. And in the end, you were defending him, which is not that different than what Bella did for me. "

"When the pictures came out, you had every right to tell me to go to hell. But you didn't. I really didn't deserve your support."

"Rosalie, you wouldn't have been in that mess if it weren't for me."

"I'm still sorry."

"You've long been forgiven."

"What about Bella?"

"I can't speak for her." Knowing Bella had always seen the good in me, I had no doubt she'd find a way to see past her first meeting with Rosalie.

"I don't really feel like I can just call her up out of the blue, but I would like to get a chance to redeem myself before Jasper and Alice's party. I wouldn't want it to be awkward. So, you think you could come over for dinner sometime?"

"I'll talk to her, but I think that would be good for all of us."

She exhaled loudly. "Whew. That didn't suck as bad as I thought it would."

We both laughed, and even Haley giggled along.

Honesty in the Written Word

Spring moved steadily into summer. We were in a comfortable groove. Work, home, time with friends, and of course, a lot of baseball games.

Edward tried to teach me how to score, but I would much rather eat peanuts. We took Emmett to a few games with us. We looked like the motley crew, the three of us in our respective Yankees, Mets and Indians hats.

It would always be one of our little in jokes. I'll always cheer for the Indians. At least on the outside.

The bridges with Edward's family were all back in place. We had gone to Emmett and Rose's a few times for dinner. They had, after much encouragement from Esme, left Haley with us once or twice when they couldn't find a babysitter. We all survived.

And most importantly, Edward and his dad were on the mend. Carlisle had popped into Edward's office one day, out of the blue, and handed him a book, with a quick 'I thought you would like it.'

It was slow going, but they were definitely out of the woods.

On the friends as extended family front, Alice's stomach was already huge. Maybe it looked big because of her size. Maybe it was the non stop eating. Either way, it was very clear that she was 'large and in charge' as she called it. If she was this big at five months, I cringe to think what she'd be like by Christmas.

Tanya had been the biggest surprise of all. The disastrous story from April about her and Emmett had actually brought about something good. She had fallen madly in love with Demetri's brother, Felix. She was happily weaving her way into his life, spending time with his family, and encouraging everyone and anyone she knew to take advantage of his security business.

I'd asked Esme if I could deliver Tanya's invitation to the party in person. We'd met for drinks at the St Regis, where she regaled me about all things Felix. It was fabulous to see her so happy. She had expected grief from her family, Felix not coming from their social circles and all; but in the end, it was a non issue. They were simply happy that she finally had someone of her own. I think we all were.

"You know, Bella, if it wasn't for you, I never would have met him."

I shook my head and smiled. "More like if it wasn't for you and Edward faking an engagement, *none* of this would have happened. I owe you just as much thanks."

We laughed and clinked our glasses together. Out of all the chaos, there had come more than a fair share of happiness.

Everything seemed to have come around for our friends. Jasper and Alice were happily preparing for a life of wedded, parental bliss. I couldn't help but wonder if Tanya and Felix weren't far behind. Of all our friends, she was the one I was happiest for. She really had suffered the most.

We had made arrangements to spend the weekend of Alice and Jasper's party at the house in Southampton. As much as things had resolved themselves, the thought of a full weekend there still made me nervous. We'd been living together for three months; it shouldn't have been a big deal. I'd been out to Southampton a few times, but the house still threw me off balance. Memories of that first meeting and what ensued.

While he didn't specifically address it, I knew that Edward was well aware of my apprehension. He did what he could to keep me distracted or put me at ease. We spent Saturday morning down on the beach. He insisted on trying to teach me how to throw a football, but it was a lost cause. I'd much rather be the one tackling him, anyway.

He, Emmett and Jasper had stayed up late the night before, telling stories and lord knows what else. By the time lunch was over, he was a walking zombie.

"Come on, take a nap with me," he coaxed.

"Yeah, I know what nap is code for, Cullen. Go sleep, you need to be functional tonight."

He gave me a feeble attempt at a pout. He was too tired to put up a fight.

"What will you do?"

I smiled. No question on that.

"Do what I have wanted to for months, get lost in that library."

He gave me a quick kiss on the forehead, and I was off.

Maybe it was the apprehension of my first visit that had made the library seem so cold. In truth, it was the type of room that I would have chosen for myself. Arts and Crafts style furniture, over stuffed leather library chairs, and Micah floor lamps. It was inviting, soothing. The perfect place to curl up and read a book.

I was running my hand longingly over the spine of what appeared to be a first edition of *Great Expectations*, when I heard a noise behind me. I jumped, waiting to be scolded like a naughty child.

"Go ahead. No point in having them if they just sit there."

Carlisle stood in the center of the room, his hands in the pockets of his immaculate khakis.

"I can't. These books, there just so valuable..." The *Great Expectations* had to be worth at least \$300,000, and fragile too.

"They are books none the less. They are meant to be enjoyed."

He walked over to the stacks on the far wall and shifted them around so that he could reach the very back row.

"Don't tell anyone about this. I'd like to keep it our little secret for now." He beckoned me over.

There on the middle shelf of the last stack, were all of Jasper's books.

"Emmett mentioned reading the first one and enjoying it a while back. I always thought that Edward would appreciate them; they reminded me of him a lot. I bought them all, thinking that maybe, someday we'd get a chance to talk about them. Little did I realize that the writer was already part of the family, and some of the anecdotes in the story were ones I knew first hand."

He pulled the first in the series off the shelf.

"I've always wondered about some things. Would you mind if I asked a few questions?"

We spent the afternoon talking about the books. Nuances to the characters, plot devices and why they played out the way they did. I told Carlisle about editorial choices that would have made the story come out totally different. In return, he told me stories about Jasper and Edward when they were little.

It's funny how you draw from your personal experiences in your art. I'll never be able to look at the characters in a Jack Hale book again and not think of two scrawny kids standing on a beach after a disastrous run in with a bottle of with sun-in.

It was a wonderful afternoon. Five months ago, if you told me that I would spend an afternoon in the library at Southampton, dissecting Jack Hale books with Carlisle Cullen, I would have laughed at you and asked for a hit off the bong.

It's amazing how life changes.

A Simple Bach Concerto

"Up," Haley begged. She looked up at me with her big eyes. She stood with one hand on my leg. I brought her into my lap. She had just turned a year, and with a handful of words, Emmett was convinced she was a genius.

I bounced her on my knee while she giggled.

The house was packed, people everywhere. We'd spilled out onto the lawn. With the heat, my mom and Bella had opted for a casual gathering, so despite the crowd, there was very little pretense. Lobster and laughter described it well.

"You look comfortable," Jasper said taking a seat next to me. I had a momentary flashback to the towheaded boy who used to play cops and robbers with me around this house as a kid. Always an idealist, he'd kept all of us in line at one point or another. For many years, he was sort of barometer for me. If I could maintain his friendship, I must not have been a complete monster.

Things had gone well for him after revealing his secret. He was able to do the kinds of publicity tours that his publishing company always wanted—Bella informed him this would only add to the success of the series. Bella said she'd always been surprised the books had taken off as they had with so little publicity. He and Alice just got back from a month long junket and were now settling in for the duration of her pregnancy.

"I can't complain."

"I hear you've done some babysitting. We're going to keep that in mind."

"Oh a couple of times for a few hours. Don't get too excited," I laughed.

"So, you're not ready for one of your own?" he asked casually.

"I can't believe you just asked me that. Was that question Alice's doing?" We both laughed at the implication.

"Maybe a little. It just seems like you and Bella are pretty well settled."

"We are," I acknowledged as I saw her talking with Alice with a glass of wine in her hand. "It's been an amazing year."

"I sure couldn't have predicted any of this. "

"What about you? Do you feel ready for everything?"

"Oddly, I think I do. You know the saying 'everything you never knew you always wanted?'"

I nodded. I knew exactly what he meant. Rosalie came to take Haley as some distant cousins wanted to fawn all over her. I made my way back into the house. I passed by the library. A number of people were engaged in conversation by the window. I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"There you are, son. Your mother is requesting your presence." My father smiled at me, and I followed him down the hall.

"Edward! I've been looking for you. There have been multiple requests for you to play."

I should have known this was coming. I'd been gravitating toward the piano whenever I was at one of their houses lately. It felt natural. Sometimes, Bella would curl up in the room with a book in her hand. Others, I assumed I was alone, until I would hear my mother join in on violin.

I hadn't told my mom, but yesterday, Bella and I spent time clearing space for a piano that was going to be delivered this week.

"Oh no. I really couldn't."

"Nonsense. It's been too long since you played for our friends."

I leaned into whisper in my mother's ear. "Thought that was pretentious."

"I've decided showing off your children is always in vogue," she said with a wink.

I laughed. People all around me encouraged and prodded. I was waving my hand to decline, when my father said in a low voice, "I would love to hear you play, Edward."

I met his eyes, and found all the encouragement I needed.

I lost myself in the music. I assume people still talked, and glasses clanked, but I didn't hear it. When the song ended, I held my position for a minute, almost afraid to see reactions. I could hear the applause begin before I tentatively lifted my head. My mom and Bella were standing directly in my line of sight. Bella smiled at me, and then shifted her gaze. My eyes followed.

I had to look around a few people; he was tucked away where most people wouldn't notice him.

My father was standing in the doorway, leaning against it. I recognized the expression immediately. The picture. I closed my eyes, and hoped when I re-opened them I would see the sentiment in his face.

It was there. Pride.

I swallowed hard, to keep the ball of emotions at bay. He nodded gently.

A lot was said in that moment. We only had an instant before people filled in the space, taking him out of my line of sight. Everyone patted me on the back, and began dispersing. My mother had announced dinner would be served.

I had to push and prod a little to get where I was going. I knew he'd be there.

"Thanks for the book, Dad."

He reached his hand up to his face, and wiped gently. He looked slowly toward me from his spot in front of the window. His eyes were still wet.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"The book was good, but the inscription was better."

"I wasn't sure you'd noticed."

"Maybe we could have lunch sometime this week to . . . you know . . . discuss the book . . . or whatever?"

"I would like that very much."

"Mom said dinner is being served, so we should probably go," I nudged.

"Tell her I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay," I responded quietly. I turned to leave the library, but I paused, looked back over my shoulder and said, "Dad?"

"Mm?"

"I love you, too."

~*~

CHAPTER 30: STORY BOOK ENDINGS GETTING IT TOGETHER

I am going to propose to Isabella Swan.

I just don't know when. Or where. Or how.

I have been working diligently to get all of my ducks in a row. I've known since at least April that this would happen eventually, but I'd been waiting for things to come together.

Now that we'd found a groove, I found myself increasingly impatient about this milestone in our relationship. And that was irrational, of course. We hadn't even been together a year.

But I knew. My friends and family had pressed me. "When did you know?" The simplest answer was that I'd always known. It wasn't the boots or the tie grabbing or the pop tart or the window or any of those things she said or did along the way. It was a feeling. I remembered a phrase that went through my head a long time ago. "She never disappointed me."

She still hadn't. Not really. In part because she never stopped surprising me.

There were several reasons why I'd waited even this long. We had more than a few potholes to contend with in the first few months. After the biggest issues were resolved, we still needed to settle into the day to day aspects of a relationship, and of course, our families needed attention.

The beauty was, we became each other's missing link. I knew that without her, my family would not be where it was. It proved what I already knew. We fit.

That wasn't to say every day was perfect. We had spats. Bella's clutter syndrome sometimes made me want to pull my hair out. She left piles everywhere. Most of the time, I could blow it off. Maybe it was because of how intently our bond had formed in the beginning.

Or maybe it had to do with something my father said.

When Emmett was about to get married, my father told him. "Always remember son, 'don't sweat the small stuff.' I've lived by that mantra, and every time I get annoyed by something your mother does, I ask myself, 'Is this something I would miss about her if she were gone?' You can live with more than you would expect if you keep that in mind."

So, tension has never really turned into a fight between us. And we were currently facing tension because Bella was begging me to stay.

"Do you really have to go?"

"You know I do," I said zipping my carry on bag. "I'll be back in a couple of days."

"I hate it when you're gone. The place feels too lonely."

"Duty calls, but you know you're giving me the right to beg the next time you have to go somewhere for work too."

"Is it too late for me to come along?" She asked sheepishly. I laughed outwardly, though I had to disguise a slight panic. I hadn't invited her on this trip for a reason.

"It is. You, my dear, have work. And I'll be back before you know it." I kissed her forehead.

I hated lying to her. I knew it wasn't the best way to start our hopefully soon to be engagement, but some things just need to be done the right way. And lying was the only way to accomplish that.

So I grabbed my bag and took her hand. She accompanied me to the front door. I would have liked the extra five minutes of the walk down to the car, but it was early, and she wasn't dressed yet so we had to say the goodbye at the elevator.

Until now, all of my business meetings had been day trips, or we'd managed to find a way for Bella to come with me. This was our first night apart since she moved in. Neither of us was looking forward to it.

I spent the entire plane ride brainstorming. I had so much to figure out. I wanted her proposal to be something she would remember, a story she could tell. I had created my own problem. It was hard to top the Tiffany's window. I was beginning to think I'd set the bar too high too early. How would I spend the rest of our lives living up to that level of romance?

I was still wrestling with the decision during the four hour car ride, wishing I hadn't decided to fly commercial after all. The rental car was nothing fancy. Standard midsize. I wanted to blend. So it wasn't exactly a performance vehicle.

I pulled into the driveway at almost five. The cruiser was in the driveway. Despite the ridiculously long day of travel, I still wanted more time to compose myself, but I knew he was waiting for me. Charlie hadn't seemed all that surprised when I called. He and Bella spoke frequently these days; he must have known how serious we were.

In some ways, the blow up on the beach led them to a stronger phase of their relationship. They were working to be more honest, to share the details more consistently.

He opened the door before I rang the doorbell.

"Hey, Edward. Welcome back." He reached out his hand.

"Hi Charlie. Good to see you," I said while shaking the hand he'd offered.

"Come in, come in. You must be exhausted."

"It really is a long trip. Have you ever gone out to visit her?"

"Just once when she graduated college. Otherwise, she wanted to come here so she could see friends too."

I nodded as we made our way into the living room.

"Do you need a beer?"

"Not just yet, thanks."

He plopped down in his recliner, and I smiled as I sat down on the world's most uncomfortable couch.

"So, I assume you know why I'm here."

"I have a hunch."

"I know we haven't spent much time together, and I hope that will change. But for as crazy as my life probably seems to you, I'm really a fairly old fashioned man at heart."

I caught a hint of a smile as he nodded for me to continue.

"I love your daughter, Charlie. I can't even imagine my life without her. I think we've weathered enough storms to know that what we have is real, and it's not going anywhere." I paused as I thought about my next line.

"And?" he encouraged.

"And I'm planning to ask her to marry me, but I would like your approval."

"I see," he said, while running a hand through his hair. "Well, like you said, you and I haven't had much time together. So, how about we change that? Let me spend some time getting to know you better, and then we'll see whether I approve."

"I . . . uh . . . sure," I stuttered.

"Good. Now, I'm taking you out to eat, Edward."

And he did. We went to a local restaurant, and it was an interesting experience. Everyone knew Charlie. They were also apparently aware that Bella's boyfriend was coming to visit, so they knew who I was, but not by picture or name.

Charlie told me to get to bed early.

"I took the day off tomorrow. I thought we'd go fishing." I was surprised he'd made the time for me. He indicated that he'd learned his lesson the last time Bella and I were there.

I was exhausted, so I complied with his request. Not on the couch. In Bella's bed. I didn't fall out once. That actually made me miss her more.

I woke up on my own at five since my body thought it was eight. I was making coffee when Charlie came down. "Oh good you're up. The earlier we get out there, the better."

And I spent the morning with my hopefully soon to be father-in-law. We didn't talk much. I caught one fish. He caught six. I stuck myself with a hook at one point, but all in all, fishing wasn't bad. It was relaxing. I wasn't going to run out and buy my own pole, but I could see myself out here for years to come. Something he and I would do together when we came to visit.

I had an evening flight out of Seattle, which meant we had to wrap up by early afternoon so I get could get on the road. We were winding in the reels, and getting ready to head back when Charlie spoke up.

"You're a good man, Edward. Watching you two the last time you were here, I knew you loved her, and I know you'll take care of my little girl. And not just because of the money. Because that's the kind of man you are. So, yes, you have my approval."

It was quite a speech from him.

"Thank you. I'm relieved. I was getting a little nervous."

"Good," he laughed. "I knew the answer before you got here, but I thought it would be fun to let you sweat."

That was the last duck. Now I just needed the when, where, and how.

Puddle Splashing

"JW, I have to go, will you please cut to the chase!"

I glanced down at my watch. So help me god, if he didn't wrap up soon, I wasn't going to make it home in time.

"But Bella, we really need to pin this down."

"You have a week to decide! Look, I am going to be late for something, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

I slammed the phone down and grabbed my bag. I had forty five minutes, tops.

Edward had taken the red eye home last night. He'd stopped at the apartment after I left for work to take a shower. Then he was off to the office for a few meetings that he couldn't miss. I called Emmett and had him check Edward's schedule. He would be tied up until 4:30 and then would most likely head home.

If there was one thing that was predictable about Edward, it was that everything ran like clockwork. Military time didn't have anything on him. I was a bit more laid back, and well, let's just say that my laissez faire attitude might have sparked one or two disagreements since I had moved in.

Fortunately, there was making up. Which was always a good thing.

I looked at my watch as the elevator descended. It was 4 now.

There was no time to lose, so I grabbed a cab. Normally, I would have walked or called Demetri, but I needed every minute.

The doorman greeted me as I flew through the door.

"He's not back yet, Miss Swan."

"I figured as much. I'm planning a little surprise; would you mind calling up as soon as he hits the elevator?"

"Will do. I'm sure you're glad to have him home," he called after me.

I fidgeted with the strap of my backpack as the elevator rose through the building, amazed at what I was about to do. The butterflies were going crazy. It was ridiculous to be so wound up; I was surprising my boyfriend, who I happened to live with. It's not like that first weekend I stayed here and had no clue what to expect...

But in a way it was similar, because I definitely knew what I wanted.

As soon as the elevator doors opened, I took off like a shot down the hallway and unlocked the apartment door. 4:25. Better get moving.

I dropped my backpack in the office and ran into our bedroom to grab what I needed. I'd hardly gotten changed when the phone rang.

"Yes?"

"He just ran into the elevator, Miss Swan."

"Thank you!" I hung up the phone. "Fuck!"

Where were they? I had torn apart our closet. They weren't there.

The hall closet. They had to be.

I ran down the hallway, digging through ski boots, running shoes, and baseball gloves. There they were.

I pulled on my wellies and scrambled into the kitchen as I heard the key in the lock. Crap, I was trapped.

I looked around in a panic...what to do, what to do. My eyes scanned the room, and then it hit me. Even better than my original plan. I climbed up onto the counter.

Just in time. The door squeaked open, and I heard his footsteps come down the hallway.

Three days of no Edward was way too long for me. And I was going to do something about it.

"Hey," I called out, trying to sound innocent. "I just got home. Want some wine?"

I heard Edward drop his keys on the coffee table, and make his way into the kitchen. Taking one last long breath,

I leaned back on my hands, my crossed leg swinging idly as if I didn't have a care in the world.

"I'm surprised you're home, I was going to..." He stopped short.

"Hi."

I can only imagine his surprise to find me sitting on the counter in my wellies and his shirt. It probably matched my surprise at the sweaty Dartmouth t-shirt, shorts and running shoes.

"Thought I'd throw you a welcome home party," I replied innocently. I couldn't pull my eyes away from his chest. He knew it too, damn arrogant grin.

"Funny, I had the same intent." He was across the room in two seconds flat.

"You are supposed to make me want to stay. This is going to encourage me to travel more." Edward pushed my knees apart as he ran his hand up the inside of my thigh.

