



Fridays at Noon

troublefollows1017

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Table of Contents

[Summary](#)

[1. Chapter 1](#)

[2. Chapter 2](#)

[3. Chapter 3](#)

[4. Chapter 4](#)

[5. Chapter 5](#)

[6. Chapter 6](#)

[7. Chapter 7](#)

[8. Chapter 8](#)

[9. Chapter 9](#)

[10. Chapter 10](#)

[11. Ch 10 Outtake EPOV](#)

[12. Chapter 11](#)

[13. Chapter 12](#)

[14. Chapter 13](#)

[15. Outtake Saturday at Six](#)

[16. Chapter 14](#)

[17. Chapter 15](#)

[18. Chapter 16](#)

[19. Chapter 17](#)

[20. Chapter 18](#)

[21. Chapter 19](#)

[22. Chapter 20](#)

[23. Chapter 21](#)

[24. Chapter 22](#)

[25. Chapter 23](#)

[26. Chapter 24](#)

[27. Edward's Birthday](#)

[28. Chapter 25](#)

[29. Chapter 26](#)

[30. Chapter 27](#)

[31. Chapter 28](#)

[32. Epilogue](#)

Summary

Edward Masen's life intersects with Bella's at the restaurant he dines at for lunch every Friday. He's handsome, arrogant, and is used to avoiding love. She isn't impressed by the things that usually have women falling at his feet. AH/AU.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1

Friday, June 18th at Noon

I finished refilling all of the salt shakers, placed fresh flowers in all the vases on the tables in the main dining area, helped cut up the fruit for the bar, took orders for two tables, and now wanted two minutes in the back room without my damn heels on while I waited for my tables' food. I never wore heels but they were a required part of the uniform. How I hadn't sprained an ankle yet was beyond me.

"Bella! There you are!" Rosalie snapped as she came through the door and spotted me. "Jessica's not coming in, and I need someone to cover the private dining room."

"And you want that person to be me?" I said, sounding a little too shocked for her liking.

She narrowed her hazel eyes at me. Rosalie didn't have to say anything, she invoked fear deep within me with only a look.

I shook my head and tried to come off more confident. "I mean, absolutely. Whatever, you need, Rosalie."

Waiting tables was not my chosen profession. It was more like my *needed* profession, needed if I was going to have money to live somewhere and occasionally eat. I was an English teacher by trade, but due to recent cutbacks and the fact that I was on the bottom of the totem pole, I was let go at the end of the school year. The entire economic downturn was making it hard to find a job anywhere. Lucky for me, my roommate, Jasper, talked his sister, Rosalie, into giving me a job at the restaurant she managed in the heart of downtown Seattle.

I had never worked at a restaurant before, but I was good at cooking dinner for my dad when I was in high school. I figured it couldn't be that hard to take some orders and schlep out food. I didn't have to cook anything, just deliver it to the customer. Things at Eclipse were a little bit more complicated than that, unfortunately. My week-long training session was a huge eye opener. I needed to have the menu memorized, as well as have general knowledge of the wine list. I needed to know what wine went with what menu item and be able to describe how each dish was prepared. It was completely mind-boggling. Then there were the rules

of serving. I had no idea there were rules about what side you should serve a person from or about allowing someone to taste the wine before they were poured an entire glass. I felt extremely out of my league but was determined to be a fast learner. It was the overachiever in me. I did not like failing at anything.

Eclipse was also not the kind of restaurant I would ever eat at for two reasons. One, I couldn't even afford an a la carte dessert on my budget. Two, they served things I had never even heard of, things like foie gras and something called ricotta and corn agnolotti in summer truffle consommé. I was more the veggie burger and fries kind of girl. Lately, store brand mac-n-cheese was keeping me alive. The people who frequented Eclipse were wealthy, very wealthy. We had Seattle's who's who dining with us all the time. Sometimes it was some big name athlete or some swanky politician. Powerful business people in fancy suits filled the restaurant daily.

"Mr. Masen reserves the upstairs dining room every Friday at noon," Rosalie explained as she led me to the stairs leading to the private dining room. "Jessica is his server of choice but obviously she thinks I didn't know she planned to go away this weekend with her boyfriend. For some reason, she thinks I am not the eyes and the ears of this place! For some reason, she thought she could screw me over last minute! Well, her little fake sick call just cost her this job. I hope you don't need reminding that I know everything that happens in this establishment, and anyone who doesn't understand that will pay dearly. Do I need to remind you, Bella?"

I shook my head. Message received loud and clear - do not mess with Rosalie Hale. Rosalie was so different from her brother. Rosalie was a high strung Type A personality. It was the kind of personality needed to run a restaurant, I supposed. Jasper, on the other hand, was one of the most easy-going people I had ever met. We met in college and had been friends for a couple years. Besides helping me with the job situation, he took me in when I couldn't afford to live on my own any longer. Jasper had saved me from the shame of having to move back home to live with my dad. For this, I would be eternally grateful. He and I were great friends - completely platonic, of course. He had a girlfriend named Maria, who I thought kind of treated him like crap, but it wasn't my place to judge.

I started up the stairs to the private dining area and tripped on the first step, landing painfully on my left knee.

"Bella," Rosalie spat like it was a curse word. "Try not to embarrass you or, more importantly, *me*. Mr. Masen's business is a big deal. He's here with his assistant today. You should be able to handle a table of two. I would send Emmett in there but Mr. Masen prefers female servers, and you are all I have unfortunately. So don't mess this up."

Don't mess it up. That would be my mantra.

The wait staff at Eclipse was mostly male, which surprised me at first. Then I added up my first day tips. The clientele did tip extraordinarily well. Men could support their families working as servers at Eclipse. I really had no idea what Jasper was getting me into when he offered to help me out. This was not Forks Diner. Hell, this wasn't even Red Lobster, and I used to think that was fancy.

I made my way up the stairs, careful to put one foot firmly on each step, so I didn't fall again. I opened the door and found two men sitting at the long rectangular table. They were both dressed in expensive-looking suits, and one was noticeably older than the other. The older man had short, thinning grey hair and a closely cropped beard. He was a good looking older gentleman, but it was his younger counterpart who took my breath away.

The man had a wild mess of bronze hair on his head. There were strands of reddish-brown hair sticking up in all different directions that somehow looked purposeful. He couldn't have been over thirty, probably wasn't much older than me, actually. His eyes were so green, you couldn't help but take notice of them even from across the room. Then there was the jaw porn. Oh my, did the man have a jawline that made me want to touch it, preferably with my tongue.

The two men were engaged in a serious conversation and paid no attention to me. I stood patiently to the side, waiting for them to acknowledge me, so I could welcome them and explain our specials for the day.

"I swear Alec, if I had a fucking nickel for every time someone has told me they're sorry today," the younger man ranted. I couldn't help but think he should be a little bit more careful about talking to his boss like that.

"I know, Edward. I know."

"It's ridiculous," he huffed, running his hand through that mess of hair on his head. He turned his head just enough to catch sight of me. "What?"

Oh shit. He was talking to me.

"Where's Jessica? We've been here for five minutes, and no Jessica."

I stepped further into the room and tried to smile even though I was so nervous, I could feel the sweat beads forming on my forehead.

"Sorry, Jessica is out today. My name is Isabella, I'll be your server this afternoon." I hated using my full name, but Rosalie insisted that Isabella sounded more formal and should be the name I used with customers.

"See!" The young man pounded his fist on the table, making the silverware and glasses rattle. "What did I tell you? *Sorry*. It's all I've heard today!" he shouted.

This guy might've been hot, but maybe hot-headed was a more accurate description.

"Relax, it's not her fault Jessica's not here. Right, Isabella?" The man I assumed to be Mr. Masen looked up at me with a reassuring smile.

"Right, sir," I replied nervously, trying to focus on the much more polite Mr. Masen. His assistant could really take some lessons on how to treat people who handle his food. I handed them a menu and began explaining our daily specials. "Today we have two specials-

"I don't need to hear the specials," the snippy assistant said, never even opening his menu. "We'd like a bottle of your Romanée-Conti, 2000 preferably, but 2004 will do as well. I'll have the heirloom lettuce to start and then the lamb."

I blinked a few times, not sure I heard him correct. I did not have our significantly long wine list memorized, but I knew that was one of the most expensive kinds of wine we offered. Bottles of that stuff didn't cost hundreds of dollars, they cost thousands - a few thousand. I looked at his boss for some sign that maybe he shouldn't be ordering such an expensive bottle. Mr. Masen was busy looking at the menu.

"I'll start out with the soup and then the beef short ribs," he smiled warmly, handing me the menu back. I picked up the other, unused menu that sat beside Mr. Hot-headed Assistant because it was obviously too much work to hand it to me.

"You're ok with the Romanée-Conti?" I asked, wanting to make sure he heard what his assistant had ordered.

"Excuse me?" Edward the Assistant asked through a clenched jaw. His green eyes were alight with a fierceness I was not accustomed to seeing.

"Sorry, j-j-just making sure that was ok," I stuttered.

He threw his hands up. "Did you hear that Alec? I'd be ten cents richer!"

"Edward, relax," Mr. Masen said with great concern. "You're going to give yourself a heart attack before you're thirty."

"I'm sure they taught you in waitress school that you should do what the customer asks without question," Edward the Assistant spat condescendingly.

Part of me wanted to congratulate him on obviously graduating at the top of his class from asshole school, but I mustered up enough restraint to stay quiet.

The only gentleman at the table turned to me with another kind smile. "Whatever Mr. Masen ordered is fine with me. I would never question his taste, even if I didn't work for him."

Time froze. My jaw must have hit the floor, and I wasn't sure how I didn't pass out. Mr. Hot-headed Assistant was actually Mr. Masen/Hot-headed Boss while the older, gentler Mr. Masen was not Mr. Masen at all but Mr. Alec the Not Hot-headed Assistant.

"Of course, sorry," I apologized.

"Fifteen!" the real Mr. Masen roared.

"Sorry," I muttered again because my brain and mouth were no longer connected.

"Twenty! Can we make it a quarter?" he asked, glaring at me with his hard, jade colored eyes.

I shook my head and exited the room as quickly as my feet would move me. I zipped down the steps and managed to slip just before reaching the bottom. My butt hit the second to last step with a painful thud. I jumped up and winced as I made my way to get their bottle of wine and place their food order.

Emmett noticed my fall and followed me.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. My butt's going to hurt tomorrow, and I probably will *not* be earning anything close to a fifteen percent tip today, but I'll be fine."

"How's it going up there? Jessica says Masen can be a real ass sometimes. You'd think a guy who's got billions of dollars could buy some manners."

My eyes went wide. "Billions?"

Emmett laughed, "Bells, do you seriously have no idea who that guy is up there? Edward Masen, CEO of Masen Corporation. He's a software developer, created the most popular software security program in the world right now. Came from money, but in the last couple years, he's made more than everyone in his family combined. I heard he's worth close to twenty-eight billion. He's like twenty-eight years old with twenty-eight billion dollars. Can you imagine?"

Twenty-eight. Billion. Dollars. That kind of money just did not compute.

"Great. Well, that explains his choice of wine. It also explains why he looked like he wanted me dead when I mistook his assistant for him. Great. Just great." I was such an idiot. I questioned a multi-billionaire about a bottle of wine that cost a fraction of what he probably makes in an hour.

Emmett laughed at me again. "Oh man. Don't mess this thing we got going with him, Bella. He reserves that room every Friday at noon. Rosalie will have your head if he stops coming in because you offended him."

"Got it," I replied, needing to find our sommelier, and suddenly wishing Jessica and her boyfriend had waited one more day to make that stupid trip to San Francisco.

Eric, our wine expert extraordinaire, handed me the ridiculously expensive bottle of wine and reminded me for the millionth time to let it breathe for a few minutes before handing it to the customer. I carried the forty-five hundred dollar bottle of wine up the stairs like it was my own child. Something told me that if I fell and it broke, I would be broke because Rosalie, in addition to firing me, would confiscate my next paycheck and then sue me for the remainder, which would still be a lot.

Amazingly, I made it upstairs without falling or breaking anything. I poured the extremely expensive wine into his glass and gave it a few minutes to breathe. I served their appetizers and then handed him his glass so he could taste the wine and approve.

Edward Masen stared into the glass before swirling the deep red wine around. He raised it to his nose, sniffing before he lifted the glass to his lips. I found myself mesmerized. He had pretty lips, even for an asshole. He took a sip but I could tell he didn't swallow. He let the wine sit on his tongue. I watched him swallow eventually and then take one more sip. My eyes were focused on his mouth. I wanted to look away but there was something about him that made it impossible. His tongue poked

out and licked his bottom lip. I strongly disliked him and his twenty-eight billion dollar attitude but his mouth was kind of perfect. He set the glass down and then nodded his approval. I filled his glass and then his assistant's.

I managed to not make another major faux pas the rest of lunch. I served their entrees without causing the nickel-counting Mr. Masen any other reason to shout at me. I was feeling confident that I had redeemed myself and might actually see a nice sized tip in the end. At this point, ten percent was over five hundred dollars. For about one hour of work, I was not going to complain. Suddenly it wasn't so bad that Jessica went on her vacation early.

Everything was going so well, I guess I should have expected something to go wrong. It was just my luck that when I brought up their desserts and went to refill their water glasses, Mr. Masen was barking orders at someone on his Blackberry. He took a sip of his wine and then set the glass precariously near the edge of the table.

Just as I reached for his water glass he shouted loudly, "No!"

I was startled, unsure if he was talking to me or the person on the phone. I jerked my hand away and in the process hit his wine glass over and the very expensive, very red wine spilled onto his very light grey and, most likely, very expensive pant leg.

"Oh God! I am so sorry!" I grabbed a napkin as he leapt back in his seat.

"What the fuck!" he exclaimed.

So much for things going so well.

"I'm sorry. You startled me. I wasn't sure if you were talking to me. I'm sorry."

"I have to let you go, Peter. The incompetent staff here at Eclipse has now stained my eight thousand dollar Caraceni suit with a glass of wine from a forty-five hundred dollar bottle of wine. Have what I need when I get back to the office or else."

He set his phone down and snatched the napkin out of my hand.

"I'm so sorry," I said with a trembling voice. Either he was going to kill me or Rosalie was, my death was a given. "I can get you some club soda."

"Don't!" he bellowed. "Don't get me anything except the check. We're done!"

I nodded and headed downstairs to get him his bill. It took every ounce of self control I possessed not to cry. He was so angry. Angry people made me nervous. I did not like to ruffle feathers. I liked to fly under the radar as much as possible in most situations.

Mr. Masen was sitting in another seat when I returned, dabbing at the stain on his pants with our white cloth napkins. It almost looked like he was nursing a wound. I was not a fan of blood so I was thankful I knew it was only wine.

"Sorry again. I'd be happy to pay for the dry cleaning," I offered to be polite. It seemed like the right thing to do, so he could see I was serious about feeling bad.

"Damn right you'll pay!" he spat.

"Edward," his assistant admonished him.

I could feel the tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. "I'm so sorry."

He grabbed the leather bill folder and shoved his Platinum Corporate American Express card in it. When I returned with it, he quickly scrawled his name on the receipt and left. He didn't even look at me. He just stood up and bolted out the door.

"Thank you for a wonderful lunch, Isabella," Alec the Assistant said with his sweet smile. What was such a nice man doing working for such a jerk?

I took the signed credit card receipt and immediately noticed he had not tipped me at all. Well, that figured. I'm sure that covered his dry cleaning bill and then some. Of course, I had no idea what it would cost to dry clean an eight thousand dollar suit. Who bought suits that cost that much anyway? I didn't even own a car that cost that much.

Billionaires. *Scratch that.* Multi-billionaires. That was who bought eight thousand dollar suits and had five thousand dollar lunches.

I tried to push Edward Masen and his horrid temper and his perfect mouth and his sexy jawline and his wicked glares and his desire to collect nickels from everyone who says they're sorry out of my mind the rest of my shift. I was doing a great job, until about two hours later when I was summoned to the host table.

"Isabella?" a man I didn't recognize asked as I approached.

"Yes," I answered cautiously.

"Mr. Masen asked that I give this to you," he said with a smile much like Alec the Assistant gave me when he left. They both looked like they felt sorry for me. I should feel sorry for them. They had to work for Mr. Masen every day. I only had to do it for one hour, and that was more than enough. He handed me an envelope with my name written in a lovely script on the front.

Curious as to what the almighty Mr. Masen would possibly send me a couple hours after our disastrous encounter, I slipped my finger in the corner and ripped the envelope open. Maybe he felt guilty for not tipping me. That would be nice. I pulled out the slip of paper and gasped at what I saw.

"What is it?" Angela, one of the hostesses, asked.

"A one hour dry cleaning bill for *fifty-seven dollars!*"

"Why is someone giving you a dry cleaning bill?" Angela looked as confused as I felt.

He withheld a humongous tip and now was giving me the bill to clean his pants? The man had more money than I will ever see in my lifetime, and he was asking me to reimburse him? I had never been so mad in my entire life. Part of me wanted to throw the damn thing in the garbage. Let him send all the assistants he wanted to come get his flipping fifty-seven dollars. I wouldn't pay it.

I only worked until four on Fridays. The more experienced wait staff got the Friday night tables. There was big money to be had on Friday evenings. Money I could really use after getting screwed over by Edward Masen today.

The more I thought about him, the angrier I grew. Who paid fifty-seven dollars to get their pants dry cleaned? That was highway robbery! I looked at the bill that was paid for with the same American Express card he used here. Fast one hour cleaning - that was extra. The pants were picked up and returned by the dry cleaner - that was another charge. Extra special care for extra expensive pants- another up charge.

Insanity. If this guy thought I was going to pay him back when he went out of his way to jack up the bill, he was kidding himself. I noticed he attached his business card so I would know where to send the money.

Edward A. Masen, CEO

Masen Corporation

1201 Third Avenue, Suite 5400

Seattle, WA 98101

I slipped the card and the bill in my pocket and changed out of my heels. I slung my messenger bag around my body and cashed in my tips for the day, which were sorely lacking. It was a cloudy day, but the temperature was quite pleasant. As I made my way to the bus stop, I passed a bank, and inspiration hit. I was going to pay Edward Masen for his dry cleaning, but I was going to make him feel like the ass he was for asking me to do it.

Being allowed on the 54th floor wasn't as easy as I thought it was going to be. Nevermind the strange contents of my bag when I got checked in at security or the fact that I was wearing a white dress shirt with a red silk tie, a black skirt, black nylons, and black Converse sneakers - I was a stranger in a strange land. Everyone in the lobby seemed to have a security badge and a fancy briefcase. I had to sign my life away and show my driver's license to be allowed on the damn elevator. Once I made it to the floor that housed Masen Corporation, I was met with more obstacles. I should have thought about how difficult it would be to get to the head of a big organization.

"But do you have an appointment?" the man at the desk asked one more time.

"Not exactly, but Mr. Masen requested that I bring him something," I replied, knowing I didn't look like the type of person that usually brought Mr. Masen anything but maybe his coffee.

"Let me get his assistant," the man said, obviously annoyed by me.

I sat down in the reception area, careful not to touch anything that the evil Mr. Masen could charge me for breaking. There were pretty vases and interesting art pieces. I wondered if they cost millions of dollars or if someone just picked up a bunch of things at an IKEA or something.

"Can I help you?" a nice woman asked a few minutes later. How many assistants did it take to assist an asshole? At least two, it appeared.

I stood up with some effort. My bag was so damn heavy and the contents clinked

and clattered because of the movement, causing Assistant Lady to look at it like I might have a bomb in there.

"Um, I'm here to see Mr. Masen. My name is Bel- I mean, Isabella. Isabella Swan. I work at Eclipse where Mr. Masen dined today. I'm here to reimburse him for the cost of his dry cleaning bill. I accidentally spilled some wine on his pants, and I offered to pay. I wanted to come by and give him my tips for the day."

The look on her face was priceless. It was nice to know that everyone else thought it was a little nuts that a billionaire would ask a waitress to pay for his dry cleaning.

She gave me one of those sweet motherly smiles, like I was a clueless child. "Dear, I'm sure Mr. Masen can cover the cost of his own dry cleaning. That really won't be necessary."

"Oh, but, Mr. Masen sent me the bill. He's asking for it."