"I can go change into something else..."

"The hell you will," he growled as he grabbed the placket and yanked open my shirt. His shirt. Well, it was semantics. And a few button holes might have just ripped, ending its useful life anyway.

"Holy hell, Bella, you look so amazing like this." I moved to wrap my arms around his neck, but he pushed me gently back. Before I could say anything, his head dropped, and he began to suck and kiss his way down my body.

I had just intended to give him a visual. We'd joked about his wellie fantasy for so long; I'd just assumed that he'd end up tossing me over his shoulder and taking me to bed. But the logistics of a kitchen counter happened to work out better than I'd ever considered.

But it was really hard to think logistics when you are all but naked on a marble slab with your fully clothed boyfriend in a sweaty t-shirt kissing his way up your leg.

"God I missed you," Edward mumbled. "You don't want to know how many cold showers I had to take. So consider this payback."

"Payback is going to...unhhh" I moaned in reaction as a finger slipped into me. Oh god it should be considered illegal what he could do with his hands. I might have squeaked a tiny bit when his mouth joined in.

"What was that, Bella?" He continued to manipulate my body, stroking, licking, teasing, and pinching. How the hell had I survived three days?

His free hand slipped around to the small of my back, scooting me forward to the edge of the counter as I arched into him, losing myself to the ripples that shot through my body. A bomb could have gone off, I was absolutely oblivious to anything but Edward. It didn't matter how many or how often, it was always this way with us.

"Damn, that was just..." I struggled for words as I came back down. I was supposed to be giving him a welcome home surprise, not getting one in return.

Edward kissed the inside of my thigh and chuckled. "Now you know what I really wanted to do to you when you sat down on the counter in my shirt last February. Although you didn't curse like a sailor then. Do I bring something out in you, Miss Swan?"

"Like I know what my name is." I grabbed the edge of the counter to steady myself as I sat up. Edward stood, bring us to eye level. I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling him forward so that I could kiss him, and ran my tongue along his lower lip. I heard him chuckle.

"Your knees have to be killing you after kneeling on the kitchen floor. But I am so not even close to being done with you yet, Cullen. I think we need to move this into the bedroom."

"Why not right here?" That wicked smile that I loved was in full force. "Not like you haven't thought about it."

"What's gotten into you?"

"More like what would I like to get into?" He pulled me forward, grabbing my ankles to pull my legs around him. He groaned. "Yeah, that was a year in the making."

We kissed frantically as I fumbled with the draw string on his shorts, laughing as he struggled to shake them off.

Neither of us tried to get him out of the t-shirt. No way was that coming off.

I didn't know what got into Edward. The time away, the wellies and his dress shirt, the kitchen counter, I really didn't care. The joking and playing quickly fell away, and the only sounds in the kitchen came in the way of gasps and moans, punctuated at the end by a growl and declaration from Edward, and a colorful metaphor or two from me.

We leaned into each other, Edward's arms wrapped tightly around my waist, head buried in my shoulder.

"That was..."he struggled for words.

"I believe the term you used was fucking incredible, Cullen. *Who* curses like a sailor?"

He chuckled and kissed my neck. "You are a bad influence, Bella."

It was a weak argument, and he knew it.

"You wouldn't have me any other way."

"Well, since you are the bad influence with the dirty mouth, I guess we should get you in the shower, shouldn't we?"

I laughed at him, like I didn't see that coming a mile away.

"You are totally transparent," I sing songed at him.

Edward grinned at me. "Are you complaining?"

"Not on your life."

"Well, since we are being honest about all the things I wanted to do that first weekend..." He smiled sheepishly at me as he carried me towards the bathroom. "How do you feel about keeping those boots on?"

0-2 Count

That place in my not quite stomach still flipped or waved or knotted whenever I was around her. And it was doing some kind of dance after fulfilling my earliest fantasy of Bella. It was more than the image in front of me. It was the memory of how far we'd come, from seeing those rain boots in her apartment before spending an afternoon making out like teenagers, to waiting for her to come out of my shower after telling me she loved me, to her wearing that damn shirt out of the bathroom, everything that had been a part of our initial physical connection had re-emerged. It was intense.

I came within a split second of proposing to her with her rain boots still on.

I thought better of it. Not exactly the kind of engagement story you could pass on for generations.

A few weeks and I still hadn't popped the question. I was getting anxious. Excited. And completely exacerbated. I caught myself staring at Bella's left hand on occasion, imagining what it would look like with the ring in place. When Jasper told me about the final wedding details, I couldn't help wonder what kind of wedding Bella would want. I'd been carrying the ring with me for some time, hoping that inspiration would strike at some opportune moment. But it never had. I wondered if it ever would.

So, I got a good night's sleep, woke up the next day, and decided that was it, damn it. I was going to make this happen. I called Bella's favorite restaurant and set some things in motion for that evening. It wouldn't be the world's most creative proposal, but hopefully, she'd see it as sweet, and personal.

I took off an hour early. I went home to shower. I had a glass of wine ready when she walked in the door. I was about to tell her where we were going for dinner, but she let out a yell and slammed the door.

"One of my writer's is going to drive me off the deep end. She just won't listen to me. I honestly think she's insane, but she took over my entire afternoon, and nothing was accomplished."

She took the wine, kicked off her shoes and headed for the couch. I walked over and sat down next to her as she continued to rant. After a few minutes she finally calmed down.

"Thanks for letting me vent. How did you know I needed this?" she asked holding up her wine glass.

"Lucky guess," I said with a smile. "Would you like to change and head out to Aureole?"

"Not really. Can we just order in? Or even make PB&J? I'm beat."

I grabbed her glass to re-fill it, taking a deep breath when I walked away. "Sure, staying in sounds good."

When she went to the bedroom to change into sweats, I called the restaurant to cancel everything.

Once the disappointment wore off, I decided it was a blessing in disguise. The restaurant idea was too clichéd anyway.

A couple of days later, I came up with a new plan. I finagled a luxury suite at Yankee stadium. I told Bella a group of us were getting together, but we'd really have the place to ourselves. I was proud of this idea. Baseball had been an ongoing theme in our relationship. I thought this would give her a story that even her dad would enjoy hearing.

She called me a half hour before we were supposed to leave. I'd been pacing our apartment, trying to wear off my nervous energy.

"Hey, you'll have to go without me," she sighed into the phone. "Major crisis mode here."

"But," I choked. I really had no idea what to say. "Are you sure you can't get out of it? Even if it you come late?"

"I have no idea when I'm going to get out of here. You don't want to wait around for me. Besides, I wouldn't be much fun anyway. You go. Have a good time. Just don't ogle the players without me." She laughed.

I feigned a chuckle.

Shit!

I felt justified in the profane indulgence. I might even deserve a second.

Fuck!

I didn't feel any better. I wasn't going to let the box go to waste though, so I walked downstairs, and I asked the doorman if he knew anyone who could use them. The guy almost kissed me.

I gave up for a while. I was all out of ideas. And disappointed. I decided just to take a break, and not try to force anything again.

To be honest, I was wallowing a little. And Bella started to notice. She took it the wrong way. She thought I was upset about all the hours she'd been working, and a couple of times she tried to assuage my perceived frustration by telling me the deadlines would soon pass.

I didn't really respond with anything other than smiles and nods. That was probably my mistake.

I must have been brooding a little too much because finally one morning while we were getting ready, she threw her toothbrush down in the bathroom.

"Is something going on, Edward? Because you can't possibly still be mad about my schedule."

"What do you mean?"

"You're walking around this place like you just lost your puppy or something."

"I haven't been that bad, have I?"

"Yes, and it's getting a little old."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I really didn't know."

"What's bothering you?"

"Maybe I just miss you." I was aware that it sounded too feminine. But she was kind of enough to wait for me to laugh first.

"Sap."

"Guilty."

"Would a walk to work make up for it? I can afford to get in a little late this morning."

"I'd like that."

Forty minutes later, we were standing in line at the coffee shop. We were both a little sweaty. Indian summer had brought record high temperatures to NY this September. It was already over 70 degrees before nine. There were too many people and not enough air conditioning. Bella fanned herself with her hand.

We instantly recognized the irony and began laughing. "Do you want to wait outside?" I offered.

"Bless you. You know where to find me," she said reaching up to give me a quick kiss on the cheek before she left.

I took the time in line to check my schedule for the day. I knew it was Wednesday, but I hadn't paid any attention to the date. Immediately after it registered, I whipped around to look for Bella, but she'd already exited the building. I stood in line grinning like an idiot. Thankfully, it moved quickly.

When I made it back outside, I handed her a mocha, and I took her hand as we walked away from the shop.

We'd been by the window here and there, but some days even when we walked to work, we didn't actually stop at Tiffany's anymore. Today was special. I led her there with purpose.

"Waxing nostalgic there Cullen?" Bella chided when I pulled her toward the sacred glass.

"I am, in fact. Do you know what today is?"

"Wednesday?"

"Very funny. It was a year ago today that I first saw you."

She looked at me expressionless. Then she glanced back toward the coffee shop and back to me. "And we just happened to end up here?"

"Yes."

"That's . . . wow . . . I don't know what that is."

"I'd say fate."

"It would have been fate, if I had my wellies on."

"Technicality."

We laughed, but I felt pressure building.

"Still happy with the way things turned out?" she asked.

"Absolutely," I said, and then I paused trying to form the words. She interrupted my silent planning.

"Because I know it hasn't been easy lately, but we had to know that it wasn't always going to be Tiffany's

windows and romance didn't we?"

"But it's still about the pop tarts right?"

"Edward, I think it's been nice to get into the day to day routine. It's been comfortable. Especially after everything . . ."

I stopped her. "I think you missed the point. Don't you remember your metaphor? Weren't pop tarts about the goodness inside? And the long shelf life?"

She exhaled and nodded. "They last forever."

"Like us."

"I'd like that. Of course, there will be months like this when I'm just so bus . . ."

I had to interrupt her again. "Bella, please be quiet. I'm trying to propose."

"Oh," she exclaimed with wide eyes, and then she shut her mouth.

"You've already thwarted me twice, and I won't let it happen again. As we are standing on one of the most famous streets in the world with about a million people passing us right now, I am not down on one knee, which may be why you are confused."

I saw a slight smile creep out of the corner of her mouth.

"I had a speech prepared . . . twice, but I just looked into your eyes, and I've lost all coherent thought. All I see is forever."

I took a deep breath. And I cut to the chase.

"Isabella Swan, will you marry me?"

Where it all Started

And in the end, it really was that simple.

He slipped a hand into his pocket, and pulled out a ring. I was still registering his comment about thwarting him twice, and didn't expect him to literally propose.

"You are really starting to make me nervous. Can you please say something?" Edward asked. I could see the apprehension in his eyes. He thought my lack of response was negative. It was anything but.

What do you say in a situation like that? 'Yes' didn't seem like enough. 'Fuck yeah!' was really not appropriate.

So I went with what always worked. I grabbed his tie and pulled him down so I could kiss him. Who cares if the world was watching? Let them.

We probably drew a number of stares, making out in front of one of the most famous windows in the world. We finally broke apart, laughing when a little girl said 'Mommy, why is that man eating that lady's face?'

Edward held the ring up, the sun sparking and refracting off of the diamond. "So do you want this thing or not?"

I pretended to take a swipe at him. He caught my wrist and leveled it out. "Stop shaking. I don't want to drop it."

Pulling in a long breath, I willed my hand to be still. It was pretty much a lost cause, but Edward managed to get it on my ring finger.

"Much better. I don't think I would have lived it down if that went down the gutter."

"What, you think Tiffany's will chastise you?" I held my hand out, examining the ring. It was simple, a large, emerald cut diamond in a classic, filigreed setting.

"You want to tell Carlisle Cullen that you lost his mother's ring? Because I sure don't."

If my hand wasn't shaking, it sure as heck was now.

"This was your grandmother's?"

Edward broke into a huge grin, his eyes sparkling like a little kid. "Yeah, Dad had Mom pull it out when I told them what I was planning. Apparently Emmett never considered it. Rosalie is more of an 'I want my own' type of girl. But given everything we've been through, and all the conversations we've had about how important family is, he thought it was perfect for you. If I'd have said no, he might have insisted on giving it to you himself."

There are some things in life that happen for a reason. The bad things are often necessary to make you appreciate the good. Sadness makes you realize how truly happy you can be. And loneliness makes big loving families all that much more wonderful.

Edward's family was whole again. Mine was a little larger. Both were infinitely happier.

And now it was time to start thinking about making one of our own.

Edward slipped his arm around me and led me away from the window. "So who are we calling first? My family or yours? They've both been waiting for weeks."

"My dad knew about this?"

Edward's cheeks colored a bit and he smiled sheepishly. "Yeah, um...do you remember that trip I took a few weeks ago?"

I should have known he'd have all his ducks in a row. It also explained a bit more about how he reacted when finding me in my wellies. Who knew?

"It's a little early in Washington. I guess that means you'd better call your parents."

With one arm wrapped around me, he pulled his phone out and hit a number. We walked slowly, letting the hustle and bustle of Manhattan pass around us.

"Hey Mom, tell Emmett to keep his day job, he'll never make it in Vegas..." Edward began. The perma grin he had been wearing grew a bit more.

"Yep. Finally. Third time is a charm, right?" He paused, listening to her talk. "I don't know, hang on."

He shifted the phone away from his mouth. "Can you play hooky this morning? Mom wants us to come by the house. Dad hasn't left for work yet, and he's insisting we come by. Apparently he's had a bottle of champagne chilling for weeks and is insisting it be opened now."

I did have a lot going on at work, but I'd screwed things up too many times to say no now. Meetings would keep. Life wouldn't.

"Nothing that can't be re-arranged. Just promise to cut me off at two glasses, okay? You know how I get when I drink."

He squeezed my shoulder before stepping out to the curb to flag a cab. "That's what I was counting on."

"You are a bad influence, Cullen."

He turned and gave me a radiant grin. "You complaining, Swan, soon to be Cullen?"

"Nope. Not at all."

One year ago today, I woke up optimistic, hopeful for a beautiful fall day with not a cloud in the sky. One simple choice that day changed the trajectory of my life, as well as others, in ways that I never would have imagined. Call it fate, call it luck. It doesn't really matter.

All that matters is that I gave into a childish instinct and wore my wellies that day. Would all this have happened had I not stood out in the crowd? I don't know. I like to think yes, but at heart, I'm a hopeless romantic that way.

Let Hollywood have their grand gestures, their moments that make you sigh and say 'I wish.' Not me.

I don't need to wish anymore. I'm going to marry Edward Cullen.

~*~

EPILOGUE

THE TRUTH SHALL SET YOU FREE

While things did die down, I quickly came to the realization that I'd never be anonymous again. Between the media frenzy we'd lived through and the simple attention of 'being with the Cullens,' I would always be the one to stand out in the crowd.

Work tried to take advantage of it a few times. They actually attempted to get me to do some joint TV interviews with Jasper to promote his new book, but I drew the line. I was a behind the scenes type of girl. These days I was perfectly happy if the biggest mention was a photo from some charity event.

Renee called about a week after a photo of me ran in Vanity Fair. We'd been at some event raising funds for cancer, where Tanya and I had been captured laughing over glasses of champagne.

"Look at my little girl, hanging out with Russian royalty! Can I expect a Faberge egg for Christmas?" She cooed over the phone.

"What do you want, Renee?" I had given up trying to be civil. It was only a matter of time before she got to the point and made her request.

"I just want some quality time with my little girl! I was thinking about coming to New York this weekend."

Before I could respond, the phone was pulled out of my hand. I looked up just as Edward dropped his briefcase on the floor, and stuffed his free hand in his trench coat pocket, a look of fierce determination on his face.

"Renee, my name is Edward Cullen, and I'd like you to leave my fiancée alone."

I was so surprised to see him that it took a moment to register the shock of his actions.

Edward was quiet, listening to whatever line Renee fed him. I could help but fidget uncomfortably; not only was I worried about her behavior; I was worried at how it would reflect on me.

"Actually, we'll be gone. We have plans this weekend," he answered coolly. I'd heard him use this tone before, and I actually had a momentary flash of empathy for Renee.

She didn't stand a chance.

"No, the only Swan that is getting married in the near future is Bella's father. Shall I pass on your best wishes?"

My eyes must have gone wide; Edward winked and smiled, holding up an index finger to request patience.

"Renee, I am going to make this offer once. I want you to leave us alone, for good. In exchange, I am willing to wire you a ridiculously large sum of money. All I require is that you sign a document agreeing to never speak to the press or other people."

I couldn't make out the words, but the sounds from the phone became louder.

"It doesn't matter how much, it's more than enough. I will have it wired to your bank." He hesitated, listening to whatever she was spewing. "Yes, I know where to have it wired. I know a lot of other things too, Renee. I think I'll send along a small sample so you realize just how serious I am. If you go back on your promise, not only will I have proof of our agreement via legal documents and wire transfer records, I'll have other information that I am sure you don't want to get out. Things that will interest the papers and the IRS."

The news that Edward had compiled information shouldn't have surprised me. We'd both been through so much thanks to Jane, that it only made sense.

But the fact that he didn't tell me worried me. How bad was the information he found?

"Do you want it or not Renee?"

Edward waited for a moment before cutting her off. "I'll take that as a yes. The money will be transferred in the morning. You'll also receive a package with just of taste of what I have. If you *ever* think of showing up here or talking to anyone about Bella, everyone will learn what a wonderful mother you are. Goodbye Renee."

Edward hung up and sat the phone down on the table.

I sat quietly, waiting, afraid of what he might say. We'd been through so much, but this felt like a tipping point so to speak.

"You okay? You look kind of pale." He ran his hand along my cheek, smiling.

"I don't know, am I okay?"

Edward sat down on the couch, not taking his coat off. "I'm sorry about that. After everything happened with Jane, my dad and I talked for a long time, and I came to the realization that I needed to do everything I could to protect you and us. I asked Felix to do some digging around on Renee, just on the off chance that she decided to cause problems."

"Did he find bad stuff?" The question made me sound like I was five, not thirty.

"Do you really want to know?"

I bit my lip, thinking about the question. Did I really want to know? I'd always wondered, always suspected things, but did I want answers?

"Were they as bad as they sounded?"

"Let's just say that she won't be bugging us again."

I blew out a long breath, trying to process everything. I needed a few minutes alone to think before continuing with this conversation.

"Why don't you go change, then we can go grab some dinner. I forgot to order groceries, and there isn't much in the house."

Edward shook his head, mumbling something about organization, and gave me a quick peck on the cheek before heading to our bedroom.

As soon as he left to change clothes, I let myself out onto the terrace. Replaying the entire phone call in my mind, I couldn't help but feel a sense of loss. It was a piece of closure that we needed, but it still made me sad. I knew that holding out any hope for Renee was naïve, but I couldn't help but wish for what could have been.

"What are you doing out here? It's cold."

I looked back over my shoulder to see Edward standing in the doorway.

"Just decompressing and collecting my thoughts. My emotions are all over the place right now."

He walked over to stand behind me, pulling me in so that he could wrap his arms around me. "How do you feel?"

I took a long breath, watching as the lights began to pop on all over Manhattan. "Sad, but I know that it's for dumb reasons. I'll be okay."

Edward squeezed my shoulders. "It's for the best, you know."

"Yeah, I know. Doesn't mean it still doesn't sting a bit."

"So you don't have her. You've got a ton of other people who love you, and I'm at the front of that line. We'll make up for her not being her."

I smiled and leaned my head back against Edward's shoulder. It was time to put this behind us. There were other, more important things that we need to talk about.

"I had lunch with Tanya today. My guess is that Felix was too busy digging up info on my whack job mother to fill you in on current events." Tanya and I spent as much time together as we could. If I had a sister, I'd like to think she would have been like Tanya. "They closed on the apartment down the street."