Oh, he was asking for it that was for sure.

"Mr. Masen asked you to pay for his dry cleaning? He sent you the bill?" Nice Assisant Lady asked, looking completely dumbfounded.

"I have the bill right here," I said, pulling it out of my pocket and handing it to her. There was his credit card info right there on the receipt.

She looked at it and then handed it back to me with her mouth slightly agape in confusion.

"Um, why don't you give it to me dear, and I'll see that he gets it." She put out her hand like I was going to place fifty-seven dollars in it.

"Oh, I'd really like to give it to Mr. Masen personally. I'd like to apologize one more time," I requested as sweetly as I could manage.

She deliberated for a moment and then motioned for me to follow her. She used a special keycard to get us through a door, and then we walked down a hallway into another office area. My nerves started to get the best of me, and I began chewing on my bottom lip until it hurt.

We turned down another hall, and then she pressed a button for an elevator. We got in, and she stuck her card in some slot and the doors closed. A moment later, they opened, and we were on the move again. On this floor, everything was very

open and airy. The floors were marble and the walls were a deep blue color. There was a lot of intricate woodwork and moulding that I couldn't help but notice. The art on the walls up here definitely did not come from IKEA.

"Wait right here," nice Assistant Lady said to me before she slipped her card in another reader and went through a set of large, wooden double doors.

This place was incredible. I could see he was putting his billions of dollars to good use in the interior design department. I tried to slip my hand under the strap of my bag where it was digging into my shoulder painfully, hoping to provide some relief.

Assistant Lady did not come back out, but Alec the Assistant did.

He greeted me warmly. "Isabella, nice to see you again." He offered his hand, and I shook it awkwardly.

"I wanted to repay Mr. Masen for his dry cleaning and apologize one more time," I explained even though I knew he knew why I was here by the apologetic look he was once again giving me.

"You really shouldn't have. Mr. Masen is having a bad day of sorts, and I know that when cooler heads prevail, he will feel terrible about taking your money."

"It's fine. Really. My parents taught me to pay my debts."

"I can give it to him, if you'd like," Alec said, extending his hand like Assistant Lady did.

"I'd really like to give to him personally."

Alec sighed in defeat. He put his key card thing in the reader and opened the doors, holding it open for me to enter first. Assistant Lady was seated at a desk in this area and looked a tad bit nervous.

"Right this way," Alec said, leading me to yet another door.

He knocked, and a voice shouted out, "Come in!"

Alec opened the door and announced me like I was being presented to royalty. Maiden Isabella Swan of Forks here to see King Edward Masen of Asshole.

"Miss Isabella Swan to see you, sir."

Edward Masen looked up from the papers on his desk and sent my heart aflutter. All the confidence I had coming up here seemed to melt away at the very sight of him. A look of surprise took over his face for a moment, and then it shifted into one of perhaps amusement. His lips formed a somewhat crooked grin.

"Thank you, Alec," he replied almost kindly.

With that, Alec the Assistant left me alone with him. I tried to focus on my breathing, so I didn't pass out in front of him from the sheer anxiety of this confrontation. I thought I was big and brave, but I was suddenly feeling very small and stupid.

"I was not expecting you, Isabella. You surprise me, which does not happen very often." He was still smiling lopsidedly. He really was a beautiful creature on the outside. It was hard to not be taken in by his good looks. There were not many people who looked like him. Models and movie stars, maybe. I had come here for a purpose however, and it was not to drool over his pretty face. I was here to remind him of his ugly insides.

"Well, I just wanted to apologize one more time." I reached into my messenger bag and immediately his smile disappeared. Perhaps he didn't trust that security had checked my bag thoroughly enough. Maybe he thought I was going to shoot him.

I pulled out a shiny nickel and placed it on his desk. "Sorry for spilling on your pants." I reached in and pulled out another nickel. "Sorry for not meeting your standards today. Waitress school was a real bitch." And another. "Sorry you are a pretentious ass, who for some reason thinks that he can yell at people and make them a jittery mess when all they're trying to do is make a living because not everyone in this world can afford to buy eight thousand dollar suits or drink four thousand dollar bottles of wine. Some of us scrape by, having to watch every penny and nickel."

I opened the flap on my bag and dumped the contents onto his desk. One thousand, one hundred and forty nickels to be exact. They spilled over the side of his desk and covered all the papers and folders that were sitting in front of him.

"Fifty-seven dollars. I believe that was what it cost you to clean your pants today. Consider us even."

As I headed out his office door, I couldn't help but smile. The look on his face was worth every nickel.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Huge thanks to my pre-reader momof4luvntwisaga for catching my little mistakes here and there.

Ok, here's the super easy way to remember when to check your email for an alert that this story updated - I am going to update every Friday. I can't say at noon but maybe it'll be noon somewhere in the world when I post it!

My goal is for this story to blow all my other stories away - so hit review and tell me what you think or feel free share your sweetest payback story. I've never had the nerve to do anything as memorable as the nickels but now that I thought of it, I wish there was someone to do it to!

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

Friday, June 25th at noon

"Rosalie is looking for you," Emmett warned as I stepped out of the ladies room.

I sighed unintentionally.

"Don't let her hear you do that," he said with a smile that made his dimples stand out.

I wasn't sure why Rosalie needed me now. It was almost noon, and I had two tables that were currently waiting for their entrees. I certainly wasn't neglecting them. Before I went to the bathroom, I had gotten both tables new drinks from the bar. Everything was moving along smoothly today.

I looked out into the dining area and saw that both my tables looked fine. No one looked unhappy or impatient. I headed towards the kitchen to see if I could find Rosalie and check on the food at the same time. Rosalie was coming down the stairs that led to the private dining room as I passed by.

"There you are," she grumbled.

"Emmett said you were looking for me?" I said as brightly as I could, trying my best to appear unfazed by her constant frustration with me.

"You're working the private dining room again."

"What?" I shrieked. "No, no, no. I should not be the one to take the private room this week."

"Mr. Masen specifically requested you. I don't know why since he was so displeased with your service last week. I tried to suggest someone else, but he practically demanded you be his server."

Why in the world would Edward Masen want me to be his server again except to punish me for my little stunt last week? The corners of my mouth crept up at the thought of all those nickels spilling out all over his desk and the look of horror on his

face. I left him speechless, gaping at the mound of silver coins. It really was one of my better moments. If he wanted me to be his server, he was probably going to make my life miserable for the next hour. My smile quickly turned itself upside down.

"I have two tables already. Please don't make me. He hates me. I mean, he *really* hates me. We don't want to lose his business. Someone else should do the private room, j

"Try to earn some sort of tip this time," she said with a wave as she walked away from me, refusing to even consider my plea.

I stomped my foot like a child and went to the kitchen to grab the food for my other tables. Avoidance was not going to get me very far with Mr. Masen, I was sure of that. It would only give him more of a reason to be awful to me again.

Once my other tables were set, I begrudgingly headed upstairs. After one more deep breath, I opened the door. Today, Mr. Masen was joined by a larger group of associates. There were four women and one man along with Alec the Assistant. One of the women was talking and had the attention of the entire group.

As soon as I was through the door, though, Mr. Masen looked right at me. His green eyes seemed softer today. His lips curled into that same amused smile I saw when I entered his office a week ago. I swallowed hard, wishing I had grabbed a drink of water before coming up here. I suddenly felt parched, my nerves getting the best of me.

He looked away and back at the woman as she finished what she was saying.

"So, Denali should be ready by the middle of August."

"Middle of August?" Mr. Masen repeated skeptically.

The woman, who had strawberry blond hair pinned up in a tight bun, nodded. "If Kate's projections are right."

"Oh, my projections are right," a dark haired woman to Mr. Masen's right said assuredly.

"I have a meeting with some important people this week. I don't want to make promises that I can't keep, Tanya," he said, still addressing the strawberry blonde. His eyes flickered back towards me.

"Denali will be ready by the middle of August. I promise."

"You promise?" Mr. Masen exclaimed as she recaptured his full attention. I couldn't read his mood. One minute it seemed like he was pleased, the next, not so much. I could never work for this man. At least I knew Rosalie was going to be consistently bitchy. Edward Masen seemed to have major mood swings.

"I promise."

"Well, if I had a nickel for every time someone made me a promise and then didn't come through, I'd have a lot of nickels, and I don't need any more fucking nickels."

I didn't want to, but I stole a glance in his direction. Sure enough, he was looking right at me, that crooked grin on his face. I smiled back involuntarily. He did have a lot of nickels.

"Let's order our drinks," he said with a nod in my direction.

This lunch went much smoother than the last. They had lots of business to discuss, and it thankfully did not cause Mr. Masen's blood pressure to rise. I managed to get them all their food and drinks without spilling on anyone. I caught Mr. Masen watching me more than once, his eyes following me around the room from his spot at the head of the table. I tried not to let it rattle me, but I could feel my heart beating erratically whenever our eyes met.

I was bringing up the bill when I found Mr. Masen pacing outside the room on his phone. One hand held the phone, one ran through his hair over and over.

"I don't really give a flying fuck what he said! This is what he does. He plays these bullshit games. We are not playing. God, if I could get away with murder," he murmured darkly. Then he turned and spotted me making my way up the stairs. Angry Edward was back. His eyes were cold and hard again. He turned his back to me. "Just handle it. Figure out who it is and don't call me until you do. That's what I pay you all that fucking money to do, isn't it?"

I made it to the top and hoped that I could make it into the room before he hung up the phone. I reached for the doorknob at the same time he turned and reached for it as well. I felt a small spark when we touched, causing me to pull my hand away. I stared down at my feet, afraid to look at him, knowing he was mad enough to want people dead. He didn't just want someone dead, he wanted to make someone dead.

He opened the door and waited for me.

"Go ahead, Isabella! I'd rather not stand out here all day!" he snapped when I didn't move. My eyes shot up to his and I could see the frustration and rage, I could feel it in the center of my chest.

I rushed through the door and he followed. I set the bill folder down in front of his seat and then began clearing some of the dessert plates. He held out the folder with his credit card peeking out the top. I took it without making eye contact with him.

I didn't really expect him to be nice, now did I? He wasn't nice. He had anger management problems. I knew this even though he seemed different today. Edward Masen was a spoiled bully. I couldn't let myself forget.

I returned his bill, cleared away the remaining plates, and asked if there was anything else I could get anyone. When everyone answered they were finished, I waited downstairs for them to leave. They spent another ten or fifteen minutes up there, and I contemplated checking to see if perhaps they had changed their minds and needed something else. Before I could muster up the strength to face Mr. Masen again, his associates began making their way down the stairs.

"Have a good weekend," I said politely as they walked by. Many offered me the same in return or just nodded and smiled.

Alec the Assistant and Mr. Masen were not with them. I went to check on another table in the main dining area, and when I returned, the two men were standing at the bottom of the steps.

"Lunch was wonderful, Isabella. Please give our compliments to the chef," Alec said with his trademark pity smile.

"I will. Have a great weekend, sir," I replied, again avoiding eye contact with Mr. Crabby Pants Masen.

He was not avoiding me, however. He leaned his head towards mine. "Please tell Ms. Hale not to be too mad at you," he whispered, handing me the bill folder.

I dared myself to look up at his face. He was smiling, a devious glint in his eye this time. I internally groaned at the thought of what that meant. I hadn't done anything to make Rosalie mad at me. I certainly hadn't done anything to make him mad, except for unintentionally interrupting his private phone call.

I walked back to the register to enter in his payment and, to my surprise, found the tip section blank. I could feel the heat of my own rage engulf me. How dare he? How dare he refuse me a tip two weeks in a row? Part of me wanted to run out front and see if he was still out there, waiting for his stupid limo to take him back to his stupid office. This was my punishment for the nickels. He asked Rosalie for me because he had planned to stiff me.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Emmett asked. I hadn't noticed him come up behind me nor that I had hot, wet tears streaming down my face.

"Nothing. I should be glad. That's what I should be."

He looked at me curiously. "Glad about what?"

"Mr. Masen didn't tip me again, but it's fine," I said wiping my pointless tears from my cheeks. "I'm glad because there is no way in hell I'm going to work the private room again. Not after being stiffed two times in a row. There is no way Rosalie can make me either."

"You didn't spill on anyone this time, did you?" Emmett asked, cringing as I shot him an evil glare.

"No, I did not spill on anyone! I did fine. There was no reason for him to not tip me today. Not based on the service I provided." I knew this wasn't about today, however.

Emmett roped one of his big arms around my shoulder. "Sorry, Bells. That's just shitty. You should talk to Rose. She'll understand. She's all about customer service, but people can't jack around her staff and get away with it."

I nodded and agreed to talk to her. She just happened to be coming down the stairs as I walked by to go to the main dining area.

"What did you do?" Rosalie said through clenched teeth. If looks could kill, I would be dead.

"Nothing, why?" Masen's last words ran through my head. *Please tell Ms. Hale not to be too mad at you.* Did he say something to her? What could he have said?

"Have you been up there?" she asked, pointing up the stairs.

"Not since they left," I replied, trying to figure out what could be so wrong.

"That room is reserved for a rehearsal dinner tonight, and I expect you to have all that picked up when I return. Do you understand me?"

"Um, absolutely," I said completely confused.

She stormed off, and I made my way upstairs to see what the hell she was talking about. I had cleared almost everything off the table before the busboy even went up. What could Masen have done to make Rosalie mad at me?

I pushed open the door and immediately saw what had her so enraged. The fifteen foot table was covered end to end, side to side in pennies. There were so many pennies that they were on the chairs, on the floor, everywhere. My hand flew to my mouth, and I began laughing hysterically.

Touché, Mr. Masen, touché.

"So let me get this straight, he tipped you with a hundred thousand pennies?" Jasper was having a hard time believing my story as he took another sip of his beer.

"Left me the giant Rubbermaid containers he must have used to bring them in and a dolly to carry them down the stairs, too. I needed Emmett to come with me to the bank because I could not move them once they were filled. He thought maybe they weighed two hundred pounds each. The teller at the bank was so pissed."

"A thousand dollar tip in pennies. That's freaking hilarious." Jasper laughed, his head falling back. "That beats the nickel prank hands down."

Masen had effectively one upped me. *Damn him.*

Jasper and I were enjoying a night out on the town. Maria had gotten us into this swanky nightclub because she knew the bouncer. She was off dancing with her girlfriends while Jasper and I caught up on the week's events. I wasn't into clubbing but Jasper had talked me into it, promising to hang with me.

"You should have seen how pissed your sister was."

"Oh, I can imagine." He chuckled. "You better believe she's going to start charging him extra if he keeps that kind of shit up."

"I don't care what she does to him as long as she doesn't take it out on me," I said,

wiping the condensation from my bottle of beer. "I *am* pretty sure she will not be assigning me the private room for Mr. Masen's Friday at noon lunches any more. At least one good thing came out of this whole fiasco."

"To no more Fridays at noon." Jasper held out his beer for me to tap with mine.

Our bottles clinked together. "Hallelujah!" I exclaimed.

"Jaz, come dance with me." Maria slid in next to him. She jutted her bottom lip out and wrapped her arm around his possessively.

"I can't leave Bella here by herself," he protested.

Maria rolled her eyes. I was not her favorite person. In fact, I had overheard her trying to tell him there was no way she was going to be able to get us all into the club if I came along. Jasper threatened not to come if I couldn't, and Maria changed her tune after some serious pouting.

"Don't worry about me, I'll be fine," I said, knowing he really didn't like dancing, but not wanting Maria to be any more annoyed with me than she already was.

"See, she'll be fine. Maybe she'll even get lucky and have some guy hit on her, which is highly unlikely with you sitting here with her all night. This place attracts some of Seattle's elite. Maybe she can find herself a real sugar daddy to sponge off."

The truth was out. Maria was not happy with the roommate situation. Even though I paid my fair share of the rent, she thought I was taking advantage of Jasper.

"Maria, don't say shit like that," Jasper spat.

"What?" she replied, feigning innocence.

I shook my head and smiled at my friend's attempt to defend me. "Go dance with your girlfriend, Jaz. I got a pocket full of pennies, maybe one will be lucky and I'll find me a man," I said sarcastic enough that he got it and she didn't.

Jasper knew I had no desire to find a guy. The last few dates I had been on had been total busts. I hadn't dated anyone seriously since Mike Newton. He and I broke up soon after we graduated. He moved to California to start a job, and I stayed in Seattle. There wasn't enough between us to make the long distance thing worth it. I was sad about it at first but realized there was no way Mike was the one. When I met the one, I was sure I would know it.

Jasper reluctantly went with Maria to dance, and I stayed at the table, nursing my Bud Light. The night was not going to be as fun if I didn't have Jasper to play with. A couple of Maria's friends came back to the table, and I excused myself to go to the bar and get another drink.

I stood there, waiting for the bartender to notice me. Obviously the fact that my neckline did not plunge down to my belly button and my skirt didn't fall just below my butt cheeks meant I was not going to get served very quickly. Not that I was dressed like a hobo. I had on the jeans that made my butt look really good and a sleeveless blue top that had a decent scoop neck. I thought with my hair down I was looking pretty hot. Apparently the neanderthal bartender, who was flirting with the half naked girl at the other end of the bar, didn't think so.

"Someone call heaven, I think I found a missing angel," an obnoxiously drunk man slurred in my ear. Of course, douchebags like this thought I was hot.

"Sorry, I think you got the wrong girl," I said, hoping he'd lose interest quickly or that the bartender would come over and get me a beer, so I could high tail it out of there.

"If you're wrong, I don't want to be right." The guy ran his hand down my arm and continued to press himself up against me.

"Really, I'm not interested. I'm here with my boyfriend, so back off," I said firmly, pushing him off me.

"I don't see no boyfriend. I see you and me getting down and doing lots of wrong things together," he said, pushing his groin against my hip.

I was ready to smack him when a hand came down on his shoulder and pulled him backwards.

"Touch her again and I will break you," Edward Masen growled, placing himself between me and my drunk admirer.

The guy sized Mr. Masen up and decided he wasn't going to be able to take him. He put up his hands apologetically and backed away, fading into the crowd. I stood frozen in my spot, unable to believe what just happened.

"What can I get ya?" the bartender with the worst possible timing finally asked me.

"Ah," I responded like a moron because my brain had officially turned off.

"I'll have a Grey Goose and tonic and the lady will have a..." Edward looked at me expectantly.

I stood there, unable to make words come out of my mouth. What the hell was Edward Masen doing at the same club as me?

"You were drinking beer, correct?"

How did he know what I was drinking? I stared at him like a moron. He smiled and leaned against the bar.

"How about a Heineken Light for the lady," he said to the bartender.

Of course billionaires didn't order boring domestics. I snapped out of my stupor and decided not to hold back any of my annoyance with his arrogance.

"You don't have to buy me a drink. I'm quite capable of ordering and buying my own drink."

"I'm sure you are," he smirked. "That drunk bastard probably just flustered you."

"I also am quite capable of getting away from idiots, who think I'm easy prey."

"That, I'm not so sure of," he said with knitted brow.

He was incorrigible. I hated when people thought I couldn't take care of myself. I had been taking care of myself for a very long time. Edward Masen didn't need to worry about me. Not that he was worried. He didn't care about me. Why would he?

The bartender came back with our drinks, and Edward handed him a fifty, telling him to keep the rest. Not everyone got tipped in pennies it seemed.

"Thanks for this," I said holding up my drink. "And the help with that creep."

Getting away from him was my only objective. I pushed through the crowd to see if I could find Jasper. I needed him to calm me down. I stood next to a large pillar near the dance floor, searching for any sign of my friend in the midst of all the writhing and gyrating bodies. I took a swig of my beer and cursed myself for thinking it tasted that much better than the beer I had before it.

"Penny for your thoughts?" the silky, smooth voice sounded over my shoulder.

I couldn't help myself from letting out a small guffaw. "I have enough pennies, thanks."

He laughed and leaned against the pillar next to me.

"Well, I could offer you a nickel for your thoughts. I have a lot of those."

"That's funny because I was just thinking that if I had a nickel for every asshole that couldn't take a hint..."

He laughed again like I was truly humoring him. He was really beautiful when he laughed. His smile lightened his whole face. I looked back out towards the dance floor, needing to look anywhere but at him and his beautiful face. My heart was beating double time, and his close proximity was making me feel a little dizzy, which was just ridiculous. I hated Edward Masen.

"I think your boyfriend is having too much fun out there without you," he said, leaning closer and momentarily making me forget how to breathe.

"He's not my boyfriend," I clarified, not knowing why I felt I needed to explain. "He's my roommate."

"Your roommate?" He sounded surprised and maybe a bit pleased.

"A roommate. It's someone you live with and share rent and expenses with because you can't afford to live in this city without one. I understand this might be a foreign concept to someone like you."

"Ah, a roommate. Yes, I think I have heard of those. Thankfully, I have never needed one. I hear they can be annoying, loud, messy, borrow your stuff without asking," he said with a sly smile and twinkling eyes. Oh, how I could get lost in those eyes.

I hate Edward Masen. I hate Edward Masen. I hate Edward Masen.

"Jasper's great. He's a great roommate. I have no complaints," I said, shaking my head and looking back out at the dance floor.

"This doesn't seem like the kind of place I'd find you at. It doesn't seem like your scene," he said over the music.

Not my scene, aka I was out of my league. Poor waitresses probably didn't get in here very often.

"What is *my scene* exactly?" I asked, turning to look at him again. He was staring at me so intently, it made me lightheaded.

"I don't know, Miss Swan. You tend to surprise me at every turn, so I wouldn't dare venture a guess. It just looks like you aren't enjoying yourself the way you should."

I took another drink to distract myself. Did he care that I wasn't enjoying myself? Why would Edward Masen care if I was having fun or not? Why was he even talking to me?

"Come up to the VIP lounge with me," he said so authoritatively it almost sounded like he was telling me not asking me. He offered me his hand.

I didn't move, my eyes moved back and forth from his hand to his face. That face. Those eyes. Those lips. He was being so nice, but I knew from experience that he could turn on me in an instant. Jasper luckily saved me from having to choose.

"Bella," he said, wrapping his arms around me from behind. Mr. Masen quickly withdrew his hand and glared at my rescuer.

"Jaz."

"This guy bothering you darlin'?" he asked, resting his chin on my shoulder.

Jasper was a good friend. He saved me the way Masen had a few moments ago many times over. Not that I needed to be saved very often. Jasper was just protective.

"This is Edward Masen. Mr. Masen frequents Eclipse. Jasper is actually Rosalie's brother," I said, introducing them to one another and hoping Jasper would know not to let on that he knew all about the infamous Mr. Masen.

"Rosalie Hale is your sister?" Mr. Masen's glare became less intense as he digested this information.

"Has been my whole life," Jasper answered with his playful grin, offering his hand. "Nice to meet you, Edward. You're that computer guy. Created Masen Security, right?"

"That's me." Mr. Masen shook his hand but couldn't take his eyes off the other hand Jasper had securely on my hip.

I turned to Jasper. "I think I'm going to grab a cab and head home. I'm feeling tired."

"That'll happen when you work such a thankless job all day. Can you believe some asshole tipped her in pennies today?"

"Really?" the cunning Mr. Masen played along, his eyes going wide.

"Yeah, poor thing had to carry almost six hundred pounds of pennies to the bank a few blocks away from Eclipse by herself because my sister sure as hell wasn't going to do it. I feel guilty because I helped get her the job. Bella's an amazing English teacher by trade."

Mr. Masen seemed truly surprised. He looked at me as if being teacher was something you could tell about someone just by looking at them. "Really?"

"She graduated a year ago from UW, top of her class because she's so fucking smart. She got a job in the city, but was the first to get let go by SPS because of cutbacks and she didn't have tenure. I helped get her a job working for my sister to make ends meet, and then she gets shit on by some rich prick two weeks in a row. That pisses me off, you know?" Jasper was laying it on a little thick, but part of me did want to kiss him for standing up for me.

"I can imagine," Mr. Masen mumbled sheepishly. "You'll make sure she gets home safe, I assume?" he asked, taking a step back.

Again with the concern. He was a confusing son of a bitch.

"Yeah, I got it covered," Jasper replied. "Nice to meet you, Edward."

He nodded. "Goodnight, Isabella," he said before retreating to the VIP section from which he came.

"Did you see his face?" Jasper chuckled, clapping his hands together. "You aren't really going, right? You just said that to get rid of him?"

Did I want to get rid of him? Part of me was thinking I didn't even though the more intelligent part of me was saying I did or at least *should*.

"I think I am going to go. I wasn't kidding about being tired."

"You want me to come with you?"

"And leave Maria? I don't think I need the wrath that would cause, buddy. I'll see ya in the morning." I gave him a hug and headed for the exit.

I stood outside the club waiting to grab a cab when the drunk idiot from earlier appeared. He seemed to have Bella radar or something.

"There you are. I see you ditched that asshole boyfriend of yours. Maybe you should give a real man a try," he slurred, staggering over to me.

I ignored him; perhaps pretending like he didn't exist would help.

"Oh, don't be that way, Beautiful," he said from behind me, his hot breath in my hair. He reeked of booze and cigarettes. "I promise I'll be gentle."

It was times like this, I wished I carried around that pepper spray my dad had given me when I moved to the city. This guy needed an eye full. His big hands grabbed on to my waist, and I instinctively gave him an elbow to the ribs. He let go but started to laugh.

"You're a feisty one, huh? We're going to have a lot of fun." His eyes no longer looked hooded and playful, now they were dark and dangerous. This guy wanted to hurt me. "Stefan," he called out to someone. "Get the car."

"I'm not going anywhere with you," I said as ferociously as I could muster.

He laughed wickedly and reached for my arm only to have both his arms pulled behind him before being thrown to the ground. His face smacked the cement hard. I looked up at the two men standing over him. One was a large black man in a black suit and the other was none other than Mr. Masen.

"I think I told you what I would do to you if you touched her again, didn't I?" He crouched down and pulled the man's head back by his hair. "I think your nose is broken. Better have someone look at that. Isabella, get in the car."

Frozen once again in shock, I couldn't move. Mr. Masen stood up in one fluid motion and grabbed my arm, swinging me around. His touch on my bare arm was electric. It was the same spark from earlier today.

"Get in the car, Isabella," he growled, pushing me towards the street.

At the curb was a black Mercedes with dark tinted windows. There was another man, a young guy with sandy blond hair, holding the door open. He was dressed in the same black suit as the guy who had smashed the drunk guy on his face.

Unable to think, I did what I was told and slid into the backseat of the car. Mr. Masen followed behind me. The blond guy got in the driver's seat while the large black guy got in the passenger seat.

"Where do you live, Isabella?" Mr. Masen asked, his voice filled with anger.

I looked at him and could tell he was furious. The dark shadows of the car were unable to mask his emotions. *Was he mad at me?*

"Would you please answer me? Where do you live?" he repeated frustratedly.

I rattled off my address, and the blond man nodded in understanding, making a u-turn at the next light, since we were headed in the wrong direction.

"When someone says they're going to do something, they really should do it. Nothing pisses me off more than someone who doesn't do what they say they are going to do!" Masen fumed venomously, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

I didn't know what he meant. I told him I was leaving, and I left. I was waiting for a cab. How was I supposed to know that the drunk guy was going to find me?

"You need to find better friends, Isabella. Ones that follow through with their promises."

This was about Jasper? Edward Masen was angry because Jasper didn't make sure I got in a cab. This day could not get any weirder.

"He offered to come home with me and I told him to stay. Don't be mad at him."

"Well, then I guess I'm back to being mad at you!" he snapped, causing me to recoil a bit further away from him. My heart was hammering out of control. I couldn't figure out why I was letting this man have such an effect on me.

"You have no reason to be mad at me. I don't answer to you. I don't even know you!"

We drove in suffocating silence the rest of the way to my apartment. As the car came to a stop on the side of the road, the blond man jumped out and opened my door.

Before jumping out, I paused. "Thank you," I said curtly.

"Goodnight, Isabella," he said quietly from his spot on the other side of the car.

I was happy to get home and climb into bed. It had been an exhausting day, one that was filled with unexpected twists and turns. I hoped to drift off quickly but was kept awake by thoughts of Mr. Masen and his confusing behavior. How could someone be so playful and chivalrous one second and then so unfriendly and caustic the next?

I could picture his eyes in my mind. Those vibrant green orbs that told you right away which Edward Masen you would be dealing with. They could go from the color of soft, green grass to hard like emerald crystals. When they were friendly, they were the prettiest eyes I had ever seen on a man. They almost called to me, asking me to get lost in them. But when they were angry, they frightened me more than anything I'd ever encountered.

Between the penny revenge, the double rescue, and the drive home, I couldn't imagine why someone like him would expend so much energy on someone like me. The more I thought about it, the more unbelievable it seemed. Why did he even bother with me? Like I said in the car, we didn't even know one another. I tossed and turned until I finally fell into a fitful sleep. That was the first night I dreamt about Edward Masen.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Let me start off by saying you all are awesome. The response to the first chapter made me wish I could post Chapter 2 sooner! Blasted weekly posting plan! I will be posting teasers every Tuesday on my blog for this story . . I have a song playlist started and will be finding pictures and have links to things as they come up in the story. I'm new to the blog thing so bear with me...

To clarify a couple things, this story will be all BPOV. Sorry. I love writing Edward but this story line calls for us to not know what the guy is thinking. He confuses her and he is supposed to confuse you too! Someday I imagine I

will write a few things in his POV for fun after all the secrets are revealed. Also, each chapter will take place on a Friday. Bella might fill you in on some things that happened during the rest of the week but the idea is each chapter is a peek into her world on Friday starting at noon. Again, if the spirit moves me there might be an out take someday that fills in some of the time. Saturdays at Sunrise maybe? Tuesdays at Ten? We'll see.

Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for all her help with those pesky commas and missing words.

Tell me what you think of the chapter or just share the worst pick up line you've ever heard!

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

Friday, July 2nd at noon

I grabbed the drinks for Table 7 off the bar and garnished the one with a lime like the gentleman had requested. As I turned, I caught sight of Edward. He was walking and talking with Rosalie. I saw him laugh at something she said and took note of how carefree he appeared today, not like the last time I saw him. He didn't notice me, and that was a relief. I hadn't said anything to Rosalie, but I had a good feeling she was not going to make me work the private room today.

I delivered my drinks to Table 7 and went to find Emmett, who would be perfect for Edward and his special needs. After dreaming about him five of the last seven nights, I felt we were now on a first name basis in my head. Edward was too much of a handful for me, and I could totally admit it. I ran into Rosalie before I found Emmett.

"Private room, Bella."

"Rosalie, I don't."

"I'm not going to stand here and argue with an employee. Go handle the private room," she commanded in her irritated tone. There was no arguing with her.

I made my way up the stairs, resigned to my fate. I was stuck with this gig no matter how I played it. He looked in a good mood when he came in, but I knew better than to bank on his mood being consistent for an entire hour.

I opened the door and found him sitting by himself reading something on his phone. He made no move to acknowledge me, even though I knew he heard me enter the room.

"Can I start you off with something to drink, Mr. Masen?" I decided in real life we would still keep things formal.

"Just water today, Isabella. How are you?" he asked almost nervously.

"I'm fine, thank you," I replied awkwardly. We were both quiet and I felt my face

begin to flush. "No one else joining you today, sir?"

He smiled and shook his head. "Gave everyone the day off for the holiday weekend, aside from my driver and security. I thought about inviting them in, but I think that would make them feel... weird, you know?"

I felt my own lips curve upwards. I could imagine those two guys from the other night, sitting at the table with him in their black suits, not sure what anything on the menu meant or what fork to use for what. They didn't appear to be the talkative type either. Weird would have been an understatement. Didn't Edward have anyone to eat lunch with except people who worked for him? A friend? A girlfriend? A brother? Someone? Anyone? I suddenly felt sorry for him sitting at this big table all by himself.

"Do you want a minute, or do you know what you want to eat so I can get the kitchen started on it?"

"Tell me about the specials today, Isabella. I think I'd like to hear you talk," he said seductively. Maybe I was just imagining it. I had several dreams about him this last week, some of which included him and me doing things that immediately made me blush just thinking about it.

I went over our specials, and after thinking for a minute or two, he ordered the lobster. His eyes never left me, they moved up and down, taking in everything about me. It made me horribly self-conscious. I didn't think I would be seeing him today. Would I have done something different if I had known? Maybe put on a little bit more makeup or done my hair in a french braid instead of a boring pony tail?

Why did I care what I looked like? I mentally scolded myself as I walked downstairs. I was not going to let Edward Masen influence who I was or what I did. He was a customer at the restaurant. That was all. Did I care what the guy at Table 7 thought of my hair? Seeing that he was obviously a member of the Hair Club for Men, no I did not.

I did my job efficiently and refused to be rattled by the constant ogling I received from Mr. Masen. Even in my head, I was going back to our formal, business relationship. He kept asking me questions, though, every time I came in the room. What was I doing for the Fourth? Did I enjoy fireworks? What was the best firework show I had ever seen? Sometimes my answers led to more questions. When I said the best show I saw was in Arizona, he immediately wanted to know why I was in Arizona. How long did I live there? Where was my mom now?

"She lives in Florida now. Jacksonville, to be exact. My stepfather plays for the Suns down there. It's a minor league baseball team. He's a pitcher. He's a lot younger than my mom. Not that it should matter. He's really nice, and he treats her right. We get along ok. He's always been decent to me." I was rambling and knew it, but I couldn't stop because he was just sitting there resting his chin on his clasped hands. His sexy smile was lighting up his face.

"Have dinner with me tonight," he said, making me forget what I was talking about.

"What?"

"Have dinner with me. I can't eat alone two meals in a row. I'll pick you up at six." He just assumed I was going to say yes.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I said with a shake of my head. That was a really bad idea. Really bad.

"Why?" he asked, dropping his hands on the table. "You don't eat dinner?"

I laughed, "Yes, I eat dinner. I just don't think I should eat dinner with *you*."

"Because you don't eat in front of other people?" He continued to play dumb, knowing exactly what I meant.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I don't eat with customers."

"I won't be your customer when we go out," he argued with that devious glint in his soft, green eyes. "I'll be your date. We won't eat here, obviously."

He was hard to resist when he was being this Edward. This Edward made me want to throw caution to the wind and do anything he wanted. There was no guarantee this was the Edward I would get to spend the evening with, however. There were no sure things when it came to Mr. Masen.

"I still think it's a bad idea," I reiterated, setting the bill folder in front of him. He grabbed my wrist causing me to gasp.

"Don't make me beg, Isabella."

He let go of me and pulled out his credit card. I tried to force myself to breathe, but his touch had left me feeling under his spell. It was like I couldn't do anything

unless he told me to. I was his. Resistance was futile.

"Breathe, sweetheart," he softly demanded with a smirk.

I took the bill folder from him and retreated without giving him an answer to his request for a date. Why in God's green earth would Edward Masen want to take me on a date? Why did I tell him so much personal information today? When was he going to turn all mean and nasty? There was no way we were going to make it through an entire lunch without him snapping at me. Maybe if I refused his date, he would lash out. Should I accept so he didn't get mad? That was ridiculous. No one should date someone so the person doesn't get mad at them. I brought the bill back to him, and he was on his phone thankfully. I slipped in and out, even though I knew he wanted me to stay by the look he was giving me.

I contemplated hiding. He would have to leave eventually. He was finished with his meal and paid his bill; he could leave. I was such a chicken. I didn't know Edward Masen well but I knew him well enough to know he was not going to leave without me answering him.

I walked in the room, and he was no longer on the phone. He held out the bill folder.

"Six or six thirty?" he asked, back to assuming I was going to go out with him.

I took the folder and opened it to take the pen, so it didn't fall out when I carried it downstairs. I glanced at the receipt inside and did a double take.

"No, no, no," I said, placing the receipt back on the table. "You are not tipping me two hundred dollars on a bill that's just over a hundred."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I'm not, huh?"

"No. I can't accept that. I won't," I replied defiantly.

"Well, then I guess you better go to dinner with me."

"No."

"I'm not changing your tip."

"I'll change it myself."

"You are so stubborn," he said with his crooked grin. At least he wasn't getting angry.

I was being stubborn, I decided. "Fine. I'll go with you, and you can leave me this ridiculous tip, but I'm buying dinner."

Now it was his turn to be rendered speechless. He stared at me like I had asked him to donate a kidney.

"You can pick me up at six-thirty," I said, uncapping the pen and writing my phone number and address on an order slip. I set it in front of him and walked out, my heart hammering at a rate that could not possibly be healthy.

I was going out to dinner with Edward Masen. Not only was I going out with him, I was buying. What the hell was I thinking?

"Explain to me one more time why he asked you out to dinner, you refused, and now *you're* buying *him* dinner? Were you drinking on the job or something?" Jasper pondered from the couch as I walked out of my room in the third outfit I was considering wearing on my date.

"I think I'm going to start doing that. Maybe being drunk while I wait on him would help. How does this look?" I spun around, so he could appraise me properly.

"Where are you going to dinner? Since you're paying, does that mean he has to slum it at the Olive Garden or Outback Steakhouse?"

"I don't know. I didn't think about that." I began to panic. "What if he chooses a place like Eclipse and orders five thousand dollar bottles of wine? He'd do something like that just so I can't pay. Oh shit." I began to pace. "Shouldn't I have some say in where we go since I am paying?"

Jasper just shrugged. "I've never had a chick offer to pay before. In fact, I don't think Maria even carries money in her purse."

"She's never treated for anything? Not even ice cream or something little?"

Jasper shook his head.

"That's kind of shitty. Not that it's my place to judge," I quickly added, sitting next

to him. I rested my head on his shoulder.

"Lately, I've been feeling that way, too. Sometimes I think Maria just wants me to do her bidding. It isn't about us, it's about her and what she wants all the time. I feel like her puppet, mindlessly doing whatever she asks," he confessed.

"That doesn't sound good," I said sympathetically.

"No it doesn't, but enough about me. You are the one taking a multi-billionaire out to dinner tonight. Imagine the possibilities. Maybe his driver will take you to Kerry Park and close his eyes and plug his ears while Masen tries for second base in the backseat."

I smacked him hard on the thigh.

"Nobody gets to second base with me on the first date, you know that."

Jasper wrapped his arms around me and kissed the top of my head. "Someday, Bells, you are going to release that inner sex goddess and then watch out!"

I punched him in the shoulder and got off the couch. "I should change."

"You look fine. You look better than fine. He's going to be hoping for second base, but really he should feel lucky to just be sharing space with you."

My cheeks burned with the blush his words elicited. "Thanks, Jaz."

Having settled on what to wear, I brushed my teeth one more time before putting on some lipstick and the rest of the finishing touches. I couldn't remember another time I had been so nervous about a date in my entire life. Then I heard a knock at the door causing my heart to pound relentlessly in my chest.

"Should I get it?" Jasper asked, popping his head in the bathroom.

I still needed to put the pins in my hair.

"Fine, but don't say anything embarrassing. I swear, I will put all your underwear in the freezer while you sleep," I threatened.

"Since when do I wear underwear?" Jasper responded with wiggling eyebrows.

"Don't mess with me Hale," I warned as he took off for the door.

I quickly pinned my hair back and took one more deep breath, reminding myself that he was just a man. Nothing more.

I walked out into the living room, and there he was, dressed to kill in a perfectly tailored black suit. His hair was a beautiful mess on his head, and his eyes were a soft, mossy green tonight. He was just a man, the most gorgeous man I had ever laid eyes on, but just a man.

"Isabella. You look..." Edward stopped to choose his words carefully. I felt my cheeks turning pink. "Stunning."

No one had ever called me stunning before. I smiled at the compliment. I could say the same for him. He literally took my breath away.

"So, I'd love to know your secret," Jasper said to Edward.

Edward froze for a second and then turned his head in Jasper's direction. "I'm not sure I know what you're referring to," he replied.

"How you get the lady to treat," he answered like it was obvious. "My girlfriend hasn't paid for a thing since I met her. You must teach me the trick."

Edward's shoulders visibly relaxed. "Yes, well, I believe it has nothing to do with me and everything to do with Isabella. I don't know that I've ever had a woman offer to buy dinner either."

"She's one of a kind, I can promise you that," Jasper said with a wink in my direction. "Now, you kids have fun. Don't keep her out too late. I tend to get worried when she stays out past curfew," he joked.