"Another one living in sin before marriage? What will become of us all?"

I dropped an elbow in his ribs. "They are being more practical then we were. At least they waited a year. Besides, who said they were living in sin?"

"They bought a place together, and aren't married. I think that counts, Bella."

"Yeah, about that..." Tanya had confided in me about their plans last week, and had called today to give me the green light. "Still have a little bit of a rebel in you? Willing to face some family ire?"

"What are you up to?" I could hear the curiosity in Edward's voice. He might have grown up a lot, but the rebel would always be there. It was a perfect contrast to his type A nature, and made him ridiculously successful at work.

"I'm not up to anything. I'm just going to be a legal witness. I think Tanya and Felix are looking for one more, but they're worried that you've shed so much of your bad boy image that you won't risk pissing off the family."

Next thing I knew, my feet were out from under me, and I was being carried back into the apartment.

"You haven't seen bad boy. And I'm not running the company, so I can still afford to piss off a few people. "

He didn't mean it, the pissing off people thing. But he was legit about not caring what people said. The important ones would stand behind the decisions we made. That was all that mattered.

Changes

Dealing with Renee brought me the final level of calm I needed to put everything that happened behind me. Even when things started to die down, knowing she was out there kept me on edge. We would always be potential targets. I accepted that a long time ago, but I couldn't stand the thought that the attack would come from Bella's own mother.

My experience with Jane taught me that no one was a given where trust was concerned. I was much more cautious now, and everything I'd learned about Renee told me that she was not someone in whom I could afford to invest my trust. Bella let that investment ride for years, and there was never a return. Quite the opposite really.

I wasn't completely jaded though. I'd been blessed with friends and family who had never given me a reason to question their loyalty. Like Tanya. She deserved happiness more than anyone I knew, and she had found an amazing partner in Felix. He absolutely adored her.

Bella and I were both so proud to have been a part of their wedding. It was a simple exchange of vows, the same words couples said in ceremonies across the U.S. approximately 6200 times a day. I didn't normally want to hop on the bandwagon, but witnessing my two y closest friends enter into that commitment in the last year had only intensified my desire to say those words myself. It wouldn't matter how big or small the wedding. It wasn't about

the day; it was the intention behind the words.

Tanya and Felix's wedding couldn't get any smaller, any more private, but it didn't mean their marriage meant any less to them.

I knew there would be hell to pay from both her family and his for participating in their elopement. And I didn't have to wait long for that wrath.

"Mr. Cullen, do you have a moment? I have something I'd like to discuss."

"Yes, of course. Come on in."

Her tone was more formal than I was used to, and I sensed a hit of ire. I was nervous, as I had a hunch I knew what my assistant was coming to discuss. It wasn't going to be pretty.

I had a new assistant, of course. I had chosen not to hire from within the company pool though. I worked with temps for many months struggling to let anyone get too deeply invested in the position, or my personal information. It wore on me though; I needed someone I could trust, but I didn't know how I was going to do that. Jane had really done a number on me.

Jane sent letters to both Bella and me, apologizing. I read mine, and promptly threw it away. I think Bella kept hers. She was more touched by it than I had been, and it always amazed me how she could see the good in people who were capable of so much bad. But then, I suppose that was why she still talked to Renee.

As for me, I'd said my peace with Jane the day she left CI. On her way out the door, I reminded her that she was getting off exceptionally easy, and I offered her the same warning I'd given Jess years prior. I had to believe it would be enough to keep her out of our lives and to end her relationship with the press.

But it wasn't enough to make me eager to give someone else access to my files or my life for that matter.

One night not long after we got engaged, Bella encouraged me to let go of my resentment. We were on our way to some even for one of her authors.

"You look exhausted. Maybe Demetri should just take you home after he drops me off."

"It's okay. I'll be fine. There were several mix ups with my schedule today, and I found myself needing to be in several places at once. Took some doing to make everyone happy."

"Edward," she said with a tone that told me what was coming next. "You need someone permanent who can really help things stay on track."

"I know. I just haven't been happy with anyone they've sent."

She knew how bad it had been. Scheduling issues were the downfall of the latest temp. For some reason she kept overriding her entries into the outlook calendar. Before her I had been subjected to a string of glorious incompetence. Two were insufferable flirts. One apparently was so in "awe" of working for a "celebrity" that she clammed up every time she walked in the room.

Flirt number two was probably the worst. She dropped something *every* time she came into my office. Invariably, she would have to bend down to pick it up slowly. I took to turning my gaze out the window as I dismissed her so she could save herself the trouble. Maybe if she knew I wasn't looking she wouldn't put on the show.

My dad came into my office laughing one day. "Oh, I didn't know you got Vicki from the pool this time."

"You know her?"

"Yes, last year when Heidi was on vacation, I had the pleasure. She seems to enjoy picking things up off the floor doesn't she?"

"You too?" I must have looked incredulous. She had wiggled her ass for my father?

"I know it may surprise you, but some women claim gray hair makes a man more distinguished."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"Yes you did, but no matter. Has she spilled water on herself yet?"

"No, I don't think so."

But sure enough the next week, she dabbed purposefully at her breasts after an "accident." When she asked if she could take her top off and just hang out in my office while it dried, I decided that was the end of that assistant.

"What are you going to do? You can't keep doing this. It's been what? At least an assistant a month?"

The car rolled to a stop.

I didn't respond, knowing Demetri would be opening my door soon, but he sat frozen in the front seat. After a long pause, he turned around cautiously.

"Edward, this is completely out of line, but I just thought I'd put this out there. My aunt Irina was a jack of all trades kind of secretary for this small company out in Brooklyn for twenty years, but the company went belly up, and she's looking for a job. She's never been a corporate assistant, but she can do everything you need, and you'll never find anyone in my family who would say a bad word about you. Anyway, I know it sounds crazy, but I figured it was worth mentioning."

Bella smiled next to me and slapped me on the leg. Clearly, I had no choice in the matter.

"Why don't you bring me her resume on Monday, Demetri?"

I have no idea what I ever did without Irina. If I thought Jane was a good assistant, Irina was my savior. Beyond doing everything well, she also pushed me. She'd had a lot more control at her last job since the company was so small, so even though she knew nothing of mergers and takeovers, she let me bounce ideas and encouraged me to take risks.

I also tried to pick her brain about what I could do for Demetri. That man had the most unwavering loyalty of anyone, apart from Bella, I'd ever met. I wanted to give him a massive raise or a promotion, but Irina pulled me back.

"He'd never take it. He is an honest man and he loves his job as is. He doesn't want more responsibility, but he is also full of pride. You already pay him more than a driver would expect. Any more and it would feel like charity to him."

"What is he passionate about? He doesn't talk much about anything but his wife and kids."

"Well there you go. That's his passion. You may have noticed; we are a rather close lot."

Irina helped me gain access to the social security numbers of his three children. We both decided he'd never turn down college funds for them, and I hoped with that taken care of, he could use Christmas bonuses for vacations or something nice for his wife.

So, I was very dependant on Irina.

And now in repayment, I had served as a witness to her nephew's wedding. A wedding no one knew had happened. Until today.

She walked in with a very clear mission. She kept her eyes directly focused me. When she got to my desk, she picked up a file, walked around my desk, and whacked me firmly across the back of the head with it.

"Ouch."

"You deserved that. How could you let them elope like that?"

"Irina, it's what they wanted."

"Mr. Cullen, our family is very close. You should know all about that. What if you and Bella tried something like that? How would your family react?"

I actually shuddered at the thought.

"Exactly. Now, why would you think we would be any different?"

"All I knew was that a friend needed me, and she has always done exactly what I needed her to do. No questions asked. I simply afforded her the same courtesy." I smiled at her innocently, watching her soften a little. Then I went for the kill. I slid one corner of my mouth into a smile and winked.

"Oh you little shit. No wonder you are a master negotiator. I tell you. Well fine. I'll let you off the hook, but only because I know you still have to face Demetri."

She laughed heartily, and I braced myself for the onslaught of calls that were likely to come that day.

The Great American Dream

You are *sooo* going down." Emmett taunted me from across the line.

"In your dreams, you big oaf. I'm faster than you'll ever be."

"You better darn well hope so."

"Hike!" Edward called from behind me. I took off down the beach, looking over my shoulder for the streak of blue and orange. It went sailing over my head.

"You throw like a girl, Edward." Alice taunted from her spot on the blanket. Peter was curled up against her shoulder, sound asleep like only a six month old baby can be. It was still odd to see her with a baby, even after all

this time. Both she and Jasper had taken to parenthood like ducks to water. Edward and I were secretly betting on how long before they had another.

"No, your husband throws like a girl. I'm just rusty." Edward called back.

I picked up the Nerf ball and ran back to the huddle. It had been a concession after our first game of beach football. I may stink at throwing a football, but I can actually catch one. We got a little bit competitive the first time, and I ended up with a jammed finger from a Hail Mary pass. The Nerf ball replaced the pig skin after that.

We were playing three and three. Emmett, Jasper and Esme versus Carlisle, Edward and me. Rosalie and Alice cheered from the sidelines as Haley built sand castles. Between every play, Emmett would run to the sideline and let her bury his feet or plant a kiss on Rose's head. If I didn't love him so much I'd be grossed out by the gratuitous displays of affection.

Esme fell into step beside me as we walked back to the others. "I really don't know why you let him goad you like that, Bella. He really does need to be put in his place!"

I was about to respond, but a fleeting memory from an early conversation with Edward popped to the surface, providing a flash of inspiration.

"Esme, if I can get you the opening, will you cross enemy lines and take him down?"

"You mean tackle him?" Light danced in her eyes. It's amazing to think that the same woman who could wear couture Ralph Lauren would be just as at home playing football with her family.

"I was thinking more like knock him on his ass."

She grinned and rubbed her hands together in anticipation. "I am there. What do you have in mind?"

I looked over to see Emmett chasing Haley around the blanket, his basketball shorts flapping in the breeze. This would be way too easy.

"You'll know when you see it."

Shooting one last subtle look over my shoulder, I made my way over to where Carlisle and Edward. They stood close together, talking intently about something that appeared much more serious than football. They looked so similar in their khaki shorts and T shirts. Their coloring was night and day, but their body language and gestures were identical. It was funny to watch.

I dropped the football at Edward's feet and threw my arms around each of their shoulders.

"You know that old saying, if Momma ain't happy, nobody's happy?"

"What did you do?" Edward asked, an eyebrow raised in curiosity. He'd been waiting for the proverbial other shoe to drop since we flew back from Las Vegas earlier in the week. Irina and Demetri had both given him hell, but the Cullen camp had been suspiciously quiet.

"I haven't done anything yet, but when I do, it's going to make your mom ecstatic." I answered innocently.

"You are finally going to help her take my big brother down, aren't you?" I could already see the wheels turning in Edward's head.

"Yes, but I am going to need you to throw an interception. Think you can do that golden boy?"

Carlisle laughed and poked Edward in the shoulder. "She's got your number. Although the way you are throwing..."

"Watch it old man, I can smoke you any day!" Edward shot back good naturedly.

I threw my hands up in mock consternation, "Enough with the testosterone! Just throw the ball over my head, okay?"

We went back to our formation. Carlisle over center, Edward at quarterback, me on the line facing Emmett.

"Think you are going to beat me again little girl?" Emmett taunted.

"You are going down Emmy Poo," I taunted as I ducked low, ready to take off past him.

"Don't call me Emmy Poo you Ugly Duckling." We'd given each other nicknames after Haley got the book *The Ugly Duckling*. While mine annoyed me to no end, his drove him crazy.

"Hike!" I heard Edward call. I took off down the beach, but slower this time, waiting for the ball.

It sailed perfectly over my head. Emmett had passed me, and jumped to catch the football. The moment he was airborne with arms outstretched, I tugged on the bottom of his basketball shorts. Just like I'd suspected, they were loose and came down without a problem. Emmett dropped the ball and immediately adjusted trying to grab his shorts.

Esme had all the opening she needed. Before he knew it, Emmett was flat on his back, and his mother was dancing around like a fool.

"Nice tan line, baby!" Rose called from the sideline, laughing so hard she actually snorted.

"You planned that!" Emmett sputtered; his face a livid red. "My own mother collaborated with the enemy! That is so wrong!"

"You deserved it! You've been talking smack since..." I was airborne before I could finish my teasing. My wrists and ankles held securely by Jasper and Carlisle as they carried me towards the water.

"Put me down!" I screeched, struggling and trying to get away. "EDWARD!"

It was useless. They gave me a good toss, and I landed ass first in the cold Atlantic Ocean.

"It's a good thing you aren't wearing a white T-shirt," Edward called from the beach.

I stood up and rang out my t-shirt before stalking towards him.

"That's a nice shirt, Edward. I really like the color."

He looked down at the front of the grey University of Iowa T shirt that I'd bought him for Valentine's Day.

I kicked water at him before he could look up. "Wet, sweat, it's all relative."

He looked me up and down, a devious smile on his face.

"You're the one that's soaking wet. Didn't happen to pack those wellies, did you?"

"You are a perv, Cullen."

"You love it, Swan."

"No, I just love you." I don't think I'd ever get tired of saying that.

"You better, we're supposed to be getting married in a two and a half months."

"Jeez, Edward, counting the days?" He grabbed me by the hand, pulling me into a hug.

"I have to admit, I did have passing thoughts when we were in Vegas..."

I laughed and hugged him back. "Then you really would have been mud. I think that would have screwed up all your family's well laid plans."

The Unexpected

A few days after the great Emmett tackle, my father called to ask if we could stay in for lunch. He had something to discuss with me.

These days, lunch wasn't an unusual occurrence. We typically met about once a week. Mostly, we discussed books and business. There were two things I appreciated most about those lunches. First, it felt good to be the one for whom he turned his phone off. To know that he valued my time. Second, we'd begun a new tradition. A quote war of sorts. We each picked a quote and had to weave it into the conversation. The other had to identify it and the author by the time my dad turned his phone back on. Loser bought the next lunch at the place the winner chose. Thanks to Bella, I was holding my own, and we were about even, but a very well played Hemmingway meant I had to open up my wallet this week.

The fact that we weren't going out had me a little nervous despite the fact that things were going so well. I was assuming was I would catch flack for letting Tanya and Felix elope. The Romanov's were apparently none too pleased.

Heidi waved me right in, indicating that he was expecting me.

My father was typing at his desk. "Just finishing this up. Help yourself."

The take out was sitting on the conference table, still in the bag. I walked over and began to take out containers.

"It smells delicious," he said as he took a seat at the table. "Thank you for agreeing to meet here instead of going out. I have something I'd like to discuss with you, and I preferred to do it privately."

"I'm not going to like this, am I?" I asked mirroring a question he'd once asked me.

"Honestly, Edward, I have no idea what your reaction is going to be." He nodded toward the food. "Would you like to eat first?"

"Not really, I'm feeling a little anxious."

He smiled. "Fair enough." He leaned back into his chair. "Your mother and I have decided it's time for me to reduce my load, so to speak. I'm planning to step down as CEO by the end of the year. I'm going to stay on as chair of the board though."

I was shocked. I'd had no indication that he was thinking of scaling back. "Why now?"

"The timing feels right. We've made some very smart decisions, and the company is in better shape than most right now. As you know, your mother has just finished renovating the kitchen at the beach house, and we would like to make that a more primary residence. Certainly, having the right people running things here makes the decision easier."

"That's great. Really. You deserve it, Dad. And Emmett's so well respected already. You're leaving things in good hands."

"Ah well, that's the thing I wanted to talk to you about." He sat up again, and leaned forward, resting his hands on the table. "Emmett is not interested."

I shook my head lightly. "But wasn't that always the plan?"

"I don't think so. Not for him. He loves the position he's in, and has no desire to be burdened with the kind of responsibility that comes with the CEO title. I've always suspected he didn't really want the reigns, so I wasn't entirely surprised. Besides, he was uncomfortable taking on such a role with Haley so young."

I knew how important his family was to him, so in truth, that response made sense.

"Wow, I had no idea. So, what are you going to do?"

"Edward, I'm asking you. And please know that you are not being considered as a 'second choice' here. Even Emmett said I should have asked you first, but I felt like it was his to refuse."

I can't imagine the look of shock on my face.

"But, I haven't been back very long. There must be a V.P. who would be more qualified."

Everything in my father's demeanor shifted in response.

"There will always be a Cullen at the head of C.I., Edward. If neither of my sons is interested, then I will be the helm until I take my last breath."

I nodded, but the pressure was heavy. I feared it would crush me.

"You really think I could do it?"

"I have no doubt."

"It's a lot to take in. I'm completely floored."

"You don't need to let me know today. Of course, I understand that you cannot make a decision without discussing this with Bella first. I realize the timing may have implications for you, but it's right for the company,

and ultimately perhaps for you. Making this transition before you start a family would allow you find your footing before adding another layer of stress. If you decide to take it, I would want to work with you to get everything on target for the end of the year transition." He paused allowing me begin processing. "Now, I'm famished; we can talk more about this after we eat."

I don't think I touched my lunch. Hadn't I just joked with Bella that I wasn't the one running the company? Now I would be? It would change the course of so many things.

For the rest of the afternoon, my head was spinning, trying to figure out how I felt about it. And how I was going to approach Bella. We had plans. The wedding, honeymoon, babies. The whole shebang. Of course, if she didn't want me to do it, I would understand, and I would have to decline even though it would disappoint my father. And . . . well . . . me.

I waited until after dinner. We were lounging on the couch. I should have known her response would be nothing but supportive.

"Oh my god, why didn't you say something sooner? Of course you're going to take it!"

"But it's not that simple." I'd been so busy preparing myself to justify and rationalize why it would be okay to take the job; I hadn't acknowledged how I really felt.

"Yes, it is. You want it right?"

There was no point arguing with that. The minute the question had been posted my heart raced in anticipation. This was the one thing I never thought I could have. I'd always envisioned Emmett in that role.

But it was interesting timing. Had I not met Bella, I wouldn't have had to consider anything. I would have said yes before he finished the sentence. On the other hand, if I hadn't met Bella, my father never would have handed the company over to me.

"I do."

"Hmm, I liked your phrasing of that," she teased.

I chuckled. "Well that's actually part of my hesitation. If I do this, we'd have to put things on hold. Like a wedding," I said. I reached over and placed my hand on her stomach. ". . . and kids. I don't think it would be wise to take on a marriage and company in the same year."

"I know, but it's not forever. Didn't your father raise a family while running the company?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"And who said we were in a hurry anyway? Do you think I'm going anywhere if we have to wait a year or two?"

"No, but ... "

"But nothing. We'll have a wedding and babies; we'll just wait a year or two, or whatever feels right. There's always Vegas right? What happened to your sense of spontaneity, Mr. Tiffany's window? We don't have to plan every detail of our lives. Let our friends have all the babies and weddings. Maybe that'll it make it boring to everyone by the time we finally do it, and there will be less of a fuss."

I inhaled. And smiled. "So, I guess that means I'm going to be CEO of CI."

She lunged at me from her side of the couch and threw her arms around my neck. It wouldn't take much to imagine what came next. We were on the couch after all. I've always been fond of Bella on a couch.

It was some time before we were able to speak again.

"I'm so proud of you," she said.

"I'm still in shock. I don't feel ready."

"You can't ever be ready for something like this. But what do you have if you don't try?"

The answer was simple. You had beautiful girl looking at a window. And a sad boy looking at the girl looking at the window. Never meeting.

I put my hand on her face and let my thumb trace her cheek bone. She leaned into it, and my stomach or chest or wherever did some kind of flip or turn.

Who cared where the space was or what words you used to describe it? It came down to one thing.

Love.

The blip isn't there every day now. It comes and goes as relationships grow. It's easy to think that means the love has faded, or the magic has subsided. But I don't see it that way. The butterflies are about the anticipation of something good, not the fulfillment of it.