"Goodnight, Jasper," I said as Edward offered his arm to lead me out the door.

His black Mercedes was waiting for us, along with the two gentlemen who drove me home the week before. The blond one held the door open with a smile. I slid in with Edward following behind.

"Are you going to introduce me to your friends?" I motioned to the Men in Black.

"Brady is my driver, and Tyler is my bodyguard. Boys, this is Miss Swan."

"You can call me Bella," I added quickly, not wanting to be treated like someone who needed to be spoken to so formally.

"Good evening, Miss Swan," they both replied in sync, obviously not fans of calling anyone by their first names.

"Bella," I mumbled.

"They prefer to keep business, business," Edward explained with that smirk.

"So you can respect that request from some people, huh?"

He shook his head and scoffed, "We were never business, Isabella."

I rolled my eyes and looked out the darkened window.

"So where are we going?" I asked, trying to guess based on which direction we were headed.

"Il Bistro at Pike Place. It's one of my favorites. Hopefully you like Italian, since you're treating and all."

"As a matter of fact, I do like Italian. So, that's perfect since I'm treating and all," I replied, happy that he was going to let me do this. Although I hadn't ruled out that he might pull some stunt at dinner that would make me have to pull out my credit card and pray it didn't get denied.

The maitre-de at Il Bistro recognized Edward immediately when we walked in.

"Mr. Masen! How wonderful to see you again. Please, we have your table all ready for you," he said, leading us to the back of the restaurant.

"How's the new baby, Frank?"

"She's great, Mr. Masen. The most beautiful baby girl you have ever seen. She takes after her mother, thank goodness."

"That is good. She'd look a little funny with that mustache," Edward kidded, patting the man on the back like they were friends.

Frank pulled out a chair for me as he laughed. "Watch out for this one, Miss. He'll have you laughing all night. Your waiter should be with you in just a moment."

"Thank you," we said in unison, making us both smile.

"Frank seems to like you. He must not handle your lunch time meals very often," I said, opening the menu and glancing over the prices, glad nothing was too expensive.

Edward quirked a brow, "Are you implying I'm not funny at lunchtime?"

"You are many things at lunchtime, Mr. Masen; funny is not usually one of them," I answered honestly.

"I'll have to work on that," he said with a nod, picking up his menu. "And please call me Edward. This is a date after all."

"Ok, *Edward*." His name sounded so good coming out of my own mouth. I was on a date with Edward Masen.

Il Bistro was a lovely little place, tucked away under Pike Place Market. It was like an intimate grotto with a low-ceiling, whitewashed walls, and rounded arches. The lighting was romantic and there were candles lit on each table. It was quite lovely and not at all pretentious. Edward was full of surprises.

We carried on an easy conversation, while we drank from a reasonably priced bottle of wine and enjoyed a salad before the main course.

"So, do you ever miss Arizona?" he asked, genuinely interested. "It's so different from Washington. I imagine it was an adjustment when you moved here."

I shrugged, "The only thing I really missed about Arizona was my mom. I sort of missed the sunshine, at first. This is definitely one of the cloudiest places I have ever lived."

He smiled. "It makes sense why this was the home of all that emo grunge rock, right? The weather can certainly mess with one's head."

I would have to pay attention to the weather and Edward's moods. Maybe that could explain the shifts. He was looking at me with gentle eyes tonight. They reminded me of what I liked best about this part of the country.

"I like all the green around here. In Arizona, not even the cacti are very green. I don't miss all the dust. There was a lot of dust because it was so dry."

"So you're a big fan of things that are wet and green, huh?" Edward smirked before taking a bite of his leafy salad.

"I guess I am. Cold and wet, not so much, but green and wet, sure."

Then his Blackberry buzzed. Whoever was on the line made Edward's jaw tighten and his eyes darken a little bit but enough to make me nervous. He stood up and walked away from the table to have his conversation in private.

I fiddled anxiously with the napkin on my lap, wondering which Edward was going to return. Tonight had been going so well, but it could easily head south. He returned, avoiding my eyes.

"Sometimes I wish I could turn my phone off," he said apologetically. "Where were we?"

"Well, you've spent your lunch and now dinner learning all about me. You know that I love the color green and don't miss all the dust in Arizona, but I do miss my mom. I feel like I've done all the talking about what and who I love. What about you. What do you love?"

His hand flew to his hair, and his eyes lifted to meet mine. They weren't hard like stone, but they were different. Sadder.

He shook his head slightly from side to side. "I don't... love," he said right when the waiter appeared with our entrees.

When we were alone again, I poked my fork into one of my delicious looking ravioli. "You were saying?"

He looked at me confused.

"You were saying you don't love something, but the waiter came, and you didn't finish," I explained my query.

"I was finished," he said seriously. "I don't love. I feel passionate about certain things, and I care for some people in my family, but I don't love. That's not me."

I set my fork down, suddenly not feeling very hungry.

"You don't love anything or anyone? Nothing?"

"Nothing," he said plainly, taking a large bite of his veal.

I let that sink in for a moment. How could someone go through life not loving

anything? I mean, I loved chocolate dipped ice cream cones from Dairy Queen. Loved them. I would seriously love to meet the person who invented chocolate dip and hug them because it was an awesome invention.

"What's the matter?" he asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

"You confuse me. I don't get how someone can not love *anything*."

"Think of it this way, I enjoy things - cars, music, restaurants like this, certain people, and if something pleases me, I keep it around or revisit it for my pleasure. If it displeases me then I discard it. It's very simple. Emotional attachments are for the weak."

I picked up my glass of wine with a shaky hand and downed the rest of what was in there. He had changed. Just like that he was not the Edward who picked me up at my apartment. He was someone very dark and twisty.

"I'm not sure if I should respect you for your honesty or be offended that you didn't try a little harder to woo me before laying your cards on the table."

"Come on, Isabella. Let's be honest here," he said, leaning forward with his elbows on the table. "No one ever gets past my money and my looks. This isn't about being my soulmate or falling in love with someone I'm not. Why don't you stop playing hard to get and acting like you aren't just like everyone else that wants in my bed or in my wallet. You don't have to work so hard to get me interested. The sex is all I've been thinking about since the moment I met you. The game playing has been entertaining, but come on, I've got women who require much less effort on my part."

I felt sick. He was who I thought he was all along - an arrogant, self-absorbed asshole. He was all about what pleased him or displeased him. This was all about getting me in bed. I was so naïve, so stupid. I actually felt sorry for him. He was shallow and heartless. What a sad and sorry way to go through life. I lost my appetite completely. This date was officially over. There was not going to be any attempt on my part to please him tonight or ever.

"You're right. This *game playing*, as you call it, is getting old, right?" I asked, pushing my plate away. "I'm going to go to the ladies' room and then we might as well go. No reason to prolong dinner when we both know what we want." He needed to be knocked down a notch. I wasn't going to simply inform him I wasn't interested. He needed to feel this one.

"I'll ask the waiter for the check," he answered, looking disappointed for a second

but quickly resetting his mask.

I stood up and willed my shaky legs to get moving. I wasn't going to have much time to pull this off. I grabbed our waiter before I made it to the restroom.

"Here's money to pay for our check. You can leave the change with Mr. Masen but could you give me a good five minutes before you take it over to the table? I could really use the head start."

Our waiter, Angelo, looked at me like I was a little nuts but took the two hundred dollars, helping me rid myself of all things Masen for the day. I was done with him and his ridiculous tips. I made my way to the front door but was stopped by Frank.

"How was your dinner, Miss? Did you and Mr. Masen enjoy yourselves?"

"Dinner was excellent, Frank," I lied, having not really touched my food. "Thank you."

Frank looked around for Edward. "Don't you want to wait for Mr. Masen? He doesn't often bring a lovely lady friend here for dinner. This is usually where he brings his sister. You must be someone special."

Little did Frank know that Mr. Masen didn't think anyone was special, not even his sister, most certainly not me. I could see Angelo at another table. He was giving me my five minutes, but it wouldn't be long before he went back to Edward and gave him his change, revealing my escape.

"I'm going to wait outside, it's such a warm night. Goodnight," I said with as much of a smile as I could muster.

I headed down the cobblestone path along Pike Street to 1st Avenue, hoping the Men in Black weren't somewhere watching the door. My head was clouded with a mixture of anxiety and shame. Shame on me for thinking this could actually be a real date. He had brought me here thinking I would give it up to the Almighty Masen as soon as we finished dinner. I made it to the corner and hailed a cab, turning around to check behind me. The whole ride home I was overwhelmed with the feeling that I was being watched or followed or both. I wanted to get home and lock myself in my apartment, drown my sorrows in a carton of fudge ripple.

I unlocked my apartment door, assuming Jasper was probably out with Maria but surprised to see him sitting on the couch with my fudge ripple and a spoon.

"You're home early," he said, looking at his watch. "I'm guessing Mr. Masen didn't take you up to Kerry Park, huh?"

I walked into the kitchen and grabbed myself a spoon before plopping on the couch next to him and shoving my spoon in the creamy confection. I kicked off my shoes and tucked my legs under me.

"No, Mr. Masen is probably still sitting at our table at Il Bistro wondering why women take so long in the bathroom."

"Bella, what did you do?" Jasper asked with wide eyes.

I leaned my head on his shoulder and shoved some more ice cream in my mouth. *What did I do?* I could feel the tears coming, and I really did not want to cry over someone like Edward Masen. He was not worth it.

I swallowed my ice cream even though my throat was constricted with the emotion I was holding back. "He basically informed me that he was tired of me playing hard to get, that women tend to hop in his bed on demand. My game playing was a fun little distraction at first, but the sex was really all he was interested in. So, I pretended I was game and then snuck out."

"Are you kidding me right now?" Jasper leaned forward so he could turn and see my face. "Oh, Bella. What a jerk. I guess money can't buy a guy class, huh?"

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer. I could feel myself ready to break. Another date I could add to the list of disasters.

Jasper tried consoling me. "He's an idiot, a total loser. He just gave up a shot at the best woman in Seattle, and he's probably too stupid to know it."

"Thanks, Jaz." I plunged my spoon back in the carton.

He let me sit quietly until I could regain some composure. "So, what the hell are you doing home on a Friday night with my ice cream?" It wasn't like Jasper to be home alone on the weekend. Maria always had the entire weekend mapped out. They always were doing something together. There was a movie she wanted to see or a bar she wanted him to take her and her friends to. I never saw much of Jasper on the weekends.

"I broke up with Maria," he replied sadly.

"You broke up with Maria? Why?"

"Why? I thought we established she wasn't the best girlfriend earlier tonight."

"She really wasn't," I admitted, snuggling closer.

"Aren't we a pair? Loveless in Seattle," he sighed.

"Who needs love when you have a good friend and some fudge ripple?"

Jasper kissed the top of my head. "Who indeed?"

A/N: I don't own Twilight but I'd like to think I own Pennyward and Nickella - too much? I think it's funny ;)

Big thanks to momof4luvntwisaga because she is awesome and finds all the mistakes I make.

Thanks again for all the reviews, alerts, and favorite adds. Glad people are liking this story! Thanks to whoever tweeted about it as well. Someone said that was how they found it.

Il Bistro - real place. Pics on my blog. Next post, the day after Turkey day. I'm going to have a house full of crazy in-laws but will sneak away to get Ch. 4 up, I promise. You better believe Pennyward's not going to like being ditched. Teaser on Tuesday - check the blog, .

Also, the super great bspest04 has started a thread for this story over at Twilighted. Go chat with other readers about it, if you like. forum / ?f=44&t=13245 No spaces and change the dots, I'm sure you know the drill.

Leave me some love or just share your worst first date story, we all got them.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

Friday, July 9th at noon

I got to Eclipse before my shift started, hoping to catch Rosalie in a good mood. Jasper had encouraged me to talk to her and explain the whole date fiasco. He said she would understand, but I had chickened out every day this week. Jasper threatened to call her himself, but I begged him not to because I was sure Rosalie would punish me for getting him involved.

The place was so quiet, but as I got closer to her office, I could hear strange noises coming from behind the closed door. It didn't take long for me to figure out exactly what I was hearing.

"Oh, yes, right there. Oh god, yes!" she called out. "Emmett, yes! Fuck, yes! Right there, oh god!"

"Rosie, ughhh!"

I took off, not wanting to be discovered. Rosalie and Emmett together was an interesting development. Jasper's always been concerned that his sister would never find a guy because she worked too much. I guess she solved that problem. I went back outside and paced for twenty minutes, trying in vain to wipe away the images created in my head by what I had heard. When I came back inside, Emmett was the first one I saw. He had a huge, I-just-got-laid smile on his face.

"Hey, Bells."

"Em," I said, keeping my head down, unable to maintain eye contact and hoping he had satisfied Rosalie so that she would be more willing to hear me out.

I knocked on Rosalie's half open door. She took notice of me and waved me in, not looking as happy as I'd hope she'd be. She did look perfectly put together. Not a single hair was out of place. No one would ever know she was in here a few minutes ago getting her world rocked by the gentle giant out there.

"I was wondering if I could talk to you for a minute before my shift started?"

"You're already talking, so I guess so," she snipped.

I took a deep breath and unloaded, "I can't work the private dining room today if Mr. Masen shows up because he took me out on a date last Friday, and he thought that I was just interested in sex, but I wasn't, and so I left him at the restaurant, and now I think things will be really awkward, and I hope that he doesn't cancel his standing reservation because of what happened, but Jasper said you would understand and that you would never make me face a man who thought so little of me that he would expect sex in return for dinner, even though I was going to pay because he totally overtipped me, so that part confuses me a little bit, but everything about that man basically confuses me, so it's not surprising-

"Holy shit, woman, take a goddamn breath!" Rosalie was staring at me like I had another head coming out of my neck.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Word vomit much? You lost me at *I can't*... after that it was like listening to the adults in the Peanuts cartoons, wah, wah, wah." She held her hand up like a puppet, opening and closing her fingers like it was talking. "Is this about Masen again? Every Friday, Bella, you are so predictable. I don't care what your issue is with him, if he requests you and you're here, you're working it. He spends a lot of money here, and I'd like to keep it that way."

"But,"

"No buts. We're done."

"I know about you and Emmett," came flying out of my mouth. I regretted saying it the second I saw her face flush with anger.

"You know what about me and Emmett?" she challenged.

"I know about you and him. I know what you've been doing behind closed doors," I squeaked.

She began laughing. "Are you trying to blackmail me into not making you work the private dining room?"

The fact that she was laughing at me, made me feel like blackmail wasn't what we could call this.

"Who exactly are you going to tell? My brother? The other waiters?"

"I'm not going to tell anyone. I just really don't want to work the private dining room if Mr. Masen comes in. I'm begging you."

Rosalie thought about it for a minute and then stood up from behind her desk. "Here's what I'm going to do, Bella. I'm going to overlook the fact that I gave you this job with absolutely no waitressing experience solely because you were my brother's friend, and he begged me to help you out. I'm also going to forget that you have been a pain in my ass on more than one occasion and that you just attempted to blackmail me. So, instead of firing you right now, I'm going to pretend we never had this conversation, and you are going to go get the dining room ready, and when I need you to work the private dining room, you will smile and tell me you would be happy to. Do you understand?"

I nodded and silently retreated from her office. I was never going to attempt blackmailing anyone ever again. My life of crime was officially over.

At noon, she didn't have to say anything, she just pointed up the stairs when I walked back to check on an order. Part of me couldn't believe he even decided to show his face after last week. The other part knew he would, just to torture me. I made the walk up to the room like a death row prisoner walking to the electric chair. I tried to focus on the facts. He had no power over me. He was the loser that I walked out on. He should be feeling nervous about seeing me, not the other way around.

I pushed open the door and was startled to find a blonde bombshell practically sitting on his lap, giggling and running her fingers through the hair above his ear.

What the hell?

"There's no way lunch is going to be enough time with you," she murmured as she touched his lips with her red painted fingernail.

He playfully nipped at her finger with his teeth, and she giggled in delight, pulling her finger away.

"One of the benefits of being the boss is being able to take as long of a lunch as I want," he said in his obnoxiously velvety voice.

Wanting to throw up, I cleared my throat to get their attention. "Welcome to Eclipse. My name is Isabella. Can I get you something to drink before we go over

today's specials?"

The blonde sat back in her seat, and Edward's cold eyes stared back at me. They were dark today, dark and tired. He was wearing a deep navy blue suit and was as handsome as ever, but I could see the faint circles under his eyes. I didn't know why part of me was concerned as to why he was tired, especially when I hated him with a deep, burning passion. He turned his attention back to his lunch hoochie, I mean, date.

"What would you like, baby? Should we get some champagne?"

"Oh, I love champagne," she cooed.

"Is there a champagne you can recommend, Isabella? Price is no object, of course," he flaunted arrogantly.

"We have an '88 Bollinger that's lovely," I replied, figuring jacking up his bill was nothing but my pleasure. The more he spent on his lunch whore, I mean, date, the better for me.

"Perfect. We'll go with that. I think we're going to start with the caviar staircase as well. Lauren loves expensive caviar, and I know Eclipse has some of the best."

"Of course." I nodded politely. I was unwilling to let him think this messed up situation mattered to me at all.

I closed the door behind me but had to endure listening to Lauren, his lunch hussy, I mean date, giggle as I made my way down the stairs.

I retrieved the bottle of champagne from Eric and placed the order for the caviar. He had already racked up a bill over two grand, and he hadn't even order his main course yet. If he tipped me the standard, I was already looking at four hundred dollars. Of course, he could go back to tipping me nothing since I ran out on him. Anything was possible when it came to Edward Masen.

Upon my return, the two of them were nuzzling noses. It was pathetic and totally inappropriate, but I didn't care what he did with his little lunch hooker, I mean date. It didn't matter to me at all.

I popped the cork, and Lauren squealed at the sound. It was hard to believe she was for real. She was attractive, if you liked women who were gorgeous, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and had perfect bodies. She probably had fake boobs and

no soul, but to each their own. I poured their drinks and left to get their caviar before taking their order.

"You okay?" Emmett asked as I made my way out of the kitchen with the disgusting fish eggs.

"I'm fine, why?"

"You look like you want to hurt someone, that's all."

"I'm fine," I protested angrily. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I'm totally fine. Why the hell would I want to hurt anyone? I'm absolutely fine."

"Good. You're fine, absolutely fine. Sorry I asked," Emmett said with his hands held protectively in front of him.

I was fine. Until I walked in the private dining room where Edward and Lauren, his lunch tramp, I mean date, were drinking their champagne with their arms linked around one another.

Was he kidding me with this? Who the hell did that? No one in their right mind did that.

I not so gently set the caviar staircase down in front of them, spilling some on the white tablecloth. Edward looked up at me with his perfectly arched brow. All I needed was for him to ask me if I was okay like Emmett had. I dared him with a look, but he chose to keep his perfect mouth shut.

"Are you ready to order or do you need a minute?" I tried to keep my tone light and unaffected.

Edward looked back at his lunch bimbo, I mean date. "We're ready."

"I'm always ready, baby," Lauren purred suggestively. I could see her reach her hand under the table and place it on his leg.

"Only for me, right?" he replied, running his thumb along her bottom lip. I think she almost orgasmed, a breathy moan escaped her glossy red lips.

I was definitely going to be sick.

"What can I get you?" I nearly growled.

Edward turned his attention back to me, that pathetic crooked grin on his face.

"We are going to share the Chef's Collection because Lauren has a shoot tomorrow. Models, always counting every calorie even though they're drop dead gorgeous." He picked up her hand and kissed the back of it, causing her to giggle again.

I forced my eyes not to roll around my head. "Super, I'll have that up here for you in no time."

I went to leave, but he called me back, "Isabella, could you refill our glasses before you go?" He held up his empty glass, shaking it like you would to entice a dog to come get a treat.

I turned around with a fake smile plastered across my face and walked to their side of the table. Right away, I could see why he called me over. He had his hand shamelessly up her skirt. I poured the champagne and made a hasty retreat.

Was he trying to show me how women usually acted when they went out with him? Was I supposed to learn from Lauren, his lunch slut, I mean date? Lauren, who let him get to third base in the private dining room of a very classy restaurant in front of their server? Maybe he was just trying to piss me off. Not happening. I was unflappable. I was rock solid. He was not going to get under my skin.