If all you had was the shiny package every day, you'd never get to the pastry inside. As pretty as the package is, I like what's in the middle in even more.

~*~

The End

~*~

Breakfast at Tiffany's Outtakes

Outtake 1

**Carlisle & Esme - Southampton
Saturday, February 22 - Carlisle**

"Carlisle?"

Esme had entered my home office so quietly I didn't notice she was there. I put the papers I was working on back in a file, and she sat down across from me. She crossed her legs, and put her hands on her knee. Then she looked at me and smiled. After all these years, that smile still brought me joy every single day. I made it a point in our years never to be without it for long.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"I just got off the phone with Edward." She started running her hands up and down her leg nervously.

"And?"

"Apparently, there are some pictures of him and his new girlfriend. He's gained the attention of the paparazzi again."

"Why am I not surprised?" I clutched the pen I was holding a little tighter.

"I know. But he is asking to bring her here tomorrow so we can meet her."

I looked at her and raised an eyebrow. "That's . . . interesting."

"I think he really cares for her."

"What do we know about her?" Edward's history with women did not lend itself to believing Esme's statement.

"Honestly, nothing."

"Do we have a name?"

"No, but he indicated she wasn't from around here, and perhaps not exactly like us." She was trying to politely indicate social class. I sighed. Not again.

"You think she's in it for something?"

"I hope not, Carlisle, but you haven't been around Edward much since he's been back. He seems so . . . different. I see such a sadness in his eyes, and he hasn't been dating. It would be easy for someone to take advantage of him right now." She had been fretting over him for some time. His exile had been self imposed, but I did not offer him fanfare in his return. He needed to earn my respect once again. He had not handled the events that led to his leaving like the man I thought him capable of being. He ran. He was still running.

Esme and I snuck out to Southampton late on Saturday so Edward and his girlfriend could meet us there. It was safer on many levels, but I did not like being forced to leave the city on his behalf.

On Sunday morning I sat in my library looking over her background check. I only had time for the criminal report. The one benefit to the tabloids was that they dug up her name before I did. She was a law abiding citizen at least. Given that her father was a police officer, I hoped she wouldn't be up to anything illegal, but one always had to be careful with motivations in situations like this.

I didn't know what to think about Edward anymore. I loved my son, but he made such extremely bad decisions. His constant poor judgment got under my skin, more than with anyone I'd ever known. My wife claims I see too much of myself in him. I don't know.

He always had so much potential. He was incredibly bright. People adored him. It wasn't to say Emmett wasn't a smart boy. It's just that Edward always struck me as . . . exceptional. He excelled in everything he did; Things just seemed to come naturally to him. But he never thought ahead when it came to his personal life. And somewhere along the line, it seemed his whole purpose in life was to spite me.

I found myself increasingly frustrated with his behaviors. As he got older, I needed to distance myself from him a bit for fear that I would lose my temper. Little things he did would have me on edge. He could be such a leader, but he tended to go along with the pack. Tell him to jump into a frozen lake, and I swear he'd find the deepest spot on the coldest day. He had to know better. All those hours we spent reading together. He was so perceptive, intuitive. I couldn't figure out why that hadn't translated to his own actions.

My father had been such a bastard. He yelled at my mother and me constantly. He fostered extraordinarily high expectations for me. It was literally impossible to meet his demands. But I never stopped trying. Any small misstep would mean a verbal lashing. And occasionally, a physical one. I wouldn't call them beatings; He pushed me against a wall or backhanded my face on occasion.

I vowed to do better with my own children. I would never lay a hand on them, and I would make an effort not to raise my voice. It was hard to avoid the high expectations when your children are so gifted though. And over time, it seemed unlike me, Edward did stop trying. So I avoided conflict with him for years, preferring to keep my expectations and my disappointments quiet. I convinced myself it had to be better to avoid than to actively engage him. Eventually, it meant that we spoke very little. If I couldn't talk to him without getting angry, I decided not talking at all was for the better. I still wanted to believe I made the right decision.

But I missed my son. I looked around the library, and so many memories lived between these walls. I remembered mornings when I could hear him playing piano, and I would just look out over the beach. It always calmed me. These days, I often sat here on weekends wondering if he'd read anything good lately.

Emmett and Esme were constantly telling me he'd changed, and I wanted to believe it. I was pleased he'd come home, come back to the company, but I was still trying to figure out his motivations.

Even as I sat facing him and his girlfriend, I couldn't help but wonder what his angle was. She was different. I'd give him that. Her appearance was inviting. Her conversation engaging. But I worried she was a pawn, a way for him to goad me once again.

I was hard on him, but I needed to test these waters. For the girl's sake as well as the family's.

But it hadn't escaped me. She was an editor. They went to the library first. My library. I wondered if his best memories of me were lounging on the couch waiting for him.

Sunday, February 23 - Esme

Pretty faces.

Pedigrees.

Shallow.

We had seen it all.

With Emmett and especially with Edward.

Carlisle liked to joke that I set an unrealistic expectation for my boys. That a woman could be smart and beautiful. He was always teasing me that no one would ever live up to 'mommy' where my boys were concerned.

When they were little, it was funny.

When they were in junior high, it had been a running joke.

And then the joking stopped.

Emmett met Rosalie in college. He told me that 'Dad was right.'

It had been almost ten years since Emmett brought Rosalie home. They fell madly in love, got married, and had a beautiful daughter.

I held out hopes that Edward would find the same thing. Yet he seemed to flail further and further out of control. Pretty faces with no mind. The type of girl that was only around for one thing.

We bit our tongues at the parade of women. Through the publicity. It broke my heart to see him leave for Los Angeles the way he did. I don't know who I hurt more for; my son or my husband. In some ways, there were so different. In other ways, they were the same.

Both so brilliant. Both so proud. Both so stubborn.

And five years later, here I am. Sitting at my dining room table, trying to make sense of the afternoon. Another in a long parade of girls. But this one, well...

When Edward had called to explain what was going on, I picked up on the difference in his tone, in his words. I am his mother. It's what I do.

But to watch him with this girl, who was so incredibly unlike anyone he had ever brought home gave me pause. She was pretty, yet not stunning like the women in his past. She was smart. She had a dry sense of humor. And fire. She would give Rosalie a run for her money.

And then there was Edward. I would never call him selfish, but he had never gone out of his way to be overly aware of others. Yet with this girl, his body language was night and day. He never let go of her hand. The other women he had brought here had not been touched in front of us. I know very well what he did out of our sight, although he would deny it. But this girl...

Any hesitation, any doubts I had were shattered when I heard him playing for her. I stood in the doorway to the music room, watching them. He looked at peace, relaxed. A smile on his face that I hadn't seen in years.

She looked rapt. Her expression one of awe. It wasn't because of the surroundings, the trappings of wealth. It was because of my beautiful, brilliant son.

She could see the good in him. The potential.

Please God let her be real. Let her be worthy of his love. He was in love with her. That much was apparent. We both saw it. It gave me hope. I could tell that Carlisle was worried. It was apparent in the way that he quizzed her. He may have ridiculously high expectations for Edward, but he tried to protect him more than any other.

I heard Carlisle come into the dining room. James followed with a fresh glass of scotch. He looked tired. I wondered if something happened in the library with Edward. But I knew Carlisle well enough to let him tell me what it was in his own time.

"Well? What is the assessment?"

I took a long breath, collecting my thoughts.

"He looks at her the way you look at me." He winced a bit at my comment. It was the opposite of a conversation we had six years ago when I questioned how Edward felt about Tanya.

"Is this real? This isn't another one of his dalliances?"

"Carlisle, didn't you see the way he tried to protect her? He let her stand her ground, but he was there, ready to step in the minute she stumbled. He had faith that she could handle us, but was ready to save her if she needed it."

He took a long drink of his scotch. "Did you find her job ironic?"

I smiled. I knew all three of my boys so well.

"Why else do you think I mentioned the Bronte?" I paused, watching his face, "She reminds me a lot of you. She might not appear like much at first, but I wouldn't cross her. She put up a pretty valiant stand when I pushed her. I think she loves him."

Carlisle hesitated for a long moment. "That is all well and good, but does he love her? I can't stand the thought of an innocent girl getting ripped apart."

There was only one way to make him understand. To make him appreciate the sincerity of our son's intentions.

"He played for her." The look of shock on Carlisle's face was exactly what I had expected.

"What did he play?"

I simply nodded. It was all he needed.

I could see the tears building. It might have been years since Edward had played it, but there was no irony lost in that the song he had played for Bella was his father's favorite.

"Even better than that, Carlisle. Do you know what she asked me when I offered her a glass of wine?"

He inclined his head in curiosity. After all these years, we didn't need speech. Simple gestures would do.

"She asked if it was Hemlock."

The laughter that rang through the house was wonderful. Even better that it was because of Edward and his girlfriend.

"I thought your father was going to throw me out of the house when I said that to him," Carlisle mused.

"I think this is the one." I watched his face, waiting for a reaction.

~*~

Outtake 2

We the Cullens

Late Night Calls

Taking over as CEO had been a challenge, but I have to admit, I enjoyed it as much as I hoped I would. I thrived on pushing myself, and I found I was good at it. Better than good. In fact, it felt like I was born to do the job.

There were late nights and weekends away, but I found my groove within about six months. My father had been right, and my taking over had not resulted in any damage to the company. In fact, we were doing surprisingly well. And in this economy, our success bred success. Business gravitated toward us because our solid standing was encouraging to others.

Bella and I got married a year after the transition to CEO. I ever so romantically suggested we tie the knot on Valentine's Day, and Bella laughed me out of the room, claiming it was entirely too clichéd. We ended up at a still undisclosed beach location with about twenty five of our closest friends and family. To say it was perfect would be an understatement.

Despite being comfortable as CEO, my schedule was certainly less flexible than it had been when we first met. My relationship with Bella hadn't suffered for it. She took the time to ramp her career as well. We were stressed, but we worked hard never to take it out on each other. When we weren't traveling, we took one day out a week that was "just for us." And that kept us sane.

But I had to admit, I missed our more playful days. In the early part of our relationships sex was frequent and intense. These days, the intensity was still there, but the frequency was not. We took turns feeling the pain.

One morning Bella kept trying to pull my tie off every time I put it on. "Please come back to bed," she begged.

"I have a meeting in thirty minutes, and even as pent up as I am, I cannot do both of us justice in that time," I argued. "But I promise you, it is not for lack of want."

"You could just do me justice, you know," she suggested. I laughed and kissed her goodbye. But my god, that was a long day.

Later that week, I was beyond ready so in spite of my exhaustion, I set up a big seduction scene at the apartment with candles and wine, and I sat naked on the couch except for that damn tie for nearly an hour until I got cold, and pulled a blanket up. When Bella came home she thought I looked so peaceful she never noticed what I wasn't wearing, and she just slipped off to bed.

We were in the middle of our longest dry spell. Two weeks. Now, I know for some married couples, that isn't much, but given how active we'd been for so long, that was killing me. And I was starting to take it out on everyone around me. Even Irina was steering clear of me on the days I was in the office.

We'd really done little else but pass each other on the way to flights during that period. We never missed a day of talking though, usually more than once.

"Hey, sorry to call so late, but I just got out of a meeting myself. Are you at the hotel?" she asked one night while I was holed up in London.

"Yes, it was a killer day. Hanging out with my laptop and a beer. I even ordered in tonight. Completely wiped."

"Are you still working?"

"Just looking at some figures for tomorrow. Nothing serious. Why?"

"No reason. So tell me more about your day."

I bored her with the details. I could hear plenty of shuffling, and I finally asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm changing, Edward. In fact, I'm down to just my underwear. Would you like to see?" I knew she was being facetious, and I should have laughed, but just the thought of her undressed nearly caused me to drop the phone.

"Oh god, Bella."

"Frustrated much?" she asked suggestively.

"Too much," I answered.

"Me too," she stated tentatively. "I miss you."

"Well, I can't make it all go away, but we might be able to help each other out a little," I offered.

"What are you suggested there, big boy? Do you need some help with something?" she teased.

"I can manage on my own, but I'd prefer not to have to."

"I know exactly what you mean. Rosalie offered to take me to a sex toy shop today."

I exhaled, and I think I made a sound that came out closer to a squeak than I wanted. She laughed.

"Well, if we're going to help each other with phone sex, is your laptop handy? Do you want to move to skype? We could have video." I wasn't sure what she could handle, but I figured it was worth the mention.

"I don't know . . . I think I might feel a little weird about that. Can we start simpler?" There was a small hint of panic behind the response, and I realized this was probably new to her.

"It's okay. Yes, we can start however you want."

"I'm going to try something, but I have to disconnect, okay? Can I call you back in like 10 minutes?"

"It's going to be the longest ten minutes of my life, Mrs. Cullen."

"A little anticipation is good for you, Mr. Cullen."

I felt ridiculous, but I grabbed another drink, turned down the covers on the bed, and took off my shirt and my jeans. I didn't want to be presumptuous about the underwear.

Before the ten minutes was up, I got a text.

CYE

I flipped the top of my laptop open and clicked on Outlook. There was no subject line, but as soon as I opened the

email, there were two pictures. Bella was standing in front of the mirror in a pale blue lace bra and panty set. She jutted one hip out like super model and jokingly held a breast up with the hand that wasn't taking the picture.

I groaned.

In the second picture, she had turned around, putting her backside on display.

My phone buzzed at that moment.

"What do you think?"

"I like that you showed both sides."

"It's important to give multiple perspectives," she joked.

I laughed.

"Did it enhance anticipation?"

"Yes, very much so."

"So how do we do this? Do we just start saying dirty things to each other?"

"There is more than one way to approach it. Mostly, it involves talking and touching. I talk; you touch yourself and vice versa. And you need some imagination to make it all feel real."

"I feel a little awkward. 'Oh Edward, right there!' It just doesn't feel quite like me."

"Bella, it's okay to just be you. I'm looking at these pictures, and I can't imagine anything more beautiful than you being you."

She sighed on the other end, and I continued. "Are you still wearing that?"

"Ah, well, um. No."

"Are you wearing anything?"

"No to that too. How about you?"

I swiftly flicked my boxer briefs off. "Not anymore."

"The pictures weren't silly?"

"No, nothing about you is silly. I could look at you all day."

"I miss looking at you too. It's been too long."

"Bella, will you do me a favor?"

"Of course."

"Are you on speaker?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then will you pretend one of your hands is mine, and place it on your breast? Can you do that?"

"Uh huh." Any joking left in her tone dissipated.

"Good, I want my mouth on your other breast. Why don't you lick the fingers on your other hand, and put them on that nipple? Maybe that will help you think of my tongue there."

"Edward, I . . ."

"Shhh. Please?"

"Okay."

"Are you flicking your nipples, Bella?"

"Uh huh."

"How does it feel?"

"It's good." It was harder for her to talk now.

I had taken myself in my hand, but I was slow, careful to maintain control.

"I'm I ready to feel more of you, Bella, Will you take my hand and move it lower?"

"How low, Edward?"

"All the way. I want to see if you're excited yet. Are you?" There was a pause, and I used to the time to imagine her hand trailing down her stomach.

"Yes," she whined. "I'm ready." The idea that she was on the other end of the line touching herself definitely awakened my space in between.

"Not yet you're not. I want to play a little more first."

"What about you? Are you excited?"

"Bella, I've been ready since you mentioned underwear. Don't you worry about me. What is your hand doing?"

"Umm, it's moving."

"How? Up and down? Circles?"

"A little of everything, just like you always do."

"I wish I could see you right now. I bet you look amazing."

She didn't answer. One of the things I'd learned about Bella was that she tended to get quiet the closer to release she got. Almost as if she were concentrating, reaching out for it. Desperate to grab it.

"I think you're ready for me. I want to be inside you now. Use your other hand and pretend it's me. Can you feel me?"

"Ohhh," was all she managed.

I picked up my own pace a little, knowing she had to be on the edge. Her breathing was faster. I could almost see the expression on her face, eyes shut tight, but the slight smile creeping at the edges of her mouth. She's probably flick her tongue out at some point, an invitation to kiss her as she climaxed.

The only sounds I could hear were breathing and rubbing, both from her hand, and from her skin on the bed. I took her sudden gasp as my cue to increase my efforts.

"Edward, I'm there," she cried. I hated missing this part. Nothing ever brought me to the peak faster than feeling her tighten around me, seeing her body tense and release in rhythmic fashion. But even knowing it was happening on the other end was enough.

And I signaled with my own release with a moan.

We were both quiet for a while.

"Still there?" she asked softly.

"Absolutely," I said, as I reached for the phone, but then I realized I had a bit of a problem. I started laughing.

"What?"

"Oh I just forgot how messy this was, and I don't have a towel handy." She chuckled on the other end. "I feel like a damned teenager. But then I always have when it comes to you."

"Your mom says it's a Cullen thing."

"Let's leave my mom out of this, shall we?"

"Fair enough." When she stopped laughing, her tone was more hesitant. "So you have you ever done that before?"

"Bella, everything I do with you, I feel like I do for the first time."

She didn't answer immediately, taking in my calculated response. "I guess we still have a lifetime of firsts ahead of us then huh?"

"I am definitely looking forward them."

Office of the CEO

Something had gnawed at me ever since our little phone interlude.

It was stupid, and I shouldn't get hung up on it.

But I couldn't help it.

Our sex life had always been amazing. Yes, work had thrown a bit of a curveball at our frequency, which made things a bit fewer and farther between. But they were still really damn good.

At least that's what I thought until our night on the phone. I had stepped pretty far out of my comfort zone, but I missed Edward so damn much that I'd been willing to do just about anything to feel like he was here, if just for a little bit.

When we'd finished, and were laughing about the mess that Edward had made, I jokingly asked if he'd ever done that before. He dodged the question.

He'd answered in an incredibly sweet, incredibly Edward fashion, but I couldn't help but register that he didn't say no.

Which meant that he probably had. With someone else.

We'd never really delved into his younger, wilder days. There were times when I got curious, but I always pushed it to the back of my mind. I decided that I didn't want to know.

Or at least I thought I didn't.

But since our phone call, I'd been thinking off and on about the part of Edward's life that I didn't know. What types of things had he done with other women? Were there things that he missed? Things that I didn't do?

It would have been easy to get sucked down in self doubt and apprehension. But I knew that Edward loved me. Hell, we were married. He'd wanted me, not those other women.

I spent a few days debating before deciding what to do.

Edward had flown back early in the morning from a meeting in Washington D.C. He'd gone straight to the office, and made me promise to meet him there by 6 so we could join Emmett and Rosalie for dinner.

But a few days of reflection and wondering put something else in my mind.

At five after five, Irina met me at the elevator on the 32nd floor.

"He's in his office." She gave me a quick kiss on the cheek as she pulled on her coat. "Make him slow down, will you? He looks tired."

"Thanks Irina. Have a lovely night."

I waited for the elevator doors to close before making my way towards Edward's office. He'd been the CEO of CI for a year now, but it was still odd to call it Edward's office. I still saw it as Carlisle's.

But tonight it was time to change that.

Standing in the doorway, I watched him as he marked up some type of report. His left hand supported his head, and when he wasn't writing, he drummed the silver pen I'd given him against the desk blotter.

"You look stressed, Mr. Cullen."

His head shot up, and a smile lit up his face.

"This is a surprise, Mrs. Cullen."

I pushed the door closed behind me and walked towards him, trying to keep a straight face.

"I thought we could spend some time alone before dinner. I missed you."

He leaned back, creating just enough space between his chair and desk for me to slip in and sit down on the blotter.

"So this is my mystery five o'clock meeting. I wondered why Irina wouldn't tell me who it was with." He laced his fingers over his chest, an amused smile on his face. "So tell me, was there something you wanted to discuss? After all, you do have an appointment."