I brought them their lunch and only checked on them once. I couldn't stomach watching her feed him and vice versa. When they were finished with their meal, I returned with their check, only to find Lauren, his lunch harlot, I mean date, pleasantly absent.

"How was everything?" I asked him, even though I could not care less how his lunch tasted.

"Everything was perfect," he complimented.

"I'll be sure to pass that on," I said, turning on my heels to leave, but he stopped me.

"Isabella, can I ask a favor?"

I spun back around, slowly, dreading having to do anything for him. "Sure," I replied unenthusiastically.

"If Lauren doesn't come back in a minute, would you mind checking the restroom? Believe it or not, there are women who tell their date they're going to the bathroom but actually take off instead, spinelessly leaving without a word." His voice began to change from carefully controlled to dark and biting. "They show complete disregard for their date's feelings, not to mention his time. They care nothing about the fact that he may have been concerned that she had fallen ill, or that he was humiliated when the waiter returned with the change from a paid bill and an apology that the lady asked for five minutes so she could escape. Appalling, I know, but it happens."

He might have been mad at me, but I was equally, if not more, disgusted with him.

"I left because you're a pig!" I shouted, unleashing my rage on him. "I left because I have never been so insulted by someone in my entire life! I thought we were on a real first date, but you quickly proved me wrong and naïve."

"What do you want from me, Isabella? What did you think was going to come of this?" he asked, motioning between him and me.

"I have no idea what I was thinking because you are the most infuriating person I have ever met!"

"Oh, back at you, little girl!" he shouted back, standing up and moving around the table towards me.

I moved backwards as he approached, knocking into one of the chairs but grabbing it before it tipped over.

"Well, you obviously have multiple personality disorder. You have mood swings that rival a hormonal teenage girl. One minute you act all charming and playful, and the next you become this totally different person, this horrible, rude, arrogant... *monster*," I accused.

"Why did you agree to go out with me if I'm so vile?" he asked, still advancing on me.

"I don't know. Maybe I thought the nice guy was the real you, and the bad guy was the mask you put up to keep people away. Don't worry, though, you made it very clear that the nice guy was only a game you play to get what you want. You disgust me."

I continued to take a step away for every step he took in my direction. My whole body was shaking, but it felt good to shout at him, to tell him exactly what I thought

of him.

"Who do you think you are?" he seethed. "Nobody talks to me like that. Nobody walks out on me. Most women would immediately regret walking out on someone like me."

"I have no regrets," I asserted. "I don't know who you thought I was, but I am not interested in being with someone because of his money or fancy clothes. *What* is not as important to me as *who* someone is. Your money, your wealth does not impress me, Mr. Masen."

"What does impress you, Isabella? Huh? Enlighten me," he challenged.

"Not you," I responded confidently. "You might be beautiful on the outside, but what's inside is sorely lacking. I'm impressed by kindness and decency, by things like humility and charity. The fact that you thought giving me an outrageous tip would guarantee me in your bed later that day is so insulting - I can't even begin to tell you! I am not like the friend you brought here today. I don't accept champagne and caviar in return for letting you stick your hand up my skirt. If she's the kind of woman who rings your bell, then you were wrong to ask me out because I couldn't be less like her if I tried."

I was fighting hard to keep it together, to not fall apart and cry like a fool, but it was getting harder. Being completely misjudged as a whore will do that to a person. We had circled the table twice, and he was still coming for me, moving towards me predatorily.

"You are a complete anomaly, that's what you are. Like no one I have ever met," he said, shocking the hell out of me. "What if I thought you weren't like every other woman, like Lauren, who has tried to weasel their way into my life by spreading their legs and giving me what they thought I wanted? What if I was hoping you were the one that could help me be the guy who didn't need a mask? What if I did what I did because I needed to be sure?"

That was not what I was expecting him to say - at all.

"Stop running away from me, god damn it!" He pulled a chair out and threw it down on the floor, blocking my path if we made it over there again. That didn't matter though because I stopped moving immediately. He scared the hell out of me.

Edward stood directly in front of me, and my entire body hummed in response to his proximity. It was frightening, yet surprisingly exciting at the same time. He

reached up and brushed my cheek with his hand. My eyes closed for a second in response to his gentle touch, such a contradiction to his aggressive words a second ago.

"I don't apologize. Ever," he stated with no remorse, but I noticed his eyes were full of that sadness I saw at dinner just before he told me he loved nothing. "But I was wrong last week. I was wrong to assume the worst. I was wrong to treat you so disrespectfully. For that, I am sorry. You're a good person, Isabella, and I should leave you alone because I'm not sure I am."

There was this tiny bit of vulnerability there, lurking underneath all the other crap he tried to put out all the time. His thumb caressed my cheek.

"On the other hand, I have no doubt that I am a selfish creature, and even though I know I should leave you alone, all I have thought about since the moment you dumped all those fucking nickels on my desk is this-

He slammed his lips into mine, holding my face to his with his hands. His lips were so soft, and he tasted like the apples from his dessert. In that short moment, it was as if the planets aligned, and all was right with the world. It didn't matter that we had just fought, or that he was a crazy lunatic who brought Lauren, his lunch trollop, I mean date, to Eclipse knowing I would be his waitress. All that mattered was he thought I was good and maybe, just maybe, I could help him be good, too. He was also a fantastic kisser. A really, really fantastic kisser.

He pulled back and pressed his forehead to mine. We were both breathing raggedly.

"Come to my house tonight for dinner. No pretenses. No expectations for anything but dinner and conversation. Give me one more chance to impress you, even though I know I don't deserve it."

I closed my eyes and told myself to say no. I needed to get in deeper with this man like I needed a hole in my head. I silently said no over and over in my head, hoping that would make it easier for those two little letters to come out of my mouth.

"OK," I whispered.

Not exactly the two letters I was going for, but the ones I uttered.

"My driver will pick you up at six," he said, not asking but telling.

"No," I said clearly this time. "I want to drive myself, so I'm free to leave anytime I want to, but I promise to be completely upfront about that if I do."

He appraised me and my demand through narrowed eyes.

"Fine," he relented, taking a small step back from me. My entire body felt the strange connection between us cease. "I'll text you the address. Be there at six-thirty."

"Okay," I agreed.

Lauren returned, looking like she had spent the entire time in the bathroom reapplying her makeup and fixing her hair.

"Everything all right?" Her eyes moved from me and Edward standing much too close to the chair that was knocked over and then back to us.

"Everything's fine, are you ready to go?" Edward sidestepped her question with ease.

"Um, yeah," she answered warily.

"Why don't you go wait in the car. I'm going to settle the bill, and then I'll have Brady drive you home after he drops me at the office," he said dismissively.

"Oh, okay," Lauren mumbled, surely confused by his sudden coldness. She stepped out of the room, and I almost felt bad for her. He had used her to get to me, and it had worked. Something about that didn't make me feel very good.

Edward moved towards me and whipped out a wad of cash, counting out thirty one-hundred dollar bills. He handed me the money and kissed me again, leaving me breathless.

"Keep the change. I'll see you tonight."

With that, he was gone and I was left with an eight hundred dollar tip, a second date, and a lot of explaining to do to a roommate who thought we were going to have pizza and movie night tonight.

I sat on my couch, running my fingertips over my lips for the millionth time. I was

unable to wrap my head around what happened back at Eclipse. I could only say I was ashamedly dazzled by what Edward Masen could do with his lips and tongue. However, I vowed to myself that he needed to do more than kiss well to win me over. He needed to show me there was more to him than that.

My phone rang from its spot on the kitchen counter. I sprang from the couch and grabbed it, hoping like an idiot that it was Edward. Caller ID told me it was Jasper instead.

"Hey," I answered nervously.

"Action adventure or disgusting teenage comedy with unnecessary nudity? Say boobs, say boobs, say boobs," he chanted quietly. This was his attempt at sending me his version of subliminal messages.

"Don't be mad."

Jasper sighed into the phone. "Fine, action adventure it is, but I'm looking for one that has at least sexual situations in the warning."

"No, I mean don't be mad because I'm not going to be able to do pizza and movie night with you." I clamped back down on my lip, knowing he was going to ask me why.

"How come? Did some other billionaire creep ask you out today?"

"No, same billionaire creep as last week," I admitted, covering my face with one hand.

"Bella! What are you doing? Did you forget what he said, what he did?"

"I haven't forgotten, but he actually apologized. I guess he doesn't apologize to anyone, ever."

"Like he doesn't love anyone ever?" Jasper hit below the belt, reminding me of the scariest reason this was a very bad idea.

"He asked for a second chance, and what kind of person am I if I don't give him one?"

"Bella, name one redeeming quality this guy possesses that makes you think he isn't exactly who you think he is?" my friend and protector huffed in frustration.

My fingers touched my lips again, dancing over the skin he touched with his. "I don't know. It's a feeling, that's all."

"How did he even get to you? I thought you were going to explain to Rosalie that you didn't want to see him?"

"I did and she didn't care." I decided against telling him about the blackmail scheme gone bad because that would lead to me telling him about his sister having sex in her office, which I was sure he did not want to know about.

"Why didn't you call me so I could talk to her?"

"You can't fight all my battles for me, Jasper."

"I just hate it when you don't stand up for yourself, Bells. You're letting Rose and this Masen guy bully you into doing whatever they want. Promise me you won't let them take advantage of you anymore, and I'll let you off the hook for ditching me tonight."

I let my head fall on the counter in front of me. "I promise," I replied without much confidence.

"I guess American Pie it is. I'll be home in a few." He hung up, and I only felt slightly less guilty than I did before he called.

I pulled up to Edward's gated mansion at six-thirty on the dot. I manually cranked the window down, as power windows had not been invented when my truck was built back in 1953. I pressed the call button, curious as to who was going to answer.

"Hello?" a deep, gruff voice came out of the speaker. It definitely was not Edward's.

"Um, I'm here to see Mr. Masen. He's expecting me," I said uncertainly. I hated talking into intercoms. I hated not being able to see who I was talking to.

"Your name?"

"Bella Swan."

"Isabella Swan?" he clarified.

"Yes, that's right." I shook my head, forgetting that Edward called me Isabella.

"Could you hold up some identification in front of the camera to the left there, so I can be sure you are who you say you are?"

"Um, sure." I fumbled around my purse for my wallet. I'd definitely never been on a date where I needed ID before. I pulled out my license and held it up to the camera.

"Thank you, ma'am. Please follow the drive up to the main house and park in one of the spots on the east side."

"Okay, thanks."

The gates opened automatically, and I pulled through. You couldn't see the house from the road, and my curiosity was piqued. I figured it was going to be huge. What self-respecting multi-billionaire didn't live in a humongous mansion? Of course, my imagination didn't do his home justice. It looked like I was visiting a luxury hotel not a house. The exterior was all stone. There were wrought iron railings enclosing rounded balconies on every side and a rectangular one set above the main entry. Sculpted bushes sat on either side of the front stoop, and there was a colorful mix of annuals and perennials smattered among the rest of the lush landscaping that surrounded the house. There were so many windows and bays that I could only begin to imagine how many rooms there were in there.

I slammed my truck door shut and stood for a moment, taking the place in. I so did not belong here, but here I was. The front door swung open, and Tyler stepped out. I cautiously walked towards him. I wasn't sure how he felt about my little Houdini act last week, but I imagined Edward was not happy during their drive home, and we all know what it's like when the boss isn't happy.

"Hi, Tyler," I said with a little wave as I approached.

"Miss Swan," he greeted me with a nod. "Mr. Masen is on an important call in his office, but he wants you to make yourself comfortable in the family room. I'm here to escort you."

"Okay," I replied nervously. The last phone call Edward took while we were on a date didn't move things in a good direction.

I reminded myself that I drove here and I could drive away whenever I wanted. No one was going to make me stay - except for giant bodyguards like Tyler. He could

probably make me stay if he wanted to. That was crazy. Edward was not going to kidnap me. People knew I was here. People would look for me if I went missing. Of course, this place was so immense it may take them a few days to find me, but eventually they would find me.

"This way." Tyler nodded to the left as we entered.

The inside was even more impressive than the outside. Everything was meticulously designed. Marble floors in the foyer transitioned into hardwood as we made our way down the hall. Tyler led me into a room that was decorated in golden and chocolate brown tones. There was a lit fireplace along the back wall, surrounded by two large bookcases. A flat screen television, twice the size of the TV Jasper owned, hung above the lit fireplace. Mirrors backed the bookcases, making the room look like it went on forever. Two L-shaped couches sat in the middle of the room with a leather-covered coffee table in the center of them.

"Mr. Masen should be finished shortly," Tyler said before leaving me alone in this place.

I felt like I couldn't touch anything. Even sitting on the couches seemed like the wrong thing to do. I looked around and was blown away by the enormous CD collection that took up one entire wall. Floor to ceiling was filled with more music than I had ever seen.

"Miss Swan," a woman's voice called from behind me. I spun around to find an older woman dressed in all black. "My name is Charlotte. I'm Mr. Masen's cook and housekeeper. Would you like something to drink, dear?"

"I'm fine, thank you." I wasn't used to servants and security guards and houses that looked like museums. "Actually, maybe a glass of white wine?" I said, changing my mind. Something to take the edge off would be good, but it needed to be colorless so if I spilled in here, he wouldn't kill me.

"Mr. Masen has an extensive wine collection. Do you have a preference? Pinot Grigio? A simple Chardonnay, perhaps?"

Of course he had a large collection. His wine cellar was probably larger than the one at Eclipse.

"Whatever you think Mr. Masen would enjoy as well."

"Mr. Masen is fond of Riesling," she replied, waiting for an okay from me.

"That would be fine," I nodded, having no idea what that was, which meant it was probably pricey and was never sold in a box.

Charlotte smiled and was on her way back to whatever mysterious place she came from. I wondered if there were secret passage ways or walls that moved to uncover hidden rooms. Hopefully not. If that whole kidnapping thing went down, Jasper would have a hell of a time finding me.

I walked over to the bookcase to the left of the fireplace where on one shelf there were some framed photographs. One picture was of Edward and a young woman with short spiky black hair and an infectious smile. He had his arm wrapped around her shoulder as she hugged him around his waist. In another picture, Edward stood with the President of the United States. Not something everyone has on their mantel.

"Isabella." Edward's melodic voice startled me.

"Hi." I turned to face him, feeling like I had been caught snooping.

I had thought a casual night at his house meant jeans and a nice shirt would suffice, but there he was still in a suit, his tie loosened just a bit and the top button of his white shirt unbuttoned.

"I assume you didn't have any trouble finding the place?"

I shook my head. "No, your directions were great."

"What's not great is that antique you consider a road-worthy vehicle out there," he remarked, his thumb pointed over his shoulder.

I tried to hold back my smile. "Hey, don't hate on the truck."

"I don't hate the truck, it deserves to be in a museum so people can see how their great, great grandparents got around in the old days," he teased, slowly making his way across the room to me. "What I hate is the thought of you driving alone on dark, two-lane highways in something that looks like it could break down if someone looked at it wrong."

His concern would have been endearing if I could have concentrated on anything other than the fact that he was now standing in front of me, his verdant eyes giving my heart a workout. He smelled like sandalwood and scotch.

"Perhaps I should keep you here all weekend and have Brady drive you into the city on Monday with me," he breathed into my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. That particular kidnapping scenario didn't sound so bad as his lips ghosted along my jaw.

He reached up and used his finger to release my bottom lip from the trap my teeth had it in. "Don't do that."

Before I could tell him not to be so bossy, his mouth was on mine, and his tongue was parting my lips. I could taste the liquor he must've had before coming to find me. His fingers combed through the hair on the nape of my neck, gently coaxing me deeper into the kiss.

As easy it would have been to fall into this trap, I was not going to do it. I pushed him away with both hands. He stepped back, giving me an unabashed smirk.

"I was promised dinner and conversation. That was all I agreed to tonight," I reminded him firmly.

"I'd be lying if I said I hadn't been thinking about that since I left you this afternoon," he said coolly, walking over to a side table with a crystal decanter and a couple highball glasses. He pulled the top off and poured himself a drink. "If you're hoping for an apology, you won't be getting one. As I told you earlier today, I don't apologize."

He didn't apologize, and he didn't love. Not exactly man-of-my-dreams material, no matter how good he was at kissing. The reality of that tugged me roughly off the cloud he had me floating on with that kiss.

"What?" he asked with concern. He stared at me intently as if trying to pull the troubling thoughts from my mind.

I shook my head and was luckily given a reprieve from his questioning glare by Charlotte and my glass of wine.

"Thank you," I said, taking the glass from her. I quickly took a sip, hoping it would start working its magic immediately.

"Dinner will be ready at seven, as you requested, sir," Charlotte informed Edward on her way out.

"Thank you, Char," he said, looking away from me finally.

I turned my attention back to his wall of music.

"You have so much music. Such an interesting mix. I see Classical and Rock alongside Motown and Jazz. You have no favorites, huh?"

"My musical preference is usually dictated by my mood, and my moods, as you so eloquently pointed out this afternoon, tend to change quite often," he said coming up behind me.

Mr. Multiple Personality Disorder. The worry over who he might turn into as the night wore on had not diminished. I fought the urge to run away as he put a hand on my lower back. I told myself on the way over here that I was not going to let his physical presence have an effect on me, but I was failing miserably. He was in a good mood, and I didn't want to spoil it, but I couldn't think with him touching me. I stepped to the side, and he did not follow. I took another sip of wine, willing it to calm me down.

"What's in your CD player right now?" I asked over my shoulder.

He let out an amused chuckle. "I don't own a CD player. Every one of these CDs has been downloaded into a computer that is hooked up to the sound system that runs through the whole house."

He walked over to the couch and picked up a giant remote control. It looked like something NASA would use to shoot rockets into space. With the press of a few buttons, the end of Bruno Mars' "Just the Way You Are" came floating through the air.

"Sounds like I was thinking about you before you got here," he grinned at me.

As much as I didn't want to be fooled by him, I was falling for everything that came out of his mouth. I knew my face was probably beet red, and I shook my head in an attempt to dismiss his comment.

"You doubt me?" He cocked his head. "I actually made an Isabella playlist in honor of our second chance date tonight. I'm serious," he asserted when I looked at him doubtfully.

I recognized Kings of Leon's "Be Somebody" as the song that came on next. It seemed like an interesting choice for a playlist that had to do with me. Edward set down the big remote and made his way back over to me. His eyes locked on mine as he took another sip from his glass. The drums in the song seemed to be pounding to

the same erratic beat as my heart.

"I love Kings of Leon," I told him, my nerves continuing to win out over the slight warming effect the wine was finally having.

"I know them, the Followill boys. I could introduce you," he offered, still coming closer.

Of course he knew them. He knew the President. He probably knew a lot of very famous people.

He was back in front of me again, enjoying my reaction to him, to the song. Was he trying to tell me something? Or was this just another game?

Given a chance, I wanna be somebody. If for one dance, I wanna be somebody. Open the door, it's gonna make you love me.

He didn't love anything, but was he in the business of making others fall in love with him?

"I do appreciate the chance, Isabella. I hope you believe that," he said quietly, taking my almost empty glass of wine from me.

He set both of our glasses on an end table and took my hand, pulling me against him like we were going to dance. This was such a bad idea. He had this way of confusing me. I wanted to kiss him again, and that was the opposite of what I should want. I should want for him to show me he was more. More than just a pretty face, more than someone that could make my heart flutter, more than the guy who told me a week ago it was only about the sex.

He began to sway a little bit side to side and then spun me in a small circle.

"What?" he questioned. His eyes were so clear and soft tonight.

"Nothing," I said with a shake of my head.

He looked at me knowingly. "You're difficult to read, Isabella, but I know fear when I see it. What are you so afraid of?"

I laughed through my nose. What wasn't I afraid of? That was a better question.

"You," I admitted as he went back to swaying us side to side.

He didn't say anything as the song continued. His eyes were completely focused on mine. He had to know that he was scary; intimidating, at least.

"I don't want you to be afraid of me," he said sincerely but with such melancholy my heart clenched. He released me from his hold and took a step back. "I promised dinner and conversation. We should eat."

He shut off the music and offered me his arm to escort me to the dining room. His dining room was almost as big as the private dining room at Eclipse. The table could seat ten and there was another lit fireplace on the wall opposite the door. Above the gorgeous cherry wood table was a very modern, rectangular light fixture that hung low. There was a long, narrow flower box in the center of the table filled with a variety of pale colored rosebuds. The walls in this room were painted a light grey and the ceiling was covered in intricately embossed tin tiles.

Edward pulled out my chair for me, getting me situated before sitting beside me at the head of the table. Charlotte walked in almost immediately and poured us some wine. She brought out salads next, and I felt like we were at a fancy restaurant instead of his home.

"I felt bad that you didn't get to eat your meal at Il Bistro last Friday, so I had Charlotte prepare mushroom ravioli. I hope that's okay," Edward said, unfolding his napkin and smoothing it across his lap.

I couldn't believe he even remembered what I ordered.

"That's perfect." I grabbed my napkin before snatching up my glass of wine. Two glasses were bound to make me much more mellow, at least I hoped.

"I'll have to show you around the main house after dinner. We'll save the grounds and other buildings for another day."

I choked on the sip of wine I was taking. "The other buildings?"

"The pool house, the stables, the guest house, the movie theater."

"The movie theater?"

"The movies come to me, I don't go to the movies," he explained almost snobbishly.

What a strange life he led. I couldn't imagine the excess he dealt with everyday. I

didn't know what I would do if I had his kind of money.

He spent most of dinner asking me questions. Today he wanted to know about why I chose to become a teacher. It was flattering that he wanted to know things about me, but this kind of interrogation didn't allow me to get to know him.

Charlotte was not only a better server than me, she bested me in the cooking department as well. Her mushroom ravioli was divine. We ate until we were full, and then he offered me a tour. I made a quick stop in one of the four first floor bathrooms and texted Jasper that so far everything was fine, and I was about to get a personal tour of the Masen Palace.

"When you first came in that was the living room off the foyer. You've seen the family room. Down here, there's also a game room and my office. Obviously there's a kitchen," he said leading me around and occasionally placing his hand on my lower back. "I have a wine cellar near the kitchen and there's a ballroom at the other end of the house that I use for large gatherings and such. It doesn't get used often."

The place was amazing. Fireplaces, tons of windows, beautiful furniture, and lovely architectural details could be found in every room. Edward talked about the art in some of the rooms and where it came from. He had lots of fun things in his game room. We played one game of Wii Tennis and he beat me quite thoroughly. Losing was worth it to see him loosen up a bit and act like a normal guy.

"How many bedrooms does this house have?" I asked, as we made our way upstairs.

"You're interested in my bedrooms, are you, Miss Swan?" he questioned with raised eyebrows.

My cheeks flamed, and I pushed him playfully. "This place is the size of a hotel. I can't imagine how many rooms you have."

"There are seven bedrooms and six bathrooms. There's a gym on this level and then the third floor is a library and the solarium. Then there are the staff quarters."

"Geez, what's in the basement?" *A bowling alley? An indoor lap pool? Creepy sex room full of whips and chains?* "No dungeons or torture chambers down there, I hope," I joked. I was trying to convince myself that not all überreich guys with control issues had weird BDSM tendencies.

Edward's face darkened, and he stopped abruptly in the middle of the hall, his

hands clenched into tight fists at his sides.

"There's no basement," he said quietly. We toured the rest of the upstairs with him not saying more than one or two words.

This was what bothered me the most, not knowing what caused his mood to shift so drastically. I couldn't prevent it because I didn't know what caused it. One minute he was teasing me about asking how many bedrooms were in his house, and the next he was an angry mute. I didn't say anything for fear that the yelling was about to start.

If I hadn't had three glasses of wine, I would be jumping in my truck right now. We were not knocking down any walls here and giving me hope that this was a relationship I wanted to pursue.

My phone chimed, informing me I had a text. I didn't pull it out, afraid checking my messages would seem rude. Unfortunately, ignoring it did not stop it from beeping at me again.

"Check it, Isabella, so it doesn't continue to interrupt us," Edward demanded, almost making me laugh. What was being interrupted exactly?

I pulled my phone out and there was a message from Jasper.

Bill Gates has a trampoline room in his mansion. Can Masen beat that?

I shook my head and shoved my phone into my back pocket. Edward and I went back to our silent tour. After two minutes, my phone beeped again. Edward sighed in obvious irritation.

"Am I keeping you from something?" he complained loudly.

I pulled my phone out again, wishing I could kill Jasper for having the worst timing on the planet.

Gates has LCD screens on the walls that when you walk by them show your favorite art if you wear this microchip. Don't let Masen chip you. Not on the second date, at least. ;)

Someone was bored and spending too much time searching crap on the internet. I quickly texted him back so he would stop "interrupting" my date. I shut my phone off and slipped it back in my pocket. Edward was looking at me, waiting for me to tell

him what was so important.

"It was Jasper. I turned it off so it won't bother you," I said, emphasizing the *you* part.

"It's rude to text someone when you know they're on a date. He should learn some manners," Edward quipped.

For some reason this hit a nerve. "Well, for your information, I cancelled plans with him tonight to be here. If anyone should feel bad, it's me. Jasper's home alone coping with a breakup because his best friend blew him off tonight for some guy who caused her to cry on his shoulder the week before." Edward's eyes shot up to mine, seemingly thrown by my admission. "He's trying to be funny because he's probably worried about me. I'm sure he has no idea he keeps interrupting our very stimulating conversation," I continued sarcastically.

Edward rubbed his jaw with his hand, his eyes blazing at my rebuttal. The wine had obviously taken hold of me. I had no idea where I got the courage to speak up. I readied myself for the possibility that he was going to explode.

"I apologize," he said, walking towards a stairwell that led to the third floor.

The man who did not apologize *ever*, had apologized to me – twice.

"So what did he say?" he asked over his shoulder as he led us upstairs. "To be funny?"

I decided to answer him since he was reengaging. "Did you know Bill Gates has a trampoline room in his house?"

"I did not," he replied, shaking his head, a beguiled smile playing on his lips. "What the hell is a trampoline room?"

We both laughed, relieving the tension tenfold. I shrugged not really sure what that meant either.

"Is the entire floor a trampoline, or is there just a big trampoline in a room with high ceilings?" he pondered when he reached the third floor.

I shrugged again while I giggled.

"Why was your newly single roommate sending you texts about rooms in Bill

Gates' house?" I liked how he threw in Jasper's dating status.

"Before I left to come here, we were trying to imagine how you people lived."

"Us people?" The spot between his eyebrows creased.

"Wealthy computer software developers, who run multi-billion dollar companies and live in Washington State. We were surprised to learn there were two of you."

His mouth twitched in amusement. "What were you imagining exactly?"

"I said you probably lived in a castle," I told him, even though it was embarrassing. I was definitely going to leave out the part where Jasper referred to Edward as Prince Not-so-Charming.

"A castle? Like turrets, dungeons, and moats?"

"Not the moats."

He shook his head and rolled his eyes. "Not the moats."

The third floor was the pièce de résistance. First, there was a private library filled with thousands of books in enormous bookshelves that lined three walls. The domed ceiling had a fanciful mural painted on it. Two oversized chairs were nestled in one corner near yet another lit fireplace. In the center of the room, sat a gorgeous black grand piano.

The library led to an incredible solarium. The roof and three outer walls were all windows with a set of french doors in the middle that led to a rooftop patio. It was still light out but the setting sun cast long shadows across the room. We stood in the library. I could imagine spending days in here. It was like something out of my dreams.

"These are my favorite rooms," Edward said almost shyly.

I ran my fingers lightly across the spines of one row of books. I bet he had all the classics, some looked so old, like they had been in his family forever.

"I think they're mine, too." I smiled at him. He was standing by the piano, watching me. "Have you read all these books, Mr. Masen?"

He chuckled. "No, but it's on my bucket list to do so."

"You have a bucket list?" My interest was piqued. "What else is on there?"

"That's kind of personal, don't you think?"

"Oh, you can ask me about every detail of my existence, but I don't get to know anything personal about you, huh?"

"I find you much more interesting than me," he said, his fingers walking along the keys of the piano.

"You asked me to give you another chance to show me there's someone in there worth getting to know. You have to give a little."

He approached me almost cautiously. He took me by the hand and led me through the solarium and out to the rooftop patio. From up here we could see the entire property. There were two horses grazing in a fenced in area next to what I assumed were the stables.

"I've never brought a date here before," he admitted, looking down at me with those impossibly long lashes framing those eyes that could melt my heart. "I don't let people into this part of my life, usually. I'm a complicated man, Isabella. I can't deny that," he said, turning his back to the view and leaning against the railing as he stared at my feet. He chanced a peek at my face. I smiled sympathetically because I could tell he was trying to be honest and that it wasn't easy for him. His discomfort was clear, but there was something else.

"Now Mr. Masen, you are more difficult to read than anyone could ever be, but I know fear when I see it. What are you so afraid of?" I asked, turning his own words from earlier on him.

"You," he breathed, making my heart stop. "'I have secrets, and I have demons; things that sometimes make me someone people don't like very much. For some reason, I want you to like me."

Edward Masen, one of the richest and most successful businessmen in the world, was afraid of me and wanted me to like him. It was completely mind-boggling.

I took a deep, thoughtful breath. "I like your house. I really like your cook." He pursed his lips, trying not to smile. "I love your library." He nodded but didn't interrupt. "I'm not a fan of the mood swings, but this date is a million times better than last week's."

"So you could foresee perhaps liking me in the future?" he asked with a crooked grin.

I could foresee this relationship going in many different directions - good and bad. The bad scared me to death. The good made me want to take the risk.

"If you let me win at Wii next time, maybe I'll think about it."

He laughed like a carefree boy, throwing his head back. "You know you suck, and I'm very competitive."

I shrugged. "You want me to like you..."

He stopped laughing, and his green eyes crinkled at the edges. I could feel my heart pick up the pace. I wanted him to like me, too. He might not love anything, but he was at least capable of like.

"That I do, Isabella. That I do."

His lips found mine in an instant, reminding me that I had forgotten to mention that I was also a huge fan of his kissing ability.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Happy Friday, everybody! Holy cow - you guys are the best. I can't express how much it means to me that so many of you are taking the time to read this and review. I try to respond to the reviews but have been focusing on the ones that ask me questions but I read them all. Thanks for all the alerts and fav adds and PM's. Big thanks to ltlerthqak for pimping this out in her story and causing my mailbox to literally burst at the seams! She has some awesome readers.

Pics and some of the Isabella playlist on the blog. See what others are thinking and discuss if you'd like on the Twilighted thread. Info on my profile. What's up with no basement? Teaser Tuesdays as usual.

momof4luvntwisaga is the nicest pre-reader ever even after I forced her to re-read it this week during the middle of holiday craziness. She talked me off the ledge when I worried about how everyone was going to take her giving him a second chance date. Some of you wanted her to make him

suffer forever but then this story would be a million chapters long and I don't have that many in me!

Let me know what you liked or tell me what else you think should be on the Isabella playlist. Edward owns every CD known to man so any type of music works. Expand my music knowledge!

Chapter 5

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Friday, July 16 at noon

It had been the most surreal week of my life. I was dating Edward Masen, billionaire playboy, CEO of a global software corporation, and one massive head case. Our make-up date last Friday did end on a high note. He kissed me on his rooftop patio, we watched the sunset, and then we sat in the library talking about our favorite books until I was yawning. He tried to talk me into having Brady drive me home, but we compromised by having him only follow me home. Edward was so sure my truck wouldn't make it back into the city, but it did just fine.

He invited me back on Saturday during the day to see the rest of his estate. Everything was as impressive as the main house. We visited with the horses first. He had four - a black Friesian stallion, a grey Arabian mare, and two Palominos. I didn't know much about horses, but Jasper did, and he was impressed when I told him about them. My favorite was the Friesian named Twilight because he reminded me of Edward. The horse was beautiful and strong but dark and dangerous looking at the same time. He also had somewhat of a temper according to Edward, who was surprised when Twilight came over to me and lowered his head for me to pet. I seemed to have a way with temperamental males.

After visiting the stables, Edward showed me the indoor pool. I had to turn down his very persuasive skinny dipping invitation, even though I was beginning to wonder what the man looked like under his button-down dress shirts. I would be a liar if I said my physical attraction to him wasn't getting stronger every day.

Next, we walked through the three-bedroom, three and a half bath, two-story guest house. It was nicer than any house I'd ever visited or lived in. Edward had very lucky guests.

We also watched a movie in his private theater. It was no different than going to a real theater, except we were the only ones there. It had a full-size movie screen, the most comfortable seats I've ever sat in, and its own concession stand, complete with every kind of candy I could imagine and movie theater popcorn by the tub.

Sunday, Edward took me out for brunch at Café Campagne, another small, unpretentious spot that he said reminded him of places he liked to dine at when he

was in Paris. After brunch, we went to the Olympic Sculpture Park along the waterfront. We only spent the day together, as he had some business to take care of Sunday night. He said something about the Asian markets. I had no idea what that meant. Sometimes I wondered if the man ever slept. His Blackberry was always ringing and beeping day and night.

Edward lived at his estate on the weekends but had a condo in the city for the weekdays. We had dinner there Monday and Wednesday night. Charlotte followed Edward wherever he stayed, so needless to say, I ate well those two nights. Edward's condo was in one of the high-rises along the waterfront. There were floor-to-ceiling windows with panoramic views of Elliott Bay, the city, and the mountains. You could see from Mt. Rainier to the Olympics. His condo was furnished much more contemporary than his house. Everything was very sleek and monochromatic. There was a lot of grey, black, and white. It was an impressive place but more impersonal than his house. There were no photos, no CD's, no books, no sign of who Edward really was at his condo.

All week long, Edward kept the mood swings in check, and it was hard to deny that I liked him. I really, really liked him. He was still intimidating, but I could see there was a softer side to him. He didn't like to show it, but it was there.

Last night, however, Edward had invited me to join him tonight for dinner at his estate. I had promised Jasper a make-up pizza and movie night, so I had to decline. This did not go over very well with Mr. Masen, who apparently was very used to getting his way. When I didn't give in to his coercion and snippy remarks, he coldly hung up on me. Jasper, unfortunately, heard the whole argument. He was so pissed that Edward made me feel bad, he couldn't let it go. After hearing him refer to Edward as Prince Not-so-Charming for the hundredth time, I had to resort to threats that I would burn all the Maxim magazines he kept in the drawer by his bed if he said it again.

My Prince Not-so-Charming was due any minute for lunch. I wasn't sure what to expect, as usual. It seemed every Friday we were faced with some unresolved issue. I hoped after he slept on it, he would see that he was being childish about the whole thing.

"Boo." Jasper startled me outside the kitchen.

"What are you doing here?" I questioned him, pushing a stray lock of hair from my face.

"I was dying for some French cuisine and thought why not come to my sister's

restaurant and bother my best friend?"

Jasper was good at a lot of things, lying was not one of them.

"Mmmhmm," I muttered skeptically.

"Jaz?" Rosalie came out of her office, looking just as surprised as I did.

Jasper gave his sister a hug hello. "You got a table for me in Bella's section? I need some personalized attention this afternoon. Maybe you can keep her in the main dining room while I'm here?"

I punched him hard on the shoulder. "You're here because of him, aren't you?"

"Ow!"

"Him who?" Rosalie asked.

"You don't have to keep me away from him!"

"Him who?" Rosalie repeated.

Jasper disagreed. "Last week, you hated his guts when you left for work and agreed to a second date with the guy by the time you got home. You blew me off last week. I'm not letting it happen again. I don't trust him."

"*Him* who?" Rosalie screeched again.

"Edward Masen," I replied, not taking my eyes off my crazy, overprotective best friend.

"Oh, for the love of God! Every damn week!" Rosalie threw her hands up in exasperation. She pointed at me while talking to her brother. "Did she put you up to this? Did she ask you to come here and do this so I wouldn't make her work the private room?"

"No! I want to work the private room today," I answered instead of him.

"She didn't ask me to come here, Rose. Which reminds me, I'm mad at you for not listening to her complaints about being mistreated. That Masen guy has issues and he jerks her around. Can you please send someone else in there today?"

"No!" Rosalie and I said at the same time.

Just then, I saw Angela leading Edward to the private dining room. I would have been happy to see him except that clinging tightly to his arm was another woman. By the looks of things, she wasn't someone who worked for him. They seemed very... *friendly*. She was tiny and had dark, spiky hair. It took me a minute, but I realized she was the smiling girl who had her arms wrapped around him in the picture in his family room. An old girlfriend, perhaps? She was obviously someone who meant enough to him that he had her picture at his house. She was also someone he decided he would use to punish me for refusing a date with him.

Before they went up the stairs, Edward turned and caught sight of the three of us staring in his direction. He stopped and brought over his little plaything. I hated these games. I hated that Jasper was right and I was wrong.

"Ms. Hale. Jasper. Isabella." His eyebrow arched when he said my name like he was daring me to react to his evil plan.

"Mr. Masen." Rosalie stepped in front of me and her brother with her charm turned on full blast. "How are you this afternoon?"

If he was looking for a reaction from me, he wasn't going to get one. All I could do was stare. This mystery woman was dressed sophisticatedly but oddly in a long sleeved turtleneck in the middle of July. She was holding on to Edward's arm with both hands. She was so different from last week's lunch loser, I mean, date. This one actually had a friendly smile; in fact she seemed to be smiling at me. I wanted to hate her, but if he thought I was going to let him use another poor girl to get me to agree to an evening with him, he was dead wrong.

"It's Friday, I can't complain...much." He directed the last part at me. His date swatted at him and rolled her eyes like I did. Great, she had spunk too.

"Well, let's get you and your guest situated, and then I'll send up your waiter."

Edward and I both noticed she said *waiter* not *waitress*.

He was quick to question her. "Is there a reason Isabella's not working the private room today?"

"We want Isabella. Please. I'll be so disappointed," his date whined.

Was she in on it? Was she willingly helping him make me jealous?

Jasper pushed his sister aside and got in Edward's face. "You know what Masen? You're a real asshole. You don't get what you want so you show up here to...what? Make her feel bad? You're nothing but a spoiled brat who never hears the word no. It's kind of pathetic."

It was Edward's guest who shot back. "Excuse me? Who do you think you are talking to him like that?"

"He should not have brought you here."

"Really? Edward's not allowed to take whomever he wants to lunch?" she challenged with her hands on her hips.

"Jasper, stop," I begged. Truth be told, I had no claim over Edward. If he wanted to have lunch with other women, it was not my place to tell him he couldn't. Just like Jasper was my friend, maybe this girl was his.

Jasper ignored me completely. "Personally, I don't give a damn who he eats lunch with, but when he brings a woman to the place where the other woman he's dating works, he's an asshole."

Edward's dark-haired defender scowled at Jasper. "Would you please stop calling my brother an asshole? It's starting to piss me off."

"Your brother?" I gasped in horror.

"Hi," she said, deftly maneuvering around Jasper to get to me. "I'm Alice, Edward's sister. I am so happy to meet you, Isabella. My brother has told me so much about you. Okay, not so much by normal standards, but he told me a little about you, which in Edward terms is a lot." Without warning, this Alice person pulled me into a hug.

"Alice." Edward sighed. He looked horribly embarrassed by her forwardness.

"Mr. Masen, I apologize for my staff and my brother," Rosalie said, shoving Jasper away from Edward and glaring at me. "They will have to deal with me; I can assure you."

Great. Now I was in trouble and I didn't even do anything. I was going to kill Jasper.

"Ow, Rose!" Jasper shouted when she pushed him a second time.

Edward smiled. "Ms. Hale, your brother may lack some social graces, but I'm sure his heart was in the right place. As for Miss Swan, we can't really blame her for bringing out the overprotective nature in those who care about her, can we?"

"I suppose not," Rosalie acquiesced, not looking too happy about it.

"So this is the friend who's stealing you away from us tonight," Alice said, turning to face my remorseful roommate.

"I'm confused," I admitted, needing to hit restart on this whole screwed up conversation.

Edward could not contain his delight in befuddling me. He wore a righteous smirk. "My sister is back in town, and I wanted to introduce the two of you at dinner tonight, but since you had plans with Jasper, I opted to bring her to lunch so she could meet you. It appears she was mistaken for someone else."

"My bad," Jasper acknowledged freely. He addressed Alice instead of Edward. "I apologize for my big mouth. Bella's like a sister, I get a little protective."