I had a momentary flicker of hesitation. What would Edward think? Could I do this?

But one look at the relaxed, amused expression on his face was enough to spur me on.

"There was something I wanted to bring up." I stood up, leaning forward with my hands resting on the arms of his chair. "How long 'til we have to meet Emmett and Rosalie?"

"6:10 in the lobby. Why?" A slight frown crossed his face, confused as to my query.

I didn't answer, instead dropping to my knees on the floor in front of him.

"Think you can be quiet?"

"Bella? What the..." But his ability to speak was pretty much eliminated as I quickly undid his belt and pulled down the zipper on his pants.

"Door is closed, but no need to announce it, okay?"

Before Edward could say another word, I slipped a hand inside boxer briefs.

"I decided I needed a bit of an appetizer before dinner."

Before he could say anything, I dropped my head to his lap, taking him in my mouth.

"Oh god yes..." he hissed, and I could hear the crack of leather as his hands dug into the leather of the armrest.

I let my mouth and hand work in opposite directions, pulling and teasing as I scraped my teeth gently against him. His breathing was ragged, shallow, and his hips slowly began to rock forward in a chair. Every time he tried to talk or to take control, I'd push a bit more. Whether I used my teeth, tongue, or changed the angle, it didn't matter. I had managed to render the unflappable Edward Cullen speechless.

And it was hot as hell.

A knock at his office door made him jump a bit. I decided to take a risk, and didn't release him, choosing instead to scoot back a bit to hide myself under his desk. My free hand grasped the edge of the chair, pulling it forward

with me.

"Oh fuck me, no way...." Edward struggled to catch his breath.

"Shh..." I whispered, "You need to keep it together."

Before Edward could say another word, I ran my tongue along the tip before pulling him back into my mouth. I smiled as I felt him grab my free hand.

The door squeaked open, and I heard Emmett in the doorway.

"Yo Bro, I am headed downstairs early for a drink. You want to come?"

I chuckled quietly as I continued to slowly bob my head up and down, Edward's grip tightening around my hand. I was incredibly curious as to how he would answer.

"No. I've got some things to take care of here. I can't come just yet."

"Okay. I'll keep an eye out for Bella downstairs. I'll have a drink waiting; you look like you could use it."

"Sounds good."

The minute the door closed, I felt Edward's hands slip into my hair, trying to modify the pace I had set.

"God you are so fucking sexy."

I tightened my grip on him a bit, increasing the friction as I hummed in acknowledgement.

"Oh holy shit..." The motion of his hips increased, and his breath came out in shaky gasps. "Oh god, Bella..."

It was so easy to tell when Edward was close to a release, he dropped the polished prep school façade and let loose with what he was really thinking.

His hands gripped tight in my hair as he groaned out my name. I didn't let go of him until his breathing had regulated, and I felt him lift the hair off the back of my neck.

"Not that I am complaining, but what the hell was that?"

"Just something that popped into my mind after our conversation earlier this week," I replied innocently as I rested my head on his leg. "I thought I should make an effort to come out of my comfort zone a little more, and the opportunity presented itself."

Edward barked out a dry laugh. "To give me a blow job in my office, while my brother tried to carry on a conversation?"

"Well, it didn't feel like your office yet. I thought we needed to do something about that. Speaking of which, we really need to get a lock on that door, don't we?" I teased as I tugged up the zipper on his suit pants. "Besides, you lied to Emmett. You told him you couldn't come quite yet. I think that was taken care of about two minutes after he left the room."

Edward grasped me by my upper arms and pulled me up into his lap.

"Tomorrow, I am ordering a couch for this office and a lock for the door. But right now, I am going to tell my brother that we can't make dinner."

"Why would you do that? You just told him..."

Edward cut me off, that brilliant smile I knew all too well lighting up his face.

"I told my brother whatever it took to get him out of my office. And I will tell my brother something else to get us out of dinner."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"I have all kinds of ideas after that little stunt you just pulled, and I don't think I can wait. We are going home. Right now."

"You sure about that, Mr. Cullen?"

"Absolutely, Mrs. Cullen."

The Only One

It was as if I were seeing her for the first time all over again. This amazing woman who stood out, who did the unexpected. But this time, I saw more of her. I saw beyond the bright boots and the tie grabbing to the little girl inside the confident woman. The one had just opened herself up to something new merely to make me happy.

And I wanted nothing more than to throw her down on my desk and take her six ways 'til Sunday.

While that would have been fun, and it would have fit the mood, it would not have done justice to the way I felt about her at that moment.

We'd walked the distance back to our apartment hundreds of times, but this journey seemed to take a little too long. It was as if we were in slow motion. I kept looking over at her and grinning, and she would look away, almost embarrassed. I put my arm around her shoulder to draw her in, and she smiled back.

I kissed the side of her head, and breathed the scent of her hair. "Beautiful," I whispered into her curls.

She gave me a hip bump in return and bit her lip. "You liked the surprise then?"

"I did," I said with a nod.

She smiled again, and I squeezed her shoulder in affirmation.

By the time we finally reached our building, I was almost jittery in anticipation, but I couldn't rush this. There were too many things lying under the surface.

The instant the elevator doors shut, I backed her against the wall. I weaved my fingers through her hair and pulled her in for a kiss. It was slow and deliberate. I licked her upper lip, and she sighed into me.

I continued to plant kisses all around her face, until I ended up back at her lips again where, I found the need to taste her irresistible. My tongue began a fervent exploration.

"Edward?"

"Mmm?"

"Cameras?"

I growled and pulled back. More than kissing would be dangerous on the elevator, but I wondered briefly what it would take to get them shut down for the night.

It was a matter of minutes before we were safely inside our apartment. She threw her bag on the hall table and was about to head down the hall, but I grabbed her and pulled her back.

"Not so fast."

Her eyes went wide.

I gently held her up against the wall,

"Bella you remember that night on the phone? Remember how I asked you to do things, and you trusted me?"

She looked a little panicked.

"Relax, I have a few things to say, and I'm going to ask you to trust me while I do, okay?"

She bit her lip and nodded.

I leaned into her and began with her ear, so I could whisper the first part. I took the lobe in my mouth and sucked playfully. When I released it, I said, "I don't believe you are quite aware of just how much you affect me. Only you."

My reaction to what she had done at the office was visceral. She pushed herself. For me.

And I was going to make her understand with actions what words could never fully explain.

I trailed my tongue down her neck. I slid one of my hands under her shirt, and dragged it up to her breast. I sucked on her collar bone, planting more kisses as I made my way over to her shoulder. I slid my thumb, under her bra and dragged it back and forth along the elastic, building her anticipation. Just before I moved my thumb up to brush her nipple, I breathed, "I could never want anyone as much as I want you."

I stepped back and she let out a whimper. I pulled her shirt up over her head, and stared at the sight before me. I could see the hesitation in her. She was used to matching me; letting herself give in to my worship was a challenge. I flashed her a smile.

"You couldn't be any more perfect," I said while reaching out to pull her skirt down. I didn't bother leaving the panties on. I got down on my knees to remove them entirely. While there, I kissed her left foot, and I let my tongue follow the path of her leg while I remained on the floor. I gently placed her knee over my shoulder and continued moving my tongue up her leg. When I got to the top of her thigh, I grabbed hold of her hips to hold her steady as I dragged my lips across her, stopping in the middle, replicating the licking and nibbling techniques she'd used on me earlier. I sucked gently as she moaned.

"I could never need anyone else as much as I need you," I mumbled into her as I set her leg back on the floor and began kissing my way back up her body.

Her eyes were heavy, and her nervousness appeared to be lifting as she gave into the pleasure.

I placed my thumb where my mouth had just been and pressed softly against her as two fingers slid inside.

Her mouth parted, and I could feel her pulse rising against my free hand where it rested against her neck. Nothing in my life had ever excited me as much as watching Bella give in to pleasure, knowing that I made her feel that way.

I wasn't slow or deliberate anymore. I worked with determination. Alternating the motion but maintaining a consistent rhythm.

I was torn between my desire to let my hand cause her to let go right there in the entry way and my need for more of her, but she influenced my decision.

Her eyes, trained on mine pleaded before she even asked, "I want you now. Please?"

I nodded and felt her pulling at my pants. I picked her up instead, and carried her back to the bedroom. The walk took longer than it needed because I couldn't keep my mouth off of her.

I lay her on the bed, and pushed my pants down. I grabbed her hips, and pulled her toward the edge of the bed. Her legs fell open, and I filled the space.

I couldn't do enough to tell her. To let her know that I couldn't remember what any of this was before her. I only knew the feel of her hands on my arms. Her hips thrusting up to greet mine. I only knew the taste of her sweat as I kissed her forehead. Her fingers as they reached into my mouth. I only knew the smell of our bodies when they soared to the pinnacle, screaming each other's names, claiming the other in the process.

I didn't want to let go. I stayed inside her as long as I could. Eventually, I lay down close to her and whispered in her ear.

"I could never love anyone as much as I love you."

Parts of the Whole

As sweet as Edward's actions and declarations were, in the end, his proclamation wasn't true.

He would argue that it was semantics, and even at one point tried to debate the different types of love with me.

I didn't want to hear about it though. I was in pain and at times miserable. But I knew deep down it was all worth it. That he made it all worth it.

Correct that. They made it all worth it.

Once upon a time, there had been one. And then there were two.

Now there were three. Well, two and a half. At least for six more months.

Emmett pulled me aside the evening that we told everyone, shooting a surreptitious glance around the room

before launching in.

"Bella, next time you pull a stunt like what you did in my brother's office, you might want to remember that there's about 2 inches of open space at the bottom Edward's desk. I could see your feet."

He planted a kiss on my head and gave me a big grin. "And I can't help but remember that was about 12-13 weeks ago. So I'll make you a deal. I promise I won't tell my niece or nephew where they were conceived, so long as you stop calling me Emmy Poo. Deal?"

I was cornered. But then I thought about Edward's statement, his declaration that he could never love anyone as much as he loved me. And I realized that he was right. We love people in different ways. That love was what gives depth and nuance to our relationships, what tied us to each other.

And in the end, was what made us whole.

~*~

Outtake 3

Valentine Outtake *February 2012*

- B - Black and White

"Just a few more minutes, Bella. This one doesn't want to hold still. I just need one more set of measurements."

The ultrasound tech pressed the wand a bit harder into my stomach. I winced, desperately trying to ignore the dull ache in my bladder.

"There we go," the tech muttered to herself, "got you squirmy."

She paused, smiling.

"Hmm, nice glory shot. Want to know the gender?"

My eyes darted up to the clock. 3:45. The appointment had been for 3:15.

He wasn't coming.

"Will I be able to tell from the picture?"

"Yes you will. I'll make a note on it if you want."

I bit my lip in attempt to hold back the tears that threatened to spill over.

"Could you do that and put it in an envelope please? I'd like his or her father to be present too."

The tech nodded and put the wand down.

"Not a problem. We're all done. You can go to the bathroom and get dressed. I'll get these to your OB. They'll follow up with you, but from what I can see everything looks great. Nothing to be worried about. You are carrying deep and have the good fortune of being tiny during pregnancy."

I laughed, but it wasn't a reflection of my good humor. "I don't feel tiny."

"You never do, honey." The tech extended a hand to help me up. "But it's all worth it."

I had a hard time reflecting her optimism.

After going to the bathroom and getting dressed, I powered up my phone to check my messages. There was an email from Irina, letting me know about a meeting that ran late. She tried, but cutting it short could have been a deal breaker.

I couldn't be mad at Edward. I'd been the one to him encourage him when his dad decided to move into retirement. He wanted the position, but he would never have made the move without my blessing and encouragement. I'd known full well that there would be infinite demands on Edward's time. But I guess I never really stopped to think about what it could really mean.

His schedule had been crazy since just after Thanksgiving, and I'd been okay with it at first. The economy was so volatile, and he was doing everything he could to keep CI stable. Carlisle had always treated CI's employees like family, and Edward felt the same responsibility.

I'd handled the crazy hours, the missed dinners, the last minute changes. But that was when it was just the two of us.

There were about to be three, and Edward had missed his first chance to meet his child.

Demetri waited for me in the parking garage as I left the doctor's building. He took one look at my face and stared straight ahead, not saying a word. He knew me well enough to read my moods, and he didn't engage me in conversation.

Once settled in the back seat, I pulled up Edward's private line. It rang four times before switching over to Irina.

"Hey honey, how did it go?"

I sighed. I really wanted my husband right now, but I couldn't be rude.

"Fine. The baby is healthy, and there was plenty of amniotic fluid. He or she just feels the need to constantly cuddle into my spine. That's why I measured so small. No cause for concern; everything looked good."

"Oh thank goodness. I know everyone was hoping that was the case." She hesitated for a moment, as if debating how to proceed. "He really did try to get there, Bella."

"I know, Irina. I know. Is he there now?"

"No, he's still tied up. I can tell him you called."

"It's okay. I'll leave a voicemail on his cell phone."

We chatted for a minute more before disconnecting. She reminded me of a dinner commitment Edward had with a

company CI was trying to acquire. I would be on my own tonight.

I said goodnight to Demetri and took the elevator up to our floor. The sun was setting over the park, casting long shadows through the floor to ceiling windows. I always loved this time of day in the apartment. I loved the way the fading rays of light reflected off the photos, casting prisms across the wood floors. I remember my first day here, how natural and comfortable it all felt. The apartment hadn't changed much since then. More pictures of family, the piano, more books, if that's possible. But the soul was still the same.

I quickly changed out of my clothes, grabbing one of Edward's dress shirts and a pair of yoga pants. Once upon a time I'd worn his shirts to be provocative. Now it was purely for comfort. I was six months along, or twenty four weeks, however you want to phrase it. There had been a few scares of late, and I was miserably uncomfortable. Simple and comfortable was my idea of perfection.

And to be honest, it was a way to have Edward close, even when he wasn't here.

I curled up on our bed and flicked on the TV. It was about impossible to find a comfortable position these days, so I'd bought a few giant body pillows to help support my back. Draping myself across one, so that I could lay on my side, I spread the ultrasound photos out on the bed beside me. Five black and white images displayed different outlines, different perspectives of our child. I ran my fingers over one profile shot, the silhouette of a snub nose, a fist close to the face, as if he or she were sucking their thumb.

A noise from the television caught my attention. An old Neil Simon movie was on; the characters young, and in love, totally impetuous. They were so passionate and believed that love could conquer all, but so complete clueless.

It could have been Edward and me early on. When things were simple and complicated all at once. But how we had things to anchor us and remind us of what's important.

We'd some how slipped away from that over the past few months. We didn't fight, we didn't argue. The time simply became less and less.

Out of habit, I started to spin my charm bracelet. I still wore it all the time. Lately it had been a bit of a lifeline for me. A reminder of how things had been once upon a time. And hope that someday soon we could get back there. I wasn't naïve enough to expect that we could return to the early days. But it had to be better than this.

As I reached out to retrieve one of the ultrasound photos, the red of the jasper bean caught my eye.

It was the same shape as the image in the photo. Something we had made together.

That's when it hit me.

I rolled over, grabbing my phone off the bedside table. A few quick clicks and I was looking at my calendar.

There was time.

I could pull this off.

I'd remind him. I'd take a page out of his book, and make him remember what was important.

Relief washed over me, and I curled back up into the pillow, closing my eyes. I let plans form in my head and hope fill my heart until I drifted off to sleep.

- E - Ball Breaker

My head was pounding. It had already been a killer week.

The man hired to replace me in Mergers and Acquisitions wasn't helping anything. He was an up and coming executive my father suggested for the job despite some indication that he was not aggressive enough. I should have trusted my gut because I was now sitting in a meeting that just wouldn't quit, without much luck in turning things around.

We had to win this one. CI was doing better than most companies, but we weren't immune to the downturn. There had been layoffs and restructuring, but we'd weathered the storm with less cuts than others thanks to cost reductions and streamlining of operations

I started out the day with one goal. I was going to get out in time for Bella's ultrasound. I simply had to. The whole thing was already a month overdue, but my schedule kept requiring her to push it back. When she measured small at her last appointment, her OB insisted she make it to this appointment no matter what. So Bella made the same request of me. She was genuinely scared, and while I was optimistic, I kept trying to reassure her.

I wanted to be there; I honestly did. I had every intention of cutting out in time. After lunch, I headed in for another round with some big wigs of a company we were trying to make a deal with, and Irina gave me *that* look.

"Don't forget, you only have two hours before you need to be in the elevator and out the door. The appointment is at 3:15."

"I know. You've reminded me five times today alone, and I think you set my calendar to remind me every fifteen minutes."

"Don't be silly. It's been every hour. Just don't miss it, Edward."

"I won't. Give me some credit."

In the end there were some things I simply couldn't control. At three o'clock, the meeting had gone from bad to worse. If negotiations had merely stalled, I would have rescheduled for the next day, but we'd reached a boiling point; tempers were heated, and threats were issued. The V.P. was practically cowering in the corner. I blamed myself for waiting too long to take control, believing it was his job to handle things, but I had to salvage this. Peoples' jobs were at stake.

Irina texted me at the same time my calendar reminder popped up yet again. I sent her a quick message back under the table.

Out of my hands. Can't get out.

At that point, I turned my phone off and dug in. Two more hours, several pots of coffee, and one plan to fire a V.P. later, we had a deal.

I rushed out of the conference room and hit my office to grab my coat since I had a dinner meeting in twenty minutes.

Irina looked up at me and shook her head.

"Don't give me that. I tried. Someone has to keep this place in business if everyone wants to keep their jobs." I was harsh, but sometimes Irina acted more like a mother than an assistant. Usually, I didn't mind, but I really didn't see how I could have done anything differently.

"If that makes you feel better, Edward, you keep believing that. Have a nice night. Tell Bella congratulations on your *healthy* baby."

"The baby's okay?" I smiled in relief.

"Yes," she answered curtly. With that she stood, pulled her coat from wardrobe next to her desk, and stormed out.

She could be mad all she wanted; I didn't have time to dwell on it.

I made it through dinner. The conversation droned on, and my headache never got any better. Just before dessert, I headed to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. That's when I remembered I never turned my phone back on.

It lit up with messages and texts including ones from both Irina and Bella. Irina's tone got increasingly more biting and insulting. Bella's didn't. It was conciliatory and disappointed. By the end, I almost wished she'd been mad. My chest grew tight, and the pounding in my head turned to searing pain.

I let her down.

If she'd yelled at me or told me I was a pig, I would have had a counter argument, but there was nothing I could say to "I'm sorry you missed it."

I sent Bella a quick message apologizing, but I needed to get home to her.

Thankfully, dinner wrapped up shortly after because by then I couldn't focus anymore. It wasn't so much missing the ultrasound that bothered me. I didn't quite understand the big deal. I knew the baby would be fine. I couldn't see much on those anyway, and I figured we'd meet the baby soon enough. It was more that she'd been there alone, scared, and waiting for me that I couldn't stand.

When I got home, I called out, but there wasn't an answer. I grabbed some Excedrin from the kitchen cabinet, and took off my tie.

I could hear muffled voices in the bedroom. I'd never been one to watch T.V. in the bedroom, but Bella often left it running as background noise, even while she read.

"Hey," I said tentatively, not knowing how she was going to react to me.

She was lying on her side, and for a second I thought she was ignoring me, but as I got closer, I could see the rise and fall of her breathing was slow and deep. She'd fallen asleep. She looked so peaceful, curled up in a little ball. Lights and T.V. still on all around her.

I moved over and lifted her legs, to slide them under the covers. Her hand held a grainy black and white picture, and there were several more strewn across the bed. I picked one up and drew a sharp breath.

I don't know what I expected. Squiggly lines or shadows, but this was the perfect profile. I sat down at the end of the bed and examined the photo. A tiny hand was practically waving at the camera. I noticed the nose was already almost an exact copy of Bella's. I had no idea you could see that at this point.

I studied each picture. My headache dissipated as my heartache grew. It was more than letting down Bella. This wasn't an abstract concept anymore. This was a baby. My baby. Our baby.

I gathered the pictures and set them down on the night stand. Shedding my suit, I turned off the lights and the T.V. and crawled into bed. I reached out and put my hand on Bella's swollen stomach. I traced the shape of the profile I'd just seen in the picture. I let my hand go flat and whispered to both of them, "I'm so sorry."

- B - Green

It was the smell of coffee that did me in.

I'd been standing at the refrigerator, debating what I could handle for breakfast, when the scent of fresh brewed coffee hit my nose.

My hand flew instinctively to my mouth, and I moved as quickly as I could towards the guest bathroom.

Edward was coming out of our bedroom, knotting his tie as I fled down the hallway. He'd been in the shower when I woke up.

He frowned as he saw me coming, stepping clear so that I could get to the toilet in time.

I slammed the door and dropped to my knees, dry heaving. With nothing in my stomach, there wasn't a whole lot to come up.

Edward must have followed me into the bathroom. I felt him pull my hair back from my face, his hand rubbing slow circles in my back as I tried to calm down. Ever since I was little, I hated throwing up. I worked myself into borderline panic attacks when I had the stomach flu. Here I was in my sixth month of pregnancy, going on my fifth month of morning sickness. It was pure hell.

"Hey, you okay?"

I shook my head, refusing to let go of the porcelain. I could feel the bile start to rise again.

"Can I get you anything?"

The concern was evident in his voice. I shook my head again, afraid that opening my mouth to speak would set me off.

He sighed and stood. I know he just wanted to help, but I was petrified I was going to throw up again.

The moment he opened the door, the scent of coffee came wafting back in.

"Shut it!" I shrieked, helpless to fight the visceral reaction to a smell I had always loved. I leaned over the toilet, dry heaving yet again.

The bathroom door slammed shut.

A few minutes later, the apartment door did too.

He didn't say goodbye before he left.

I lay curled up on the bathroom floor for another ten, fifteen minutes. When I was confident I could move around without getting sick, I stood, rinsed my mouth out and splashed water on my face. Then I hesitantly made my way out into the apartment.

The coffee maker was off. The pot empty in the drainer. All traces of the scent masked by a ginger candle burning next to the sink.

A note lay on the counter.

I needed to get to the office. Call me later. I love you.

The office consumed him these days. He felt the overwhelming need to please everyone, to save everything. And he couldn't accept that would be times where he couldn't.

I watched as he pulled back into himself, distracted by too many people stretching him in too many directions. I knew he wasn't intentionally missing out on the important things, and I'm sure there was a good reason for him not making my appointment. There always was. But I needed to remind him of what was important. That we were important. He needed to find his center again.

I grabbed the phone off the charging cradle and punched in a number. She answered on the second ring.

"Hey Irina. Is he in yet?"

"Yes, he blew in with a thunder cloud over his head. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, just a misunderstanding." I opened a cabinet door and pulled down a box of saltine crackers. "Can you do me a favor?"

She laughed. "For you, anything. If it means he gets out of this funk, even better."

"I am going to have Demetri drop something off tomorrow morning. Does he have a spot open in his calendar?"

I could hear Irina clicking and typing. "First thing."

"Can you dummy up a phone call? Some reason for him to be in his office?"

"Will do, Bella."

"Thanks. Can I talk to him now?"

"Hang on." She put me on hold. A minute later Edward picked up.

"A puking woman sends you running for the hills, huh?"

He hesitated for a beat before answering, "I didn't think you wanted me there."

"No, I just wanted you to shut the door. The smell of coffee was what set me off."

Edward chuckled, and I could hear keys clicking as he spoke.

"It's probably a good thing you stayed in the bathroom then. You forgot to put the basket in to catch the grinds, and it went all over the place. It was pretty disgusting. If the smell didn't get you, the mess would have."

That would explain the pot in the sink.

"I'm sorry I yelled at you," I replied sheepishly. "It's just...you know how I am about throwing up."

"I know." Edward hesitated before continuing, "I'm sorry I missed yesterday."

He didn't offer a justification. There probably was one. But neither of us wanted to go there right now.

"I'm working from home today. I have a manuscript to read. Call my cell if you need me?"

"Will do." Edward was quiet for a moment, and I just about hung up. "I love you, Bella. You know that, don't you?"

"I love you too, Edward."

I could hear Irina in the background. He was going to be late.

"Go to your meeting. I'll talk to you later."

I placed the phone back in the charging cradle and glanced up at the clock. It was 8:30. I needed to get moving, there were things to do.

Three hours and one stop later, I walked down Fifth Avenue, watching the people as they filtered by. It made me nostalgic for my old commute. The walk from the subway station to work. The few moments of peace in front of the Tiffany's window every morning.

We hadn't been by the window in a long time. Not since our engagement, actually. I'd been too busy to stop and think about how much I missed it, and how much it represented in our relationship.

The Valentine's display was up, and pedestrians stopped to admire the baubles in the window. Their dreams of what some day could be. That had been me once upon a time.

But instead of stopping at the window, I let myself into the store, weaving through the bodies lining the cases. I knew exactly what I needed to do. There were three pieces to the first message. One part came from here; one would be picked up the morning of the delivery. The final rested in the bag at my feet.

"Hey Bella!" Jess Stanley stood to greet me. Her attitude had changed after the entire incident with Jane. Free of the guilt and the need to protect her sister in law, she turned out to be a lovely woman. Under different circumstances, I might have called her a friend. "What are you doing here?"

"Hoping you can help me out." I plopped down in a chair, setting the bag carefully on the floor. "Can you help me with some gifts?"

"Sure, it's my job." She shifted to her computer. "What do you need?"

"Jess?" My tone caught her attention, and she shifted back to face me. I pulled a small jar out of my bag and sat it on her desk.

She studied the jar for a moment, before shaking her head.

"No. Not again." There was humor in her voice. But she was serious.

"Not in the window, but yeah, again."

Jess sighed and pulled out a note pad.

"Okay, rattle 'em off."

We spent the next hour talking through my plan and searching through the store for the things I needed. She rolled her eyes at my one hard rule, but in the end found what I needed. With one exception, the items we picked out were some of the most inexpensive things in the store.

"I can't decide if this is the most romantic or most saccharine thing ever," Jess teased as I slipped the first note into the bag.

"I've written notes for the first two. Someone will be by tomorrow to drop the other off for cleaning. "

Jess took the note cards from my hand, "I am surprised Esme didn't insist on buying a new one."

"No, of all people, she gets it." I braced my hand on my desk to stand up. "I miss seeing my toes. I don't know how you did this a second time. I can't wait for my first time to be over."

"It's all worth it. Trust me." She picked up the jar and examined the label. "I could have told you they don't sell just plain strawberry. Allergies, you know."

I smiled and moved towards the door. "It's okay. He'll get the point."

- E - Sprouts

I didn't have time to think about the night before, the morning, or the phone call. It was that kind of day. Not a spare second to let my mind wander. After I hung up with Bella, I was inundated with paper work, conference calls, a lunch meeting, and more paperwork. Everything was a fire that needed to be put out immediately.

Irina was apparently still upset with me because she stuck to one or two word answers all day. She didn't make a single dig; she just looked at me with silent indignation.

By late afternoon, I'd had enough.

"Irina, you are neither my wife nor my mother. They are both still speaking with me, and I expect you to do the same."

"Of course, Edward," she said with an innocent smile. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"No, thank you. Hold calls again. I'm digging in for awhile. I have to review more files."

As she stood up to leave she mumbled something under her breath.

"Did you have more to say?" I asked, calling her out.

"No, sir," she answered with a mock military tone.

"Irina," I warned.

"I'm sorry, Edward. It's just . . . if you keep this up, your wife *won't* be talking to you. And I wouldn't blame her one bit."

"Irina, could you just give me a break?" I think she was waiting for me to say more. I only added. "Please?"

She left without saying another word. About an hour later, she buzzed me.

"Your father is here. Are you too *busy* to see him?" I could almost see the expression on her face. I bet she was feeling rather smug in her choice of words.

"How's my schedule look?"

"You're clear until 4:30."

"Fine, send him in," I exhaled in defeat.

I typically welcomed a visit from my father, but time was tight, and sometimes it seemed like in his semi-retirement, he forgot what it had been like in this position.

I continued to sign some papers while I waited for him to enter my office and sit down. I didn't bother getting up from my desk.

I glanced up, and nodded toward the chair in front of my desk, and he walked in quietly and sat down.

"You look like hell, Edward," he announced.

I looked at him, startled by his direct admission.

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to be an old man long before you turn forty if you keep this up."

"Not you too."

"I'm afraid so," he said. I took a depth breath and set my pen down on my desk. I picked it back up again wanting the comfort of knowing where the pen came from. I had a feeling what was coming.

"Let me guess. Did Irina call you in?"

"Not exactly. I had a meeting, but when I saw her in the hall earlier, she might have mentioned that it would be a good idea if I stopped by. I'm glad she did."

"You know I appreciate that everyone has an opinion on how I'm doing, but honestly, I'm not sure what you all expect. This isn't exactly a 9 to 5 position. You of all people should know that."

He nodded, and leaned back in the chair. "Yes, you're right. It's not an easy job, and the hours can be brutal."

"I sense a 'but.'"

"You know me well. But . . . you're going to have to learn to prioritize and delegate if you're going to make it."

"I thought you approved of the job I've been doing. You just said the other week that everything was looking good."

"Edward, you're steering the ship remarkably well, but be careful what you leave behind in your wake."

I shook my head and looked out the window, pushing myself away from my desk slightly.

"It's hard, Dad."

"I know, son."

"I missed Bella's ultrasound yesterday."

He opened his mouth, shut it, and then nodded.

"Honestly, there was nothing I could do. I couldn't get out of that meeting."

"Edward, trust me. I do understand the strain you are under. I raised you and Emmett with the same stress. I encourage you to look back though. You'll have to go back farther than I'd like. As you know there were many not so pleasant years between us, but when you were a boy, do you remember me missing any of your events? Birthdays? Vacations?"

"No."

"Just remember. Business can always be rescheduled. Life, not so much."

I closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them, I could see the genuine concern on my dad's face.

"Perhaps I retired too soon."

"No, it's okay. I'll figure it out. I have to."

"Be careful of words like that. 'I have to' can be a powerful excuse if you let it. I'll let you get back to work. Thanks for humoring an old man with a little of your precious time."

I laughed at him and stood up to shake his head. "Thanks, Dad."

"Did Bella find out whether we're having another granddaughter or a grandson?"

It was the first time it occurred to me that I didn't have any idea. "I . . . don't know. I saw pictures, but I'm not sure if she asked."

He gave me a half smile, and with his signature wave, he was out the door.

It was another late night, and Bella and I barely got five minutes to talk. She seemed so uncomfortable, so I rubbed her lower back, while she was falling asleep.

"Hey," I said softly.

"Mmm?"

"I forgot to ask. Did you find out what we're having?"

"No, the tech wrote it down and put it in an envelope."

"Oh, when were you planning to look at it?"

"I don't know. When it feels right?"

I kissed her hair and slipped my hand around to trace her stomach like I had the night before. Sleep came easier than usual.

The next morning, we were both rushing out the door. Bella asked if I had time to walk to work, and I had to beg out. Irina insisted I needed to make an early morning phone call, and I could not be late.

Demetri was tied up with something so I ended up having to walk anyway, but with no time to stop or enjoy the walk.

"Am I late?" I said practically running to my office.

"No," Irina smiled. "I think you're just in time. Go get settled, I'll buzz you shortly."

I hung my coat, opened my briefcase, and situated myself at my desk.

There was a knock at the door instead of a buzz. "Come in, Irina."

"Actually, Edward. It's me."

I looked up to see Demetri walking toward me carrying a small box. It was blue. Robin's egg blue. His other hand held a coffee cup.

"What are you doing here? I thought you were tied up."

"I was. I had to bring you this." He set the box and the cup down in front of me.

"Oh, well I'll have to open it after my phone call."

"Edward?" Irina called. "This is your appointment. Come on Demetri, let's let him open it."

I looked at her, my confusion evident. She smiled and nodded toward the box.

There was a handwritten note with my name written in Bella's handwriting.

I decided to nickname the baby Bean, since that's what he or she looks like, all curled up in the pictures. A tiny little bean that is going to turn out to be an amazing little person, just like his or her daddy.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. I love you.

B

I took a sip from the coffee cup just to see. Mint mocha.

I gently lifted the top off the box to see a small jar of baby food. A miniature silver spoon with an apple shape on top leaned against it. I pulled both of them out of the box. The apple I understood. Our seed. Our fruit. Something new, just like the bean I'd given her. But the baby food confused me. Until I saw the flavor.

Strawberry banana.

So I tried. I left work as early as I could, and I grabbed take out, but when I got home Bella wasn't there. I sent her a quick message, and she reminded me she had a dinner meeting herself. Deflated, I pulled one carton out of the bag and tossed the rest in the refrigerator.

I was on the couch with my laptop and about thirty open windows when I heard her key in the door. She came shuffling in quickly, tears in her eyes.

"Bella, what's wrong?" I asked moving my computer off my lap and jumping up off the couch toward her.

She held her hand up. "It's okay. I just sneezed."

I might have raised an eyebrow, but she kept walking.

"I don't understand."

She turned abruptly. "Fine. I sneezed in the elevator, and I think I peed my pants in the process. So, now I'm going to go change my underwear. Happy?"

It was the completely wrong response, but I laughed. Here I thought she had some deep emotional issue, or it was something in our marriage. She gave me a dirty look and proceeded to the bedroom.

When she didn't come back out, I ventured down the hall, and she was already curled up in bed.

"I'm sorry I laughed at you; I was just relieved it wasn't something more serious."

She sighed. "I'm sorry I snapped. The stupid hormones have me so on edge, and I feel like I'm losing control of myself. Literally."

I sat down at the end of the bed to rub her feet. "Thanks for my delivery."

She adjusted so she can see me. "You liked it?"

"Yes, I liked it a lot."

She smiled and as usual, it didn't take long for her to drift to sleep.

The next morning I had an offsite meeting, but when I got to my office there was already a blue box sitting on my desk. This time the note was much longer.

Edward;

Life seems to conspire against us these days. Your schedule, me falling asleep at ridiculously early hours...there are a million and one reasons, but none of them seem like they are good enough to accept.

I don't like where we are at. I miss you. I miss your laugh and your useless little factoids that used to drive me crazy. I miss sitting on the beach at your parent's house watching the waves crash in after a storm.

I hate seeing the spark and light fade from you.

But I feel selfish in saying that, because it minimizes what you are doing, which is not an inconsequential thing. You are so noble, and you have such a big heart. I know you are trying to make things better for everyone, including us. All the work, the late hours, the things that you miss aren't because you don't want to be here. It's because you feel like people need you, that they depend on you. It's what makes you who you are.

I was thinking the other day about when we first started dating, and you explained what the charms on my bracelet meant to you. You described the tear drop as a representation of what had passed. Your way of recognizing what had gone before, as well as the opportunity to start anew. Part of starting new was us. Part of it was fixing things with your family. With your dad.

I sit back and watch you step into his shoes, and I am so proud of you, of what you've accomplished and how passionately you do it. But it makes me sad and a little angry too. So many people need you and depend on you. But I do too. And so will the baby someday. I don't want him or her to ever worry about how important they are to you. You can be there for everyone that you work with. But we need you too.

I love you. I want to be able to watch you teach our child how to throw a football or pants Uncle Emmett. All the things that you loved so much about your childhood and your family. I want us to have that too. I want to sit on the beach and watch you splash in the waves together. To sit in the library with a book, teaching him or her about pirates and fairy tales and happily ever while we look out at the greatest view in the world.

It only works if we are both there. I can't do it without you.

The first email you ever sent me, you quoted my Shakespeare. I turned it around on you with Shel Silverstein. It holds true now, just in a different way.

There's woulda coulda shoulda, and there's the did.

Please be my did again.

Come home. Come back to me.

Bella

My shaking hand fumbled opening the box to find the most delicate baby hair brush in the shape of a wave. My phone chimed a fifteen minute warning to the next meeting. I was hitting the button to dismiss when the date caught my attention. February 10th.

My head fell into my hands, and I tried to process it. I hadn't realized what she was doing with the gift yesterday. Or why exactly. I opened a drawer and pulled out the items that came the day before. I lined up the jar, the spoon, and the brush on my desk. There were all kinds of meanings in these simple gifts. They mirrored sentiments I'd expressed to her years ago in the week leading up to Valentine's Day.

What hit me in that moment wasn't the symbolism; it was the size. Such a small spoon for a small mouth. The

softest bristles for the most delicate skin. I had an absolute moment of panic. She told me what she needed, what our baby needed. Could I do it? How could I be a '*did*' when I didn't feel like I had the time or energy to?

But Bella was sick and tired and emotionally spent, and she still did. I'd promised her ages ago I always would. I kept my promises, especially to her.

- B - Reconnections

I closed my eyes and let the steam work out the knots in my body. I knew pregnancy would change my body, but I hadn't been prepared for the extremes. The random aches, the cravings, the desires. Everything was intensified.

I'd started taking long baths at night, soaking in the giant whirlpool tub while the warm water worked out the aches. I'd turn up the music so that it would stream into the bathroom and light a candle and soak in the dark. It was almost like sensory deprivation, the buoyancy relieving the weight, the pressure, the discomfort.

Because the music was so loud, I didn't hear Edward come into the room.

"You look so peaceful."

I opened my eyes to see him standing next to the tub. His tie was off, his hair a mess.

"Is something wrong? Why are you home so early?"

He frowned for a moment, and then peeled off his suit coat. Without taking off his pants or his shirt, he toed off his shoes and climbed into the tub, leaning in so he could kiss my forehead.

"What are you doing, Edward?"

He didn't answer me, simply dropped his face lower so that he could gently brush a kiss across my nose.

"I love you."

A knot started to form in my chest. I had forgotten all about today's delivery, about my letter. He'd made an attempt to talk last night, and I'd been so tired that I'd barely responded. And then to receive that today...

"I'm sorry." Sorry wasn't enough.

"Shh." He kissed me again, and I could feel the desperation in his actions. It tripped something in me, something wholly unexpected.

Our kissing grew more insistent, and I began to struggle with the buttons on his shirt and his pants.

"Are you sure about this?" He whispered against my mouth.

"I'm pregnant, not a nun. And I need this. I need you."

We shifted around in the tub, somehow managing to get the wet wool of his suit pants off. I climbed into his lap without hesitation and held on to him as tightly as I could. It wasn't about sex, or anger, or anything that simple.

It was re-establishing a connection. Letting the other know that it would all work out, that we would be okay. He whispered 'I love you' against my neck as I cried out his name.

And then we were both quiet and still.

"I do love you. You know that, don't you?" Edward asked, his head buried against my shoulder. He was looking for reassurance. It wasn't about him loving me, but me believing it.

"I never doubt that, Edward. It's a constant for both of us."

I felt him nod, and his arms tightened around me. The wet cotton of his dress shirt sticking to my skin as I tried to shift.

"You probably aren't very comfortable, are you?"

"No, but I don't want to move."

Edward laughed and kissed my shoulder. "Come on, let's get you dried off. We can warm up some of the take out I brought home last night and talk."

We managed to disentangle ourselves and get out of the tub without face planting on the floor. Edward went to heat up last night's Chinese food while I dug around in his closet for something to wear.

"Now I know where all my t-shirts keep disappearing to," he chided me as I entered the kitchen.

"I hate maternity clothes. Your stuff is more comfortable anyway."

He kissed the top of my head and grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge.

"You know, I like you in my clothes."

"It's a little different when I'm pregnant."