"I think it's sweet that you stand up for your friends, but you might want to check your facts before you start slinging your insults next time," Alice said, taking back her place at her brother's side. "Make it up to me. Why don't you and Isabella both come to dinner tonight? We'll make it a foursome so we all get our time with Bella."

I didn't realize I was in such high demand. Edward seemed all too pleased with this idea. Spoiled brat was going to get his way after all.

"Um..." Jasper looked at me and then back at Alice. "Sure."

Just like that Edward and I had a double date with his sister and my roommate. It was bound to be an interesting evening.

"Miss it!" Jasper coughed loudly into his fist as I tried in vain to putt with the Wii remote. I never realized my roommate was as competitive as our host until tonight.

My shot went wide.

"I'm going to quit if you keep that crap up," I warned.

"Good to know she's a sore loser no matter who she's losing to," Edward said from his spot on the couch. "I thought maybe it was just me."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "I am *not* a sore loser. You two play dirty, and it's obnoxious."

Edward and Jasper looked at me and then at each other.

"Sore loser," they both said in unison with a nod.

"I quit. Alice, do you want to play for me?" I asked holding out the remote, which she took eagerly.

"Oh, I know all about playing dirty." She winked at me.

A grinning Edward stood and took my hand. "We're going to go up to the roof. You two will be fine without us, I assume?"

"I promise not to bruise his ego too badly," Alice replied, resetting the Wii to play a new game. "Let's box, Mr. Hale."

"Oh, bring it, Miss Masen," he said, rubbing his hands together. Jasper was smiling from ear to ear. Any worries I had about him not being fine without me vanished.

Edward led me upstairs and through my favorite rooms. It was dark out but a clear, warm night. He started a fire in the fire pit, and we situated ourselves in the huge Adirondack chairs around it. Edward was dressed casually tonight - well, casual for Edward. He had changed out of his suit and was in some expensive looking dark jeans and a black button down with the sleeves rolled up. Sometimes I wondered if the man even owned a T-shirt. I could almost picture him working out in a dress shirt and tie.

There was a bottle of wine and two wine glasses waiting for us. Edward must have been planning on getting me up here all along. I sat with my legs tucked under me, watching the flames of the fire flicker in front of me, sipping on the glass of red wine he handed me.

Alice Masen was one of the nicest people I had ever met. She was so bubbly and outgoing, so the opposite of her sometimes brooding older brother. She brought out the lighter side of him, though, which was nice to see. She was a little vague about what she did for a living, saying she worked for a nonprofit organization. She ran a

camp for "special" kids. Edward stopped her from saying anything more, changing the subject quickly. It was weird but not really for the mercurial Mr. Masen. I liked Alice. She seemed very driven but in a different way from her brother. Alice Masen was a woman of privilege, but she did not come off the least bit arrogant or snobbish. She seemed to have her feet planted firmly on the ground.

I noticed at lunch today that her choice in clothing might have something to do with the scars that were visible on her hand and neck. I didn't know how much more extensive they were, but something told me they covered more of her body than I saw. I thought about asking Edward what happened to her, but I didn't want to ruin the nice night we were having by possibly bringing up a sore subject.

"Nickel for your thoughts?" Edward's voice pulled me from the trance the fire put me in.

I snickered at his playfulness. "I was thinking about how much I like your sister."

"She's so likeable that she was able to win you over in one day?"

"It's hard to believe that someone like her can be related to someone like you; she's *that* likeable," I teased.

"I'm that bad, huh?"

"You two are just different."

He stared into the fire. The flames reflected in his eyes, making it impossible for me to get a clear read on how he was feeling.

"She and I are very different," he said sadly.

"You're different but the same," I clarified, not liking his somber tone. "She's very confident and self-assured, like you. She seems to know what she wants and how to get it. That's very you. You know, now that I think about it, she's kind of the happy-go-lucky you."

Edward chuckled before taking a drink. "She's a good person, *like you*."

I hated that he thought he wasn't a good person. I wanted to believe he was a good person. I needed him to be a good person if this was going to become something real.

"She adores you, so you can't be that bad. She isn't afraid of you - that's for sure." Alice's relationship with him gave me hope that whatever was going on between me and Edward wasn't destined to end in my heart breaking.

"Are you?" Edward's eyes focused back on me.

I shrugged. I was less afraid of him this week. He hadn't given me a reason to be afraid of him, at least.

"Come here," he said softly. "Sit with me."

I got up and set my wine down on the side table next to him. He sat as far back as he could in his seat and spread his legs. I situated myself between them and leaned back against his body. He wrapped his arms around me and nuzzled his nose in my hair. He didn't say anything, but I sensed he was trying to show me that afraid wasn't how he wanted me to feel.

Encircled by his arms, I felt no fear. In fact, I had never felt so relaxed. Maybe that was the wine talking, but I was more than content.

"I love the way you smell," he whispered.

I didn't try to hide the way his words made me smile since he couldn't see me. Surprisingly, this was not the first time this week he used the word love. The man who didn't love anything loved when I wore a certain shade of blue and how I smelled. That had to mean something.

"We should make s'mores. I don't suppose you have a bag of jumbo marshmallows, Hershey bars, and a package of graham crackers ready and waiting?" I turned my head just enough to see him.

"I don't believe Charlotte had any of that on the grocery list for this week. In fact, I've never had a s'more. They sound...messy."

I rolled my eyes. "You've never had a s'more? Even when you were a kid and it was basically your job to get messy?"

His laughter shook me as I rested on top of him. "No, I didn't dare, even back then."

"What the heck did you eat when you went camping?"

"Never been camping either," he admitted.

I turned the upper half of my body around, so I was facing him. "You've never been camping? Ever?" He shook his head. "You live near some of the most beautiful national and state parks in the country and you've never been camping?"

"Why would I go camping when I have a luxurious king-size bed waiting for me at home?"

"To commune with nature. To sleep under the stars. To eat hotdogs and s'mores around a campfire. To have fun." I listed off my best reasons.

"Oh, Isabella, if you would just give me the chance, I assure you we could have tons of fun in my king-size bed," he replied huskily. He touched my lips with his finger.

I turned back around so I was facing away from him, my cheeks warmed by something other than the fire.

"I'll try out your king-sized bed if you go camping with me," I brokered, not thinking he'd take the deal. I actually couldn't picture Edward roughing it in a tent.

"Fine. Next weekend, we'll camp one night and then you will spend the next night here with me," he replied, pressing his lips against my temple.

I tilted my head up. "Really?"

"Why not?"

"You'll have to get messy."

"You'll have to sleep with me."

He said it like it was a bad thing. It didn't sound bad at all. It sounded like something I'd be willing to do even if he didn't go camping.

"I guess we have a deal then," I said, trying to sound unaffected but feeling very affected by the thought of spending two nights with Edward.

"I guess we do," he murmured. "Sit up, I want you to face me."

He pushed me up and turned me around. Then he pulled me on top of him until I

was straddling him. His hands gently cradled my face.

"Do you have any idea what I would do for you, Isabella?" It must have been a rhetorical question because before I could speak, he was kissing me. This was no sweet little make out. This was a let-the-dry-humping-begin make out.

As his tongue began to work mine, I could feel my whole body getting warm. Edward's hands dropped from my face to my hips, so he could help increase the friction between our two bodies. His erection was noticeable, pressing against me right where it counted. I was going to be a moaning mess any minute. One of his hands made its way up to my breast, kneading it through my T-shirt.

Things started getting a little heated, and he was pulling my shirt up with one hand and pulling down the lacy cup of my bra with the other. I had to stop him.

"Your sister and Jasper could come up here any second."

I held myself at an arm's length, but that didn't really deter him. He still had both hands under my shirt and was pinching my now uncovered nipple.

"You don't have to worry about that." He pushed my arm away and pulled me towards him. He was kissing my neck as I squirmed to get away.

"Edward, stop," I insisted, fighting to keep my shirt on. "They might come up here."

"They won't," he growled before ducking his head and flicking his tongue against my erect nipple.

"They might," I argued only because the last thing I needed was Jasper to see me giving Edward what would look like a half-naked lap dance. I would never hear the end of it. My physical resistance was faltering, however. My body liked what Edward could do to it; parts of my body liked it more than anything anyone had ever done to it.

"They won't," he asserted. His eyes lifted to mine, and they were smoldering. It was an intense mixture of lust and anger, need and annoyance.

He grabbed my face again and kissed me hard. I completely caved and kissed him back with equal passion. He let me go and went back to lifting my shirt up.

"You don't know for sure they won't," I whimpered, refusing to lift my arms as my

last defense.

"God damn it!" he bellowed. Somehow, he lifted me up with him in some anger-fueled show of strength.

Now, I was afraid.

He grasped my upper arms tightly. "She knows I brought you up here to sit by the fire! She won't come up here when she knows there's a fire! Fuck!"

Full of inexplicable rage, he tossed me back in the chair before kicking over the table that our wine glasses were sitting on. Glass and wine went flying across the brick. Edward went to the far end of the patio and gripped the railing. Hanging his head, he roared into the darkness, screaming obscenities to no one and maybe everyone in the world at the same time.

My heart thumped double time, my body's fight or flight response took over. I wasn't going to fight or run from him, however. I fixed my shirt and got up. I didn't think it was safe to approach him, so I hung back, trying to wrap my head around what just happened.

Alice wouldn't come up here because of the fire? The scars, maybe it had something to do with the scars.

Edward straightened up but was still looking out over the grounds. I slowly took a few steps towards him. My chest ached from the relentless pounding of my heart. My hands were shaking as I reached out to put one on his back.

"I don't understand," I whispered, amazed I could even get words to come out of my mouth. "Why won't Alice come up here if she knows we're by the fire?"

"I don't want to talk about it," he snapped ferociously.

My hand retracted like I was saving it from getting bit off. I wanted to run downstairs and get Alice and Jasper. I was sorry I angered him. I was sorry his sister was possibly burned in a fire. Most of all, I was sorry that I didn't know how to deal with him when he was like this.

"I'm sorry. Knowing Jasper the way I do, I could just imagine him coming up here to check on me. I'm not savvy when it comes to sex, I get embarrassed easily. I didn't mean to-"

Edward turned around with a tortured pain emanating from his eyes. It was unmistakable even in the shadow of the night.

"Jesus, are you apologizing to me?"

"I guess...I mean, yes...I don't know." I was a blathering mess.

He pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly. We stood like that for several minutes. Last week when he called himself complicated, I had no idea how complicated he really could be. Dating Edward was like being on a roller coaster; up then down, a wild ride full of twists and turns, such a thrill but completely terrifying at the same time.

"You and Jasper should get home. I don't want you on the roads too late," he said in his controlled and controlling way.

Just like that, he was in charge and detached. He took my hand and carefully made sure I avoided all of the shattered glass on the ground. We didn't speak as we made our way back to the game room. I could hear Alice's laughter from down the hall. She and Jasper were finishing up a game of pool when we entered.

"You are such a hustler!" Jasper shook his head in disbelief after Alice knocked in the last ball.

Unrepentantly, Alice strode over to him and held out her hand. "I should apologize but you were such an easy mark."

He handed her a twenty dollar bill that she slipped in her back pocket with a satisfied grin.

"Jasper and Isabella should be going. It's late," Edward announced, causing both their faces to fall.

"Come on, I need another shot at winning my money back," Jasper complained.

"You think you can beat me after that last game?" Alice perked up.

"Oh, I can and I will."

"Big talk for a guy who just lost to me when I wasn't even really trying!"

"You weren't trying, huh?" Jasper laughed.

As the two of them bantered back and forth, Edward walked over to Alice and took the pool cue from her.

"It's time for them to go," he said sternly.

Alice looked at him and then at me. I was not as good as Edward at covering up my emotions. I was sure I still appeared a little shell shocked. She focused her attention back on her brother.

"What happened?" she asked with an accusing glare.

"Nothing," he stated calmly.

Thank goodness she didn't ask me. I didn't think I could speak without my voice shaking.

"Did you invite Bella to lunch with Carlisle and Esme tomorrow?" Alice asked, undeterred by his icy demeanor.

Edward lowered his voice, his displeasure with her bringing up this lunch with people I didn't know was quite clear. "She can't make it. They need to go. *Now*."

Alice wasn't the only one that noticed I was slightly rattled. Jasper had put down his pool cue and was at my side, holding my hand.

"Let's go," he whispered to me before addressing Edward and Alice. "Thank you for dinner, Edward. Alice, I'll win back my money another time. Goodnight."

He quickly pulled me out of the room. I didn't say anything and neither did Edward or Alice. So much of the night had been perfectly pleasant. We had a nice dinner. Alice was a fun and interesting addition. The making out even felt good until it turned so very bad.

Jasper opened my door for me and then ran around the car to jump in the driver's seat. He didn't say a word until we drove through the gate.

"What the hell happened, Bella? Did he hurt you? I swear to God if he hurt you, I will go back there and kill him. I don't care how big his fucking security guard is."

I shook my head, unable to speak coherently when my emotions and thoughts were such a tangled mess. Before I knew it, the tears sprang from my eyes.

"Swear to me that he didn't hurt you," Jasper said, panicking a little. "Swear or I'm going back."

I shook my head vigorously as I wiped my face with both hands. "He didn't hurt me."

I didn't know if that was the truth or a lie. It was a little of both. He was aggressive sexually, physically, and verbally, but I didn't think he *wanted* to hurt me. What he did want was to send me away. I was unsure of how I felt about that. I wanted him to let me in, give me something, so I could begin to understand him and his moods. Maybe he had too many walls to get past. Maybe he was just saving me the trouble of trying to accomplish the impossible.

Thanks to little traffic and Jasper's frantic driving, we made it back to the city in about thirty minutes. I went straight to my room and buried my face in my pillow. I let myself come undone behind my closed door. Jasper didn't bother me, giving me the space and time I needed.

When I felt all the negative emotion was purged, I got ready for bed. I changed out of my clothes and into one of my ratty UW T-shirts and a pair of cotton shorts. I wrapped my hair up in a loose bun and checked my face in the mirror before opening my door to go to the bathroom. My eyes were puffy and red; no way to hide that. I hoped Jasper had gone to bed.

When I stepped out of my room, I saw the light under his door. He had gone to his room but was still up. I was almost to the bathroom when there was a knock at the door. Jasper was out of his room and at the front door before I could even think about answering it. Standing on the other side was Edward.

"Not happening. Go away," Jasper said, attempting to close the door in his face. Edward's hand smacked against the door, keeping it open.

"Please," Edward said wearily.

"Let him in, Jaz," I croaked, my voice rough from all the sobbing.

Jasper would have none of it. "You just cried for an hour and a half. I think he's done enough damage for one night."

"Let him in," I repeated a little more clearly.

Edward gently pushed past Jasper and followed me back to my room wordlessly. I

closed the door, knowing Jasper was going to be hovering out there like a hawk.

"My sister is quite devastated that she didn't get to say goodbye properly. She hopes tonight won't be the last time she sees you."

"I feel bad, too," I replied with my back pressed against the door, and my hand still on the knob. I didn't bother promising to see her again, as that seemed more up to Edward than to me.

He raked his hand through his hair, something it looked like he had done repeatedly since I last saw him.

"I don't want you to be afraid of me," he said, his voice heavy with regret.

"I'm not." He shot me a look that let me know not only did he not believe me but he was in no mood. "I'm terrified," I confessed.

My words seemed to inflict actual pain. He winced and hung his head. "I wish I could tell you that you shouldn't be."

Even if he could tell me not to be scared, it wouldn't stop me from feeling that way. The reality of that was half the reason I had been crying. Fear should not be the overriding emotion in any relationship.

"I wasn't ready for this. I wasn't planning on bringing my sister into this so soon. Had Charlotte kept her mouth shut, this would not have been an issue," he spat.

I suddenly felt very sorry for Charlotte. I was sure she was going to hear all about how unhappy he was about that, if she hadn't already.

"Unfortunately, my sister found out about you, and she can be quite difficult to refuse when she really wants something." He provided another example of how Alice was exactly like her big brother. "Being around my sister also causes me to...think about things I don't like to think about."

I let go of the doorknob but kept the distance between us. I didn't know what to say, so I stayed quiet, assuming that there was more for him to tell.

"I don't do this." He motioned between the two of us. "I don't know how to do this. I should leave you alone. I shouldn't ask you to muddle through this with me, but I can't stop. I get angry at you for making me want you so badly and that's unfair. I know it's unfair."

His honesty was once again unexpected. Every time I had myself convinced I should walk away, his vulnerability pulled me back in. I took a step towards him, feeling this strange need to comfort him.

"I warned you about me. I'm not normal, Isabella. I function best in a world where I say something and people listen. I don't have to explain myself or rationalize why I want something. I just get what I want when I want it."

I understood that about him more than anything else. That was part of what scared me about tonight. I never wanted to be in a position where I didn't feel I had complete control over my body.

He sat down on my bed and continued to claw at his head. "I lost control tonight. I should have respected your feelings and stopped when you asked. There is no excuse for it." He looked up at me, his entire being radiated sincerity. "It will never happen again. I swear to you."

Something told me he meant it. Edward appeared like the kind of person who did not make the same mistake twice.

"I believe you," I told him. I sat next to him on the unmade bed as my way of showing I didn't fear being near him. "I just never know what to expect from you. I feel like I have to keep my guard up all the time. You have so many triggers. It's like I'm in a mine field, and no matter what I do or how I try to avoid it, I'm destined to set one off. Maybe I'm the problem here."

"Why do you do that?" he snapped. "Why do you accept blame so easily? I am the problem, Isabella. Not you."

"Then talk to me. If you want to keep trying to make this, whatever it is, work, I need to know you, to understand you. What happened to you and your sister?"

Edward scrubbed his face with his hands. He seemed to be warring with himself over what to say. "Alice was ten years old, I was fifteen. There was a fire, and the right side of her body was burned from her waist to her neck. They were able to smother the flames before they reached her face and hair. The cosmetic surgeons always said she was lucky." He laughed humorlessly. "As if anything that has to do with smelling your own flesh burning should ever be considered *lucky*."

I swallowed hard. I had no idea how tragic the situation had been. I wondered if he had physical scars as well. His emotional ones were quite evident.

Edward sighed mournfully with his eyes downcast. "She can't really stand to be around fire. She avoids it. It can trigger some post traumatic stress crap. She has nightmares, I guess."

When I thought about it, last week, when I was at his house, every single fireplace was lit. This time, none of the fireplaces were lit, not a one. I noticed it when we were in the dining room but didn't think too much of it. It was the middle of July, why would he need the fireplaces going? Now, I knew it was because he was taking care of Alice, protecting her.

"That's terrible" I tried not to let any pity seep into my tone. "She comes off so strong and self-assured."

"We Masens have a way of covering up our weaknesses quite thoroughly," Edward replied, taking my hand in both of his. His hands were so soft and warm. He stroked the back of my hand with his long fingers.

"Were you hurt in the fire?" I took a chance that he'd continue sharing.

He shook his head but didn't speak. He lifted my hand to his lips, sending the butterflies in my stomach into a frenzy. He could be so gentle when he wanted to be, so opposite of the way he was on the patio.

"It must have been so hard on your parents," I began, but Edward dropped my hand and abruptly stood up.

"Landmine," he choked out, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

Parents - off limits. Confusing, but good to know. I sat quietly, waiting him out, hoping he would regain his composure.

"Thank you for telling me about Alice. I won't push for more, I promise."

I watched his hands relax and the right one make its way through his hair again. He turned, and his expression was calm, but his eyes were distant.

"Alice and I are having lunch with our aunt and uncle tomorrow. If I can get some work done after that, I should be free to spend some time with you on Sunday. If you'd like, you could come to the condo in the afternoon and stay for dinner."

I nodded. "That sounds great." He didn't want me at lunch with his aunt and uncle, but if his parents were landmines, extended family seemed like a big no-no for

now.

"I should go. It's late and you need your rest," he said a little too mechanically. The wall he let me peek over was firmly back in place.

I stood up and stepped in front of him, placing a hand on his chest. "Thanks for coming over to clear things up. If you let me, we can muddle through this together." I gave him a small smile.