"No it's not." He twisted the cap off the bottle and took a drink before offering it to me. "So I understand what you sent yesterday and the parallel. And once I got over the massive sense of failure at today's I see the parallel to your bracelet, but I feel like I am missing something."

"Can you give me a boost?" I placed my hands on the counter. Edward bent over, cupping his hands so I could step in and push myself up into a seated position on the granite.

"You always took that charm to be something negative, a reminder of the bad things. But tears aren't always bad you, know?" I paused as I took a drink of water. "But more importantly, the recognition of the stuff that happened before got you somewhere. And it gave you a chance to get back the things you love, including your ocean view. Plus, if you really want to go deep and theoretical, both tears and ocean water contain salt."

The phone cut into my words.

"I'm not answering that. Nothing outside of this apartment tonight, okay? Just us."

I sat on the counter, drinking the rest of the water while I thought about the last hour. It felt like we were turning a corner. There were still a lot of things to be said, but just the fact that he'd come home early, and where we were now spoke volumes.

As Edward dug through a drawer looking for chip sticks, I formed a plan in my head. My plan would still work. It just needed a few tweaks.

"Hey, Cullen?"

"Mmm?" He responded distractedly.

"You doing anything tomorrow morning?"

He smiled and extracted two black lacquer sets of sticks.

"Is it bad I'm not sure what day tomorrow is?"

"Saturday. You doing anything?"

"Just spending it with you. Why?"

"Well, I told Jess I'd pick something up. Was thinking we could take a walk, maybe get a cup of coffee?" I could see the look of doubt flash across his face. "I won't hurl. I promise. If I you are worried about it I can wait outside."

"What, do you think I'm the random type of guy that will stand in line to buy you coffee while you bask in the sun?" He set the chop sticks on the counter and leaned over to kiss my forehead again. "Don't answer that. It makes me sound pathetic."

"No, it makes you cute."

- E - Same Old Places

"So Bella?" We were done eating, and I was clearing away the take out items. She looked up at me. "You really didn't look at the envelope?"

Her brow furrowed, but I glanced at her belly and recognition hit her. "No, I thought we should do that together."

"When do you think the time will be right?"

"Are you that curious? Does it matter?"

"No, I mean. It doesn't matter. But aren't you curious?"

"Oh I am. This is going to sound bad, and I'm not trying to make you feel guilty, but I was all set to see it on the screen the other day, and when you weren't there it just seemed more anticlimactic if that makes sense. I know I won't be able to wait long, but I'm spent tonight, and I want to be able to take it in when we look."

"Fair enough. And if you wanted to wait until he or she is born, it's okay. I admit knowing there's an envelope around here somewhere is awfully tempting."

"Esme's told me stories about you at Christmas. No going digging you hear?"

I laughed. "Scout's honor . . . or prep school honor I suppose."

Work stress melted. Bella and I were just us. Comfortable. Happy to be together. We stayed up later than usual. We talked about mundane things like childcare and diapers and swollen feet. We laughed. Bella cried at a commercial, and then laughed again. It was the best night we'd had in ages.

When the morning came, Bella's energy was boundless. It was also infectious. With temperatures in the low thirties, the walk to the coffee shop was invigorating. Bella's cheeks were red from the brisk air, and I swear she really did have a glow about her lately. I didn't know how she could possibly be anymore beautiful.

"I think I'll just play it safe and wait outside," Bella said.

"Do you want anything?"

"How about tea? Nothing smelly." I reached out and palmed her cheek for just a moment before going inside.

The line wasn't long, but I reached into my coat pocked to pull out my phone so I could check email while I waited. And I found something unexpected.

An envelope. I pulled it out and stared at it. It only took a second to realize what it was. I ran my fingers down the edge. Then I put it back in my pocket.

"That was a short wait," Bella said when I handed her a drink. "Anything unusual?"

She took a sip, avoiding eye contact.

"Nope. Nothing at all." Two could play the surprise game.

Tiffany's wasn't busy yet. We were greeted enthusiastically, of course.

"I know last time, our big finale was here, but I can shake things up a little." She handed me a box Jess had left for her. "No note this time. I don't think you'll need it."

I may be a man, but I admit, I had to fight the urge to cry when I opened the box. The starfish cufflinks were the most direct comparison to the lapis starfish I'd given her. Our love was infinite. Expanding even.

"They're perfect. I almost wish I were wearing a suit now."

"Yeah, you don't have a tie for me to pull on either," she teased.

"We can still kiss can't we?"

"As if you have to ask."

We were in the middle of the store, so the kiss was simple, sweet. Sometimes, those were still the best kind. I pulled away and reached into my pocket. Holding out the envelope, I asked, "Is this the right time?"

Her smile grew wide and she gave a little chuckle. "It's the perfect time."

- B - Behind Door Number One

"Who's going to open it?" He held the envelope elevated between us.

"You." I answered without hesitation.

"Right here?"

"Yeah. Right here. It's appropriate in a way."

Edward took a deep breath and slipped a finger under the corner of the envelope, tearing open the top. He hesitated for a moment before pulling out an ultrasound photo.

I watched his face for a reaction. He frowned, his brows furrowing as he studied the photo. Then he snorted a laugh and shook his head.

"What?"

He turned the photo so that I could see it, valiantly trying to hold back laughter.

"Not even born yet, and he's packing. He's definitely a Cullen."

I swiped the photo out of his hand so that I could study it.

There was no mistaking that silhouette.

"Your dad is going to flip. He's bad enough with Haley. A boy? Oof, this is going to get interesting."

Edward pulled me into a hug, picking me up and burying his face in my hair.

"Screw my dad. We're having a boy." He hesitated for a moment then laughed, "I swear I thought we were having a girl."

"Are you disappointed?"

Edward sat me down so that he could run his hand along my cheek.

"No, nothing about this could ever disappoint. Ten fingers, ten toes. So long as we have a healthy kid, that's all I care."

He kissed me on the forehead and tugged me out of the store. "You feel like heading up to the townhouse? Mom and Dad are in this weekend, and I'm sure Mom would love to see the pictures."

"Yeah, that sounds good. But I don't know if I can handle 30 blocks."

"It's okay, we'll get a cab. It will give me a chance to call Emmett and gloat."

"You are terrible," I chided him. I tried to check him with my hip, but my stomach threw me off balance, and I stumbled into him.

"Careful Gracie. I don't want you falling and hurting the boy."

- E - How Do You Define Family

My parents were overjoyed. It wasn't about the gender. No one really cared, but it was fun to give Emmett grief

about having a future Yankee player.

We decided Saturday was an "us" day, and we took in a movie. Sunday we both ended up working several hours. She was on the couch with a manuscript, and I was in the home office pouring over research that had been handed to me Friday.

By Monday I started to feel my tension return. I knew the 'to do' list hadn't gone down over the weekend. I wore my cufflinks as a reminder of what I needed to do. It was what I wanted too.

I almost forgot there would likely be another delivery. This one came in a shiny new blue box, but what was inside was more than thirty years old. It had been cleaned up, but I recognized my baby cup right away. My mother kept it in a curio cabinet in the music room. I might have thought it was a replica save for the *EAC* engraved into the side.

No note accompanied it. She was leaving it up to me to find meaning now. I had to think back to the bracelet. I'd sent her the silver *E* charm after she learned my name. She was reminding me who I was. It wasn't in a title.

So the next day I was ready. I'd looked at her bracelet several times before bed, trying to memorize the order of the items. Floating heart was next. The form in which it arrived did surprise me. It was a sterling silver bookmark, slid into the page of a new book by Jasper Whitlock. No more Jack Hale. I was aware he was working on something new. I couldn't take my eyes off the cover. It wasn't the actual picture, but I would recognize the scene anywhere. The picture of the four musketeers: Jasper, Tanya, Emmett, and me. It was a rendering. He'd titled the book, "Beach Combers," it was the story of four friends and their adventures. Our days on the beach had been filled with make believe quests and imaginary exploration. I could only imagine how he had woven them into this tale.

I opened the cover to see the picture of Jasper. Older, wiser. He had the traditional headshot, but he'd also included a picture of him, Alice, and Peter relaxing on the beach as well. I had a moment of jealousy.

He'd found the balance that I desperately needed to achieve. I knew Bella wasn't sending me these items to make me feel worse though. She wanted to give me perspective on what should be important. I looked back at the front cover and I thought about where those four friends had gone after that moment and where they were today. It all worked out, but it wasn't without heartache. I couldn't save my son being hurt, and chances were I'd be the source of some pain.

All I could do was love him unconditionally and to be there for him. It didn't seem so hard when you put it like that.

- B - Like Father, Like Son

"Carlisle, this has got to stop."

"Come on, Bella. It's fun. And now that we know the gender, I can get him the right kind of books."

"I read to him every night as it is. There is no way I can finish all these before he's born! And it will be years before he's ready for some of these!"

I sat in front of a pile of books. *Call of the Wild*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Treasure Island*.

"I guess then I shouldn't tell you that a box of all his *Hardy Boys* books are being dropped by the apartment tonight, should I?" Carlisle glanced down at his lap. He didn't try to hide his smile.

Like I would ever refuse them.

"How's he doing, Bella? I stopped by last week, and I almost didn't recognize him."

I sighed and ran my finger over the spine of a book.

"Not sure how best to answer that one. He's trying so hard to be perfect. To make everyone happy. We talked about it this weekend, and I think he gets it, but I am not sure if he realizes that he doesn't have to keep everything under control."

"He is a bit of a control freak."

I raised my eyebrows at Carlisle. He smiled and shook his head. It was his way of acknowledging he was too.

"Emmett went through something similar when Haley was born. It's hard to know how to strike that balance. Going from being an individual to a couple is hard enough. But to go from a couple to parents is entirely different. It's scary."

"I have a hard time imagining Carlisle Cullen being scared of anything. I'm pretty sure Edward would say the same thing."

Carlisle winked at me, and reached out to grab a copy of Jasper's new book off my desk. "I was terrified. From being afraid I'd be a bad father then, to worrying about doing enough for Esme, I felt like the constant screw up. Don't tell Esme, but I did drop Emmett once."

"It explains a lot." We both said in unison, laughing.

"I think he just needs to know that it's okay to not do things right every time. So long as he's true to himself and there for the little guy, that's all that matters. Everything else will work out." I hesitated, not sure how he'd take what I wanted to say. "He wants to do right by everyone, to not let anyone down. He doesn't know how to fail."

Carlisle nodded his head in understanding. "That in and of itself is a failure, Bella. But I think I know how I can help."

He patted the left breast pocket of his jacket. It didn't matter that he was moving gracefully into full retirement, he still wore a suit whenever he went into CI.

"When he was little, he thought I could do no wrong. And for years, he thought that all I did was wrong..."

"Carlisle, it wasn't like that."

He held his hand up to stop me.

"I know, Bella, trust me, I know. My point is that Edward lives in absolutes. And in my experience, the only things in life that are absolute are family and love. Everything else will figure itself out."

- E - The Next Generation

"Your one o'clock is here," Irina buzzed.

"Give me two minutes, and then send him in," I responded. I finished dotting a couple of I's, and shuffled my papers.

"Oh no need to tidy up for me," my dad announced.

"Dad?"

"Yes, I didn't want to interrupt you without scheduled time. I had Irina squeeze me in. It seemed to stress you out too much the other day."

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

He held up his hand. "It's okay. I'm actually here to deliver a gift."

He sat down, and reached into his pocket. "Did Bella send you?"

"Yes, but this is something I thought about giving you anyway. She said it couldn't be more perfect for the final piece. That means something to you right?"

"I think so."

He held out a silver object with two fingers. He gave it a little shake to demonstrate what it was. A rattle. A round silver rattle. Endless. Unbreakable. Like the jade circle.

This one had the face of the man in the moon etched on it.

"Do you remember me telling you that I was over the moon after you were born? Having two boys?"

I nodded, still examining the intricate object.

"Well, I came across this one day at Tiffany's. I was looking for something to give as a gift, just from me. I felt like I should do something. Fathers back then were less useful in the baby stage. Of course, Esme never let you actually use it, but she seemed touched by the sentiment."

"You bought this for me?" I asked.

"Yes. Do you have any idea what Bella wanted with all this? She said she had a big plan."

"I think so," I answered slowly. "I know that she wanted to remind me that I'm not alone, and that it's not all about me."

"I'm sure that's a part of it. I want to remind you of something as well. You can't be perfect, Edward. You will fail. Heaven knows I did. You will not please everyone all the time. But you have to decide who you're willing to let down."

"Huh," I huffed. "Funny, you telling me I can't be perfect. I always thought that's what you expected of me."

"I can see how you thought that, but you see in my eyes, you already were perfect. I just never told you. Now you know." He paused searching for something. "I like to think I did a little better than my own father. You'll do better than I did."

"I just want to do my best. I don't want to let him down."

"Exactly, Edward."

After he left, I turned my chair to look out the window. She sent me two gifts today. I knew what the date was. I just hadn't figured out the right way to respond to all of this. I turned around and pulled up my calendar. It wasn't good. My afternoon was packed, but if I was going to do this right, this was the time to do it.

Several phone calls, a little bribery, and a pat on the back from Irina later, I left the office. I asked Bella if she could clear out early, and sent Demetri to pick her up. I was waiting out front when she showed up.

"What's going on, Edward?"

"Happy Valentine's Day, Bella."

"I was beginning to wonder if you forgot."

"I couldn't. I just didn't know how to show you what it meant to me."

She looked around me to the building. "What is this place?"

"Come on, I'll show you." We walked into the office, and she inhaled sharply. The pictures that adorned the walls clued her in. "I don't want to start missing the important things now, so I thought maybe we could have a do-over. They do the 4-D kind here, and I have such a hard time seeing those grainy black and white ones."

She grabbed my tie before I could start another thought. It was a greater struggle for her to reach me now, so I had to help out by leaning down more, but the effect was the same.

- B - Introducing...

"He has your nose."

"No he doesn't! Mine looks like a ski slope. He has yours."

"So long as he doesn't have the guy's from the copy room, I really don't care." Edward leaned in closer to the screen. "I wonder what color his eyes are."

"We won't know for a few months."

"I know that! I meant when he's born."

I snorted. So many things he didn't know. "That's what I meant. His eyes will be blue when he's born. They change over time."

"They do? That's kind of cool." He continued to stare intently at the screen. "I hope he has your smile."

"I hope he has your brother's coloring," I shot back.

"Hey, I like my coloring!" Edward protested.

"So do I, but a red headed kid and sunscreen? No thanks."

The tech wiped the gel off my stomach and let me know she was done. Edward braced my elbow and slipped a hand behind my back to help me straighten up.

"You hungry?"

I laughed and swung my legs over the edge of the table. "When am I not these days?"

"Good. I made dinner reservations. We have some stuff to go over." He pulled a sheaf of papers out of his topcoat pocket and handed it to me.

"What's this?"

"A list of names. I know you; you are going to be an absolute pain in the ass about finding the perfect name. I figure we have three months to figure it out."

"*Me* be a pain in the ass, Mr. Perfectionist?"

Edward laughed and slipped his arm around my shoulders. "Only when it's important."

To reinforce his point, we had the perfect Valentine's Day dinner. Pizza with extra mushrooms, seltzer for me, red wine for him. He'd have stopped and bought a box of pop tarts on the way home, but I really had to go to the bathroom.

He was waiting for me on the couch when I got done. Just an end table light was on, casting a warm glow throughout the living room.

"Come here." Edward held his hand out to me.

When I got close enough, he reached out to push my sweater out of the way to run his fingers reverently over my stomach.

"Do you think he can hear me?"

"I think so. I've been reading to him, and he definitely reacts to my voice."

Edward stared at my stomach for a moment before leaning to kiss it gently.

"Let's get a few things straight here, okay bud? We root for the Yankees, you'll go to college anywhere you want, and Uncle Emmett is always wrong. You stick with those facts, and we'll be good. Got it?"

As if on demand, my stomach flexed as if the baby was acknowledging Edward's instructions.

"See that? He's listening to me already." Edward grasped my hand, and pulled me down into his lap. One arm supporting my shoulders, his free hand resting on my stomach.

"Thank you." His voice was hoarse, and I immediately knew what he was thinking.

"You just needed a little reminder is all. I may too someday."

He studied my face, his hand tracing along my cheek. His non verbal way of telling me he loved me. Always had

been, always would be.

I stared at his lips, waiting. A kiss almost always followed the hand on the cheek move. Some things about him were predictable, and I was fine with that.

"It's really hard to kiss you when you bite your lip, Bella."

I threw my head back, laughing. I felt his lips on my neck.

I guess I was predictable too.

And that wasn't a bad thing either.

~*~

Original Gifts - New Gifts

- 1. Strawberry Key Chain - Jar of Strawberry Banana Baby Food**
- 2. Jasper Bean - Apple Baby Spoon**
- 3. Crystal Tear Drop - Wave Baby Brush**
- 4. Lapis Starfish - Silver Starfish Cufflinks**
- 5. 'E' Charm - Edward's Baby Cup with EAC Engraving**
- 6. Sterling Floating Heart - Floating Heart Bookmark on Jasper's Book**
- 7. Jade Circle - Man in the Moon Baby Rattle**

~*~

Outtake 4

Dividends in Full Carlisle - The Reckoning

It took every ounce of willpower I had to keep my eyes trained forward. I refused to let what had just happened draw any more attention in this direction.

I did not want to sit there calmly.

The night had been a complete disaster, and sitting there at the table I was fuming. What was it about Edward that made drama follow him wherever he went?

To me, the evidence contradicted everything Bella had argued in her speech.

There was a period of silence while we all took in Bella's words. Her audacity stunned me momentarily, rendering me unable to react.

When I finally allowed my head to turn, I saw Rosalie sitting somewhat smugly, and Esme's eyes watering as she looked down at her plate. Emmett appeared to be anxious. His gaze passed between us all frantically.

"No one's going to say anything?" he asked. "Are we really just going to pretend that didn't just happen?"

Esme trembled slightly next to me, clearly struggling not to fall apart completely.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I was too late. Emmett pushed himself away from the table, throwing his napkin onto his plate. "I can't do this," he stated gruffly before heading toward the door, following the same path Edward and Bella had taken. Emmett's departure was slightly less dramatic, though equally unwarranted in my opinion. I gritted my teeth to keep from ordering him to sit down.

"Well this is just great," Rosalie seethed. "He can't even go one night . . ."

"Please stop," Esme interrupted in a quiet voice. "I understand that you are angry and hurt, and I accept responsibility for that. It's true I haven't been as forthcoming with invitations and offers of my things, but it wasn't because I think any less of you. I just always saw you as the type of woman to want to forge your own way. I didn't think you would want anything I had to offer. I meant no harm tonight. I just thought Bella deserved a fighting chance against this crowd. Clearly, I made mistakes, but I can't handle any more disparaging of Edward tonight. I just can't."

"I know he's your son, but you have to see . . ."

"Rosalie, that's enough," I said, effectively cutting off the conversation. Her mouth closed. "Maybe you should see how Emmett is doing."

It took her a second to process that it was not a suggestion.

"That's a good idea," she answered, scrambling to compose herself. I was probably too short with her, and it would likely be one more apology I'd need to make later, but all of my attention was focused in one direction—Esme.

I have tried to explain to others how much I love this woman. Tried and failed. I could handle almost any emotion she threw at me. She could rage at me; she could dismiss me. I didn't do well with this though, with seeing her heartbroken, especially when I knew I was the cause.

It took me back instantly.

Of course, the night hadn't really been about the earrings, but they certainly had been a catalyst.

When I was growing up, my father didn't treat my mother very well. There were other women; she likely knew it. She put up a very good front, never complaining, and she played her role brilliantly. He rewarded her with jewelry. The greater the transgression, the bigger the diamond. She never seemed to mind. In fact, I think she stopped caring about why she was getting the bauble at all.

Giving Esme any jewelry, then, was a double edged sword for me. It wasn't something I did often or without serious thought. She was a woman who appreciated the meanings behind things. You had to think twice before bringing home the wrong flower or giving an anniversary gift.

When I bought those earrings for her, I knew she was upset with me, and it was warranted. I wanted to do better. The timing was atrocious. For the first time in our relationship, I think she actually doubted the depth of my commitment. I could see the insecurity on her face. I was ashamed that I could do that to her. So, the gift wasn't about an expensive piece of jewelry or the color of the box they came in.

It was about making sure she always knew.

They were a symbol of far more than an apology. Topaz did promote forgiveness, but I had hoped she would see them as something else, something even more personal. Perhaps, she would see them as a part of me.

She claimed I misunderstood everything surrounding those earrings tonight, that I had forgotten why I gave them to her. Was it possible she had never really understood?

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called the driver to bring the car around front.

I touched Esme's elbow, and she nodded. She took a deep, calming breath, and a mask formed on her face.

"I'm ready," she said through a strained voice.

We wove our way back out of the room, shaking hands, smiling, promising tennis on Tuesday or lunch on Friday. No one would have known what waited for me the minute the car door slammed.

Perhaps other men would have been surprised or lost control. I was relieved.

As I said, I much preferred her anger to her sadness.

Esme - Aftershocks

We didn't speak on the short ride across town. I was exhausted from playing my role as the perfect wife, and I wanted nothing more than to go home and eradicate all memories of the night.

The minute the car pulled to a stop in front of the brownstone, I had the door open and was in flight. I heard Carlisle call out after me, but I didn't want to deal with him. Not yet.

When we were in the city, there was always someone at the house, so the door remained unlocked. Laurent was not expected to be on duty twenty four hours a day, but he kept an apartment at the back of the house. If I called him, he would be there in a heartbeat, the natural buffer between Carlisle and me. I hated to admit that it was incredibly tempting, and even more unfair. Laurent did not deserve that, and I'd already made enough mistakes tonight.

Even so, the last thing I wanted to do right now was speak to my husband. I needed to compose myself and cool down before I let him know what I thought. There were things I needed to do first.

Climbing the steps to the second floor, I quickly shed my dress and earrings and washed away my war paint from the evening. With my hair pulled back from my face and a pair of Carlisle's cotton pajamas on, I looked like any other mother, any other woman. Not one caught in the middle of an ongoing siege with no way of stopping it.

I could hear Carlisle downstairs, his dress shoes echoing on the hardwood floor of the solarium. His tie was most likely undone and hanging limply at his collar, a glass of scotch in one hand, the other running aimlessly through his hair. The gesture was his only tell, and it let me know when he was upset or angry. Edward was the same way. They were so damn alike, yet they continuously refused to admit it.

We'd kept the house relatively intact after the boys moved out. I knew they would never come home, but I couldn't bring myself to dismantle the memories that resided in their personal spaces. Emmett's room was classic boy, full of trophies, framed photos, and sports paraphernalia. Pictures of friends and family were stacked on the dresser, along with a few old discarded sporting event tickets.

Edward's room was more organized, less revealing. Books neatly stacked on the shelf, electronic equipment on one wall. A Dartmouth banner hanging above his desk, in open defiance to his father's wishes.

They'd been at odds for so long that it was almost impossible to remember why it had happened or a time when they'd simply just been. The long slow boil had started during Edward's teen years, but it seemed to go back so much further. Even when he was a boy, his relationship with Carlisle had been tumultuous, but there had always been highs to balance out the lows. Somewhere along the line the highs seemed to stop coming, and the lows just got lower. I'd chalked it up to his rebellious years, but as he left his teens and entered adulthood, the rebellion didn't stop, and the distance only grew.

I was probably at fault for being overly protective of Edward. It wasn't that I loved him more than Emmett. I loved them both equally, just in very different ways, for my boys were very different men. But Edward had always needed more. Emmett was always so strong, so loved, so admired. Not just by friends, but by his father too. His sense of strength was one that didn't require support or encouragement, just love. It made life so much easier for Emmett, easier for everyone around him too, as his needs were so simple. Edward wasn't like that, even though one could argue his talents greatly outshone Emmett's, and it made him so much harder on himself. I tried to fill the space for him, showing him as much love and support as I could. I'd never stopped to consider how that might have made Emmett feel. There were things I would have to atone for, with both Emmett and Rosalie. I never wanted him to doubt my love for him; I also didn't want my other son to continue to doubt that his father felt the same.

The phone line in Edward's room was still live after all these years, and I picked up the handset to dial from memory. I highly doubted he would want to talk to me, to any of us for that matter, but I couldn't let him think he was alone. The ring tone was a distant echo; once, twice, three times.

"This is Edward Cullen, please leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

"Hi, Edward, it's Mom." I paused, suddenly feeling ridiculous. What could I say that would change anything?

"I am so sorry, Edward. I don't know what else to say. I wish I could take it all back, both for you and Bella, but there is no way to change what happened, even though I wish I could. I hate the way the evening turned out, and I feel as though I am to blame. My intention was not to hurt either of you, but to help everyone believe what I know you two share."

I sat down on Edward's bed and glanced around his room. There had to be a way to fix this.

"I love you all too much not to believe there's hope," I whispered and eased the handset back into the cradle.

Scooting back up onto the bed, I pulled a pillow down from the headboard and wrapped my arms around it. Even though Edward moved out years ago, I could still smell traces of Edward in this room. He was grown and gone, but he was still my little boy, and he was out there somewhere hurting. And I was completely impotent to help.

"Are you planning on avoiding me forever?" Carlisle asked from the doorway. His words were sarcastic, yet his tone was neutral. He was testing the waters to see how I would respond.

"It's tempting right now," I shot back. "Or are there any cruel words you forgot to say? You can lob them at me. I make a better punching bag than our son ever did. At least I would know why you are angry and would be able to fight back."

The hallway light reflected off his perfect features, his hair still the same brilliant blonde from his twenties. I remembered how those strands of hair felt in my fingers when we first got married, when he would lay his head in

my lap and talk to me about everything. He used to seek out my opinion, wanting my input on everything. He said that I had a valuable perspective on things he sometimes missed. Well this was one of those times.

"Esme, that's really not..."

"What, Carlisle? It's not fair? Tell me you weren't about to say that." I waited for him to contradict me, but he didn't.

"What did he do to make you dislike him so much, Carlisle? Don't blame the incident with Tanya and that girl that the office, because we all know this has been around much longer than that. Why is it that you adore one son and shun the other?"

Carlisle didn't move from the doorway, but I could see his shoulders droop.

"If you gave him a chance, you would see how much Edward has changed. He really loves her, Carlisle, and he's doing everything he can to protect her. Our world is not easy, and you only make it harder. You are going to force him to choose if you keep this up, and right now I wouldn't blame him for the decision he would make."

"He wouldn't turn his back on family."

"No, he wouldn't turn his back on *me*. And probably not Emmett, although there are some bridges to be mended there. But I wouldn't blame him if he did turn his back on you, Carlisle. What have you done to make him want to be here? Tonight was the last in a long string of events. Fortunately our son has someone who absolutely adores him, and will stand by him through anything. You may not see it or believe in it, but Bella really does love him. More importantly, he loves her, and with the stunt you pulled tonight, you may have pushed him out of your life for good."

I watched as Carlisle slid down the doorframe to sit on the floor, his head cradled in his hands. I fought the urge to jump off the bed and run to him, to kiss him and make everything better. It had always been that way with us. He was in pain, but he needed to see what he was doing, not just to Edward but to the entire family. I would not allow him to break us apart.

"I won't be bought off, Carlisle. Nor will either of your sons. Money, expensive gifts and impressive titles don't mean anything without someone there who loves you and believes in you. Edward could walk away from it all right now for her, and if he did, I'd say he was the wisest one of us all."

My husband looked up at me, his handsome features shadowed.

"You need to fix this, Carlisle. This may be your last chance to salvage anything with our son. I've held us together, but I can only be so strong."

Carlisle - Realizations

With her warning, Esme got up and walked out of the room, pausing as she passed by me. I sat on the floor for a long time. I lost track of anything that would have marked the minutes.

A part of me wanted to go after her. I wanted to list all of my grievances with Edward, and ultimately, with her. He was a coddled boy, protected, allowed to get away with everything. Never forced to grow up or make tough decisions. He judged me without having walked in my shoes. Things came far too easily for him, and wasn't a parent supposed to be the one help children live up to their potential? Emmett had gone there naturally; he simply needed less pushing. Maybe if Esme hadn't been so quick to jump in and save Edward every time, he would have

grown up sooner as well.

So, yes, I wanted to run after her. It wasn't logical or good behavior, but I wanted to argue and yell and bring up issues that had been festering below the surface since Edward was a boy.

I didn't, though, because as I went to stand up, I allowed myself to take in Edward's room. I pulled myself up to standing, using the doorway as leverage, and walked inside. I hadn't been in that space in ages. I couldn't even remember the last time. It was probably when he was a teenager, and I was likely upset with him for something or other. I had always been upset with him, after all. He pushed my buttons more than any human being I'd ever known, except perhaps my own father. That thought caused me to pause in the middle of the room, eyes shut, blocking out the realizations that were beginning to form.

I slowly opened my eyes only to be assaulted with his stupid Dartmouth banner. A symbol of his hatred for me, of his unwillingness to do anything to please me.

The bile burned as it bubbled to the surface and I choked it back down.

I let out a shaky breath. I didn't really believe it was my son's duty to please me, did I? Certainly not. I'd been determined to raise a son who could think for himself, who could take risks. Someone who understood people, who had strong business acumen but also knew how to appreciate the people he loved. Someone like ... me.

My eyes narrowed, and I peeled them away from the banner, examining the rest of the room. The room spoke to me. It reminded me who my son was. It told me of his precision, of his intellect. It reminded me of his propensity to bring joy when he played the piano. A boy who loved his mother and his brother. A boy who had forged his own path and stood up to a father who tried to control him.

He reminded me ... of me.

Comprehension crept in like a disorienting fog. I had to place my hand on the dresser to keep myself from collapsing. I hadn't followed Esme out of this room for a reason. I hadn't attacked her and said things that I would never be able to take back for a reason.

She was right.

It was my fault.

How had I failed so dramatically? Had I not been adamant that I would do better than my own father? When had I become him?

With new conviction, I backed out of the room. I didn't talk to Esme. My words would have meant nothing then anyway. Not to her anyway. I only hoped that would mean something to him. I wasn't ready to give in entirely; he'd played a role in getting us to this spot, but I had to accept responsibility for my actions or we would be stuck here forever.

The library in the brownstone was nowhere near as impressive as the one in Southampton. Still, it was the place where I did my best thinking. I drew inspiration from the words of men and women far more astute than I. My phone sat in front of me. No lights, no sounds. Just me, the books, and the phone.

I waited for the necessary words to find me.

There was no way to know whether they would be good enough, but they were all I had.

"Edward, I don't know if you will listen to this message. I believe we need to talk, and I hope you will be open to it. Bella said a lot of things, and I don't agree with everything, but if you don't know that I love you in spite of all our differences, then I have failed as a father, as a man. I would appreciate a call back."

I closed my phone, steeling myself against the silence that greeted me.

I was surprised when she spoke. "That was a good first step."

"Now what?" I asked tentatively.

"You wait."

"He may not respond."

"True, but I believe he will," she answered reassuringly.

"Why would he?"

"Because he loves you, Carlisle. Do you really not see that?"

It was overwhelming. This sudden clarity made me very anxious. Too many new ideas were swimming in my head, eager for an opportunity to be shared with my son. I had no idea whether it was too late to try.

"I don't know how to be patient," I said.

"Well you're not too old to learn."

Sunday came and went, and he didn't call.

It was a very long day, and I was completely on edge. Esme finally told me to go play tennis. Mostly I think she wanted me out of the house. In the evening, I tried to distract myself with work, but I jumped whenever the phone rang or I heard the ding of new email coming through.

I didn't expect him to respond immediately, and I was as much hoping he would call as much as I feared he actually would. I didn't really know what the next step in the conversation was.

The email didn't come until Monday afternoon. By then I'd decided obsessing about it wasn't going to do me any good, and I scheduled several last minute late morning meetings so that I would be forced to avoid my phone and computer for a few hours.

When I saw his name in my inbox, I inhaled sharply. He was in the building, on the same floor. I could walk over and see him, but it was clear in his email he wasn't ready. The tone was formal. They were running away.

I bristled, willing myself not to consider it a typical move on his part.

He was asking for more time.

I had to give it to him.

Esme - Debrief

"How was dinner?"

I wasn't in the house five minutes before Carlisle was there, asking for details. I'd not given him the option to come to the airport, leaving the house with a quick note that Emmett and I were meeting everyone for dinner. Neither of them was ready; they were both close, but they weren't quite there yet.

"It was nice." I dropped my purse on the entryway table and slipped out of my coat. "No, I won't lie, it was great. Their trip to Washington didn't turn out quite like they had hoped, but in the end, I think it will all work out for the best."

Without looking back, I wandered down the hallway towards the library, knowing that Carlisle would follow. He was too curious not to, just like his sons.

"What do you mean the trip didn't turn out like they thought? Did they run into problems?"

There was a bottle of wine open on the table in the library, a glass already poured. I knew it was Carlisle's, but I took a drink and sat down on the sofa.

"What did your digging tell you about Bella's family?" I asked, keeping my tone neutral. It wasn't an attack, and I didn't want him thinking as much. He'd had answers all along, ones that we all should have seen, but we'd never taken the time to look. We'd all been so caught up in other things that we'd missed the details, and in doing so failed in our ability to help ward off Bella's pain.

"Not a lot. Parents divorced when she was little. Dad is the chief of police in a tiny town in Washington. He's said to be a very good man. Mom took off, going from one deadbeat job and boyfriend to another. From what I could find out, the father raised her all by himself."

"That he did. They are very close. Like you and Emmett, or like Edward and me. But we all know what distance can do to honesty." I stopped to take a sip of wine, weighing my words carefully. "They stayed at her father's tiny little house. Edward slept on the couch in the living room..."

Carlisle sat down on the couch next to me and took the glass of wine from my hand. "Our son slept on a couch? Hell must be freezing over."

"An old lumpy one at that. But that's not the point Carlisle." I waited for him to take a drink of wine before reclaiming the glass. It was an old habit of ours, one that came naturally. "Do you remember how angry you were when Edward left and how cut out you felt? Like he was doing things and intentionally leaving us out?"

"Yes," he responded hesitantly.

"Edward just dated people. Bella found out her father was engaged. He's been dating a woman for years, and Bella had no clue. He'd already started moving things out of her childhood home and building a new life with this woman, all the while leaving Bella in the dark because he didn't want to crush her hope that someday things between him and her mother would work out."

Carlisle pivoted on the couch, lying back so his head could rest in my lap. My right hand went instinctively to his hair, combing the blonde strands through my fingers. There were just the faintest traces of grey interspersed with the blonde, so light you could hardly see them. He really didn't look much different from when I'd first met him. The laugh lines around his eyes were deeper, but other than that he was the same beautiful boy with the idealistic heart who just wanted to be loved. And because he wanted so much to be loved it, made him lash out at those who

he felt took it for granted.

"Bella took it hard. I think deep down she never let go of her parents getting back together. I don't think any child could. She comes across as strong, but inside she's just a scared, hurt little girl who doesn't know what it's like to be able to love someone and trust that they'll give it back. We had those details, Carlisle. In the report, in our interactions with her, and we missed them all. You, me, Edward, all of us."

"Is she okay?" he asked. My husband was many things, but at heart, he cared immensely about others and their feelings. He was also a parent, and would instinctively react to a child in pain.

"She will be. She just needed to know that we were there for her, and that she had a family, even if there is no biological connection. I have to give Edward credit; he moves heaven and earth where that girl is concerned."

"What do you mean, give Edward credit? What did he have to do with this?"

I'd learned a few things in my marriage. First and foremost, throw the breadcrumbs out and Carlisle will follow.

"Carlisle, he's not the man you think he is. He's grown up. He loves this girl so much that he swallowed his pride and reached out to ask for help in making this better. He buried the hatchet with Emmett, and accepted that we, as a family, could be exactly what she needed. He needed us to make her whole. He *needed* us, Carlisle. He wanted us to be a part of his life, of their life."

He lay there quietly for a long time, not saying anything.

"That was you and Emmett, Esme. It wasn't me," he murmured.

"You may not look that much different from when we met, but you've turned into a stubborn old codger. He's afraid to ask. He wants your approval, but he's going to do whatever it takes to protect her from feeling any more pain or rejection from a parent." I took a sip of wine and sat the glass on the table. "Funny how roles change. Once upon a time I remember you being the one doing the protecting. Although I was the girl and your father was the grumpy old codger."

He sighed, and reached up to grab my hand, kissing my palm and laying it over his heart. "As much as I hate to admit it, I have become him, haven't I?"

"In some ways yes, in other ways no. He would never admit a mistake, and he never could have loved the boys like you do. You don't have to repeat his mistakes Carlisle. I know you don't want to. There are amazing things coming soon, I know it. This girl is the one, and the family needs to evolve to accept that. Someday, maybe soon, they are going to have kids, and he's going to need someone to talk to about the challenges of fatherhood. Do you really think you want to miss that?"

Carlisle laughed, but I didn't miss the hit of a tear that he quickly batted away. "Oh god, can you imagine him with a little boy? I would pay to see that."

I leaned over and kissed his forehead. My husband was a good man, so full of love. He just needed a kick in the rear every once in a while to keep him on the right path.

"Then get up off your ass, you old codger. You don't have to pay. He might just let you in for free if you ask."

Carlisle - Perspective

The years have been good to me. I have everything a man could want. I have more than I deserved.

I have been all over the world, and I've met heads of state, celebrities, and CEOs of every major corporation. I've seen the seven wonders; I've gone on a safari. I even own my own damn island.

Still, as I sat on the leather couch, book in hand, looking out into the dark space where I knew the ocean met the sand, I could not deny this was my favorite place in the world. In this house, filled with the people who mattered more to me than anyone rich, famous, or powerful.

The house was quiet now, after a day filled with food and laughter. And of course, our annual football ritual. Since that day when Bella had organized the famous Emmett de-pantsing, each year one of us became a target. The teams grew as children were added.

I was brought out of my memory by the sound of shuffling in the room. I started, assuming it was Emmett's dog, who had a penchant for eating my books. "Yogi?"

I was met with a telltale giggle. I played a long.

"Yogi? Is that you? Are you eating my books again?"

The giggle grew louder.

"Go on, get out of here, Yogi."

"No, Grandpa, it's me!"

A little boy jumped out from behind a stack, holding a large picture book.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed, sport?"

"Can't sleep. Busy day," he said thoughtfully. Such a thinker, like his dad. Or his grandpa.

He held up the book higher, asking permission. I'd replaced several bottom rows with kid friendly options, and he was the one who raided them the most. I laughed. "Come here."

He curled into my lap. He was out before I finished the last sentence of the book. I set it down on the on the floor and ran my hands through his hair, too much like his father's for his own good.

"Hey, Dad, have you seen . . ." Edward came into the room and stopped short when he saw us. I held up my finger to my mouth to shush him. He whispered back, "Oh."

"I'll bring him up in minute," I answered.

"Thanks," he mouthed back at me.

I smiled as he left the room. Edward was a good father. Better than I ever was.

I looked down at the sleeping boy in my lap, and my heart clenched when I realized how close I came to missing out on this.

In the end, Esme was wrong. I did have to pay to be part of it. It wasn't much. Just my pride.

I leaned down and kissed his forehead, shifting him in my arms to carry him to bed.

It was a small investment, really, when the return was this big.

~*~