His eyes warmed and looked upon me with such reverence. "For you, Isabella, I would do just about anything except walk away." His hand pushed some fallen strands of hair from my face. He leaned down and kissed my lips, letting his mouth linger near mine for a second longer. "Goodnight," he whispered, and then he was gone.

He strode past Jasper without a word and left the apartment. Jasper was leaning against the backside of the couch, his arms folded in front of him, and a disapproving look on his face.

"He's trouble, Bells. I like his sister a whole lot, but he is nothing but trouble."

He was probably right but there was no getting off this ride now. I was strapped in and couldn't get away if I wanted to. I could only hope we didn't run off the tracks.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for her help once again. She has been such a good sounding board throughout this process! It's her birthday today so everybody send her some love! Happy Birthday my friend!

Thanks for all the reviews, alerts, recs, and fav adds. I am trying really hard to respond to reviews but sometimes I get all screwed up so if I didn't respond or I responded twice like a weirdo - I apologize. I read them all and refuse to delete them from my inbox, making my husband so annoyed. ;) Your support of this story is phenomenal. Special thanks this week to SammieLynnsMom and mcgt who rec'd this in their stories and sent lots of people my way! Also to those on Twitter like Raindrops855 and Bunch2009. I'm hoping it doesn't disappoint as we carry on.

I'm on Twitter now. Don't know that I'll say anything interesting but you can send me a hello over there at troublefollows1

Pennyward is always throwing our girl for a loop. I don't think she'll ever know what to expect! Camping next week, *waves self*, if you liked the tent scene in Eclipse - all I can say is Jake ain't getting in this tent! =) Feel free to discuss what you think about that over on the Twilighted forum!

For now, let me know what you think. Are you glad Alice has arrived on the scene?

Chapter 6

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Friday, July 23rd at noon

Thank goodness it was Friday. It had been a long week, and I was ready for a getaway. More importantly, I was ready to see Edward. I hadn't seen him since Sunday night. We had spent most of Sunday afternoon together explosion-free, until he got a phone call. *Damn that Blackberry.* Trouble was brewing at Masen Corporation in regards to something called Denali. Dinner was interrupted several times by his phone as he made arrangements to fly to New York that evening. He seemed awfully frustrated, considering he wasn't even flying commercially. Edward, of course, had his own private jet.

I didn't even ask what the problem was, knowing I would most likely only hear the word *landmine*. He offered no apologies, sending me home right after dinner. He just kissed me deeply and promised to be back in time to go camping. I wasn't the least bit upset with him. I understood he was head of a huge company, and there were never any guarantees regarding his time for me. Maybe I was disappointed but certainly not mad. The next day, however, a huge bouquet of roses was delivered to Eclipse with my name on it. Edward managed to make my heart skip a beat with just some words typed on a tiny piece of paper.

Isabella-

These flowers mark my promise to turn my phone off Friday night until Sunday afternoon. I will be much too busy communing with nature and then you - repeatedly.

Yours truly,

Edward

Today was the first time in five weeks that I did not experience one moment of dread on a Friday at noon. Maybe it was because instead of him coming to my work, I was going to his. *I* had the day off. We were going camping and had a long drive ahead of us. Edward had some work to do in the morning, but he asked me to come get him promptly at noon.

The man behind the desk on the 54th floor gave me no trouble this time. He smiled warmly and called for someone to come get me right away. Alec the Assistant came through some doors and greeted me with a bemused grin.

"Good afternoon, Isabella."

"Good afternoon, Alec," I returned, trying desperately to repress my childish excitement. Edward's promise of repeated communing had me giddy as a school girl on her way to a Justin Bieber concert.

"Edward tells me his phone will be turned off during this trip of yours. Should I be concerned you might be planning on losing him out there?"

I couldn't help but laugh. The thought hadn't crossed my mind. It was nice to know Edward had talked about us with Alec. I wasn't some secret lover. Not that I was his lover. Yet. *God, I hope he didn't tell Alec about the becoming his lover part.*

"He and I were talking about it this morning, and I told him I wouldn't blame you after some of the trouble he's given you."

"I promise to bring him back in one piece. Hopefully no worse for wear," I assured him. "Unless he really pisses me off out there."

Alec smiled. "Have patience with him, Isabella. He irritates easily, especially when things aren't familiar and under his control. He's a big fan of his comfort zone, but stepping out of it is good for him. I think *you* are quite good for him."

I was surprised by his candor. Alec was an employee, but I sensed they had a close relationship. He genuinely seemed to care about and respect Edward as a person, not just a boss.

We went through the multitude of doors and the little elevator to the floor that housed Edward's office. A few more swipes of Alec's keycard, and we were in the room with Edward's other assistant. Alec introduced her to me as Maggie.

"Isabella." Edward's silky voice made my knees weak. He stepped out of his office and towards me. The way he looked at me made my whole body heat up. He greeted me with a sweet embrace and a kiss on the cheek. His lips were cool against my warm skin.

"I told her to take it easy on you out there," Alec teased. "We need you back here on Monday alive and well."

"Something tells me with all night Saturday and all day Sunday to recuperate in my big, comfortable bed, I should be just fine," Edward responded, his gaze fixed on me.

I spent the week trying to focus on the camping part of the weekend, but I was literally becoming consumed by the anticipation of spending the night in Edward's bed. Communing. With each other. Repeatedly.

"I got you something for tonight. I hope that's ok," I said, handing him the box I was holding, in the hopes that everyone would turn their attention on him and off me and my blushing face.

"You got me something?" Edward looked totally befuddled.

I didn't have any wrapping paper, so I did what my mom did when I was little. The gift was wrapped neatly in the Sunday comics. "It's the gift that puts a smile on your face before you even open it," I said, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

Edward shook his head in disbelief. "You bought me a gift?"

I rolled my eyes. Had no one ever bought the man a gift before?

"Just open it."

He walked over to Maggie's desk and, like a kid on Christmas, tore at the paper with reckless abandon. He tossed the lid on the floor and pulled out the red T-shirt first. "Pitch my tent" was written across the front in white block letters.

"I wasn't sure if you even owned a t-shirt, so I thought I better get you one. This way, you won't feel out of place amongst all us common folk," I said with a wink.

Alec came over to see what had Edward stunned into silence and chuckled softly at what he saw. Edward set the shirt aside and pulled out the Levi's next. I had been picturing him in those 501 button fly jeans since I bought them.

"Having paid one of your astronomical dry cleaning bills, I figured a nice washable pair of jeans could actually save me money, should I get you a little bit dirty tonight."

Maggie covered her mouth with her hand in an attempt to quiet her laughter. Edward's expression was indiscernible. I couldn't tell if he liked it or not. The gift was my way of asking him to join me in the real world where people bought clothes

that didn't cost as much as a semester of college. He didn't say anything, and I started to worry I had unintentionally stepped on yet another land mine.

"You don't have to wear any of it if you don't want to. I just thought-"

"Why wouldn't I wear them?" he cut me off, looking at me curiously.

I shrugged and bit my lip. One side of Edward's mouth shot up in that crooked smile that made my heart pitter patter. I guess he liked my gift after all.

"You never fail to surprise me," he muttered, shaking his head. "I love them, thank you." He grabbed me and kissed me shamelessly in front of his assistants.

Between the fantastic kissing and his use of the forbidden "L" word, I was putty in his hands.

Ready to get him alone, I prompted our departure. "We should head out. I need to get some gas before we go."

He narrowed his eyes at me. "We will not be taking your truck, Isabella."

"We need my truck," I argued. "We need the room in the back for the tent and all our supplies and gear."

"We are not driving that ancient piece of scrap metal that most likely will bring about your untimely death unless I can find a way to rid you of it. My Cayenne will do just fine."

I wrinkled my nose at him. "I'm guessing you aren't talking about pepper; but regardless, we need my truck."

"A Cayenne, it's a SUV," he replied like I must live under a rock.

"Porsche SUV," Alec whispered.

"You have a Porsche SUV?" *So much for us looking like we were from the real world.* I sighed and answered my own question. "Of course you have a Porsche SUV. Never mind. I'm not going to win this argument, am I?"

"No, you most definitely are not." Edward kissed my cheek again. "Let's go."

He followed me back to my apartment in his fancy SUV so we could drop off my

truck, unload everything I had in there, and reload it all into his car. Edward also went inside to change. I had seen the man in eight thousand dollar suits, but nothing prepared me for Edward in a T-shirt and Levi's. I internally patted myself on the back, because he was the sexiest man alive. The jeans hung on his hips just right and the T-shirt emphasized his pectorals in a way that made me tingle all over.

We headed to the Heart o' the Hills Campground, about two hours from the city, near Port Angeles. My dad and I had camped there many times and liked that the campsites were large and provided a good amount of privacy. It was also the closest campground to Hurricane Ridge, which I really wanted Edward to see. This time of year, there were meadows, just north of the Visitor's Center, awash with a sea of colorful wildflowers. The Meadow Loop Trails were easy and wouldn't be too strenuous for a novice like Edward.

After a pleasant drive in his annoyingly amazing, yet ridiculously expensive Porsche Cayenne, we stopped in Port Angeles to get some supplies. Apparently, Edward had never in his life shopped at Walmart. He was immediately taken aback by a child having a humongous temper tantrum in front of the gumball machines and the mother who was paying him no mind as she continued out of the store.

"Where are you taking me exactly?" he whispered by my ear as I pulled a cart out of the corral.

"Be nice," I scolded. "It's our one stop shopping spot. We'll be in and out, I promise."

We headed straight for the camping gear. This part of our shopping adventure was not part of my original plan. It didn't matter to Mr. Never-Runs-His-Own-Errands that I had spent one day this week trekking back and forth between Seattle and Forks to get my dad's stuff. The obstinate Mr. Masen was not fond of borrowing. He didn't see why he couldn't buy his own tent. What if he loved camping and wanted to do it again? I was also informed he would not sleep on anything smaller than a queen-sized bed, so my dad's full-sized mattress was also out.

In the tent aisle, Edward perused the selection for about ten seconds and then grabbed the most expensive one.

"I don't think we need a three-room 'vacation lodge' that sleeps ten," I said with my arms crossed in front of me. Of course, I was talking to a man who lived alone in a seven bedroom house. This was lowering his person to room ratio by quite a bit.

"What are you talking about? Maybe you snore. I might need to move into my own room."

I cocked my head. "I do not snore; and even if I did, the flimsy nylon walls aren't very sound-proof."

One side of his mouth curved upward. "Come on, it looks... cool."

"It looks like it'll take half the night to set up. Do you have any idea how hard that thing is going to be to put together? Look at all the poles and the canopy, no way," I argued.

He set the large box down in a huff. "Fine, you're the camping expert. You pick out the tent."

I found us a reasonably priced Coleman that would fit a queen-sized mattress perfectly. I let him put it in the cart, and we moved to the air mattresses.

I had gotten him to compromise on the tent, but he was less willing to do that on the air mattress. I let him get what he wanted with little argument. That one concession made him cocky and led to me losing the fight over sheets (he refused anything under 500 thread count), the pillows (that I said we didn't need because I packed mine from home), the kind of beer (because billionaires really don't drink domestics), and the brand of marshmallows (they also don't eat store brand).

I did win when it came to dinner. We were going to cook hotdogs over the fire whether he liked it or not. He complained, but I just ignored him and put them in the cart. In obvious retaliation for the tent comment earlier, he questioned why two people needed two packs of hotdogs.

"Do we need to talk about the eating disorder you seem to be suffering from? No one your size could possibly eat all those hotdogs without some..." He stuck his finger in his mouth like he was going to gag himself.

I pulled out my coupons. "I can save a dollar on two packs," I explained as if I was speaking to a normal person.

His eyes immediately narrowed. "Put the coupons away, Isabella," he commanded.

"Why?"

Edward whipped out a hundred dollar bill and handed it to a guy standing by the

cheese.

"I just bought that guy's groceries. Do I appear to be someone who needs to save a dollar? Put. Them. Away."

"But-"

He pulled another hundred dollar bill from his roll of money and held it between two fingers. "I could pass these out all night long, and I would still be richer tomorrow morning than I am right now."

He stopped a young woman walking by and handed her the bill. She took it hesitantly. I imagined the poor thing thought someone was going to jump out and inform her she had just been punked.

He was unbelievable. God forbid billionaires use coupons. I pictured the salacious headline in the business section of the Seattle Times - *Masen CEO Caught Using Coupons at Supercenter*. How would he ever be able to show his face in public again? I was never going to be able to wrap my head around the kind of wealth this man possessed. I stuffed my envelope of coupons back in my bag.

"Point made, Mr. Masen," I said, taking the extra pack of hotdogs out of the cart. People were starting to stare. There was some definite whispering going on by those who saw what happened. I was sure they were hoping he would follow through with the idea of passing out money all night long.

"Please put your money away," I urged him quietly, trying to not attract any more attention. If he started passing out money to everyone that walked by, we could be mobbed worse than the lady who hands out free samples of anything edible.

We were strolling through the main aisle when two children, who were chasing one another with what looked like cucumbers, sprinted our way. I could see Edward's eyes go wide with fear. Just before the first cucumber wielding boy ran into my petrified billionaire boyfriend, I gave Edward a push into the safety of a side aisle.

"I never thought I would regret not bringing Tyler along. This place is a nightmare," he grumbled annoyingly.

I rolled my eyes and pushed on. We were done and just needed to check out. His attitude was kind of pissing me off, and we hadn't even started the actual camping part of the trip. If this was any indication as to how he was going to handle doing

things my way, we were in trouble.

It just so happened that we had stumbled into the family planning aisle. Behind me, Edward grabbed a box of condoms and threw them in the cart. Thinking that was a little presumptuous, I snatched them out of the cart and put them back on a different shelf a little further down.

"I want them," he said authoritatively, throwing them back in the cart.

"Getting ahead of yourself, aren't you?" I quipped, stopping to take them back out. "Shouldn't we see if you survive camping first?"

He took them off the shelf again and put them back in. Standing in front of the cart, he gripped the front of it with both hands. "If I can survive this place, camping should be a piece of cake."

"You haven't made it out of here alive, yet." I set the condoms back on the shelf. I imagined myself running him over with the cart. He was so obnoxious sometimes.

He appraised me with his eyes for a moment, and I could see he wasn't angry, maybe more entertained than anything. He went around the cart that separated us and pressed his whole body against the back of mine.

"Come on, Isabella, I think they might make camping *more interesting*," he whispered flirtatiously into my ear as his hands ghosted down my sides.

Thankfully, I was holding onto the cart because he was making me lightheaded. He tossed the condoms back in and strolled ahead of me.

He wanted our first time to be tonight? In a tent? On a raised air mattress with 500 thread count sheets? I wasn't prepared for that.

A man carrying a crying toddler crossed our path as we tried to make our way to the front of the store.

"Is there a rule that people must bring their demon children shopping with them?"

I couldn't hold back my sarcasm. "Not everyone can afford nannies to watch their kids while they shop or a housekeeper to do their shopping for them. Some people have to bring their kids wherever they go. It's kind of frowned upon to let the little guys fend for themselves."

Edward stopped and scowled at me. "I'm not going to apologize for being wealthy enough to enjoy certain comforts."

I pulled the cart up alongside him. "You don't have to apologize for being wealthy, just a stuck up snob," I retorted, more than flustered with his elitist attitude.

Edward's hand jumped to his hair, pushing it up in the front. "This place makes me extremely edgy. I'm not trying to be a snob," he defended, dropping his voice so people around us couldn't hear.

"This is my world, Edward. It's full of crying kids and fiscal responsibility. I'm not glamorous. I clip coupons, and I borrow tents. I have no idea what thread count the sheets on my bed are, and I eat store brand everything. Your disgust with all of these things kind of hurts my feelings."

His expression shifted quickly to one of remorse. He put his hand on my cheek. "You are not defined by your circumstance, Isabella. You are so much more. You, of all people, deserve to have the world at your feet." He kissed me softly on the lips.

I tried to remember what Alec had said to me about having patience with Edward. He was kind of a fish out of water, and he was going to flail around a little. I needed to understand that it was a big deal for someone like him to be doing this with me.

We got in the shortest line with the least number of small, noisy children. I pulled out my wallet and used my incredible mental math skills to estimate my portion of the bill. I figured I would pay for the food, and he could buy all the big stuff.

"What are you doing?" Edward inquired, completely flabbergasted.

"I was going to pay for the food," I replied cautiously.

He went from looking confused to pissed in a matter of seconds. "Landmine. Huge, blow-your-body-to-bits land mine," he snarled through clenched teeth.

I stopped breathing for a second as his temper boiled over.

He leaned his head towards mine and kept his voice low but nonetheless menacing. "I swear to God, if you don't put your wallet away, I will throw the biggest goddamn fit this store has ever seen. Bigger than the kid out there by the gumball machine. I will put all temper tantrums to shame."

I blinked once, twice, three times, then slid my wallet back into my bag. If the

billionaire wanted to pay, I would let the billionaire pay. No reason to make a scene in the checkout lane.

He handed the clerk cash and started walking away as she started pulling his change from her drawer.

"Sir, your change," she called after him.

"Keep it," he said gruffly, bound and determined to get out of the store at lightning speed.

I sighed and took the money from the bewildered girl. "He doesn't shop here much," I offered as my only explanation.

I ran to catch up with him, slipping the money in my bag. I knew better than to try to give it back to him.

"You know you can't tip the cashier at Walmart. She's required to give you your \$38.15 in change," I said, trying to enlighten him on normal person etiquette.

He threw up his hands in obvious frustration. "Well, I just can't win with you, Isabella. I'm either a pompous asshole or an overgenerous twit."

I dropped it, knowing there was little reason Edward would ever have to shop at a Walmart again. Anything I said at that point was only going to lead to me stepping on land mines. Land mines were a no-no this weekend.

I figured we would set up camp, drive up to Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center, hike for a little bit, and then enjoy the evening back at camp around the fire. Edward was surprisingly pleasant during set up. He unloaded the car, and I admired the way his upper body muscles flexed as he exerted himself physically. He was fun to look at and so damn cute pitching a tent in his new Pitch my Tent T-shirt.

We set up, and then headed right back out, wanting to get up to the Visitor's Center before it closed at four. It was a beautiful day, and Edward wore a contented smile as we viewed and commented on some of the sights along the 13-mile stretch of road we had left to cover.

The Meadow Loop Trails on the north side of the center did not disappoint. We did the shorter Big Loop Trail first and immediately saw a bunch of fawns grazing in a field. Along the Cirque de Rim Trail, the flowers were in full bloom, and it looked like something out of a movie. Blue alpine meadow flowers were in abundance.

"It is gorgeous up here. I feel bad that I've waited this long to see this part of the state," Edward said as we walked side by side on the trail. "Thank you for bringing me here." He took my hand and kissed my knuckles all gentleman-like.

"You're welcome" I gave a tiny nod of my head.

He didn't let go of my hand as we continued walking, and I liked it a lot.

"Come here," he said, tugging me off the paved trail and into the flowery meadow.

"I don't think we're supposed to wander off the trail."

"We won't go far and I promise not to disturb any of the wildlife," he replied with that crooked grin of his and a devious glint in his eyes. He was impossible to resist.

We walked through the long grass and flowers until we were a good hundred feet away from the trail. Edward stopped and pulled me down onto the ground with him. He caressed my cheek with the back of his hand and kissed me gently once, twice, three times.

"Now this is what I call communing with nature," he said, pulling away for a moment before pushing me on my back and deepening his kiss.

Heaven. This was what I imagined heaven to be like - a beautiful place with a beautiful man doing things with his hands and mouth that might be frowned upon in the actual Heaven.

Edward hitched one of my legs up and over his hip, pressing himself into me and trailing kisses down my neck. I combed my fingers through the hair at the nape of his neck as his hands drifted under my shirt. He rested his hand in the center of my chest.

Mossy, green eyes met mine. Everything about him was easy and carefree in this moment. If this could be who he was all the time, falling in love with him would be so easy.

"Your heart is beating so fast," he noted with a smirk.

"You tend to have that effect on me," I admitted.

"Good," he said, planting another kiss on my lips. "As long as it's not out of fear, I'm happy to make your pulse race."

"Do I look afraid of you right now?" I touched his face gently. My fingers glided across his perfect cheekbones and traced the defined line of his smooth jaw.

He closed his eyes for a second and then smiled down at me. "No. You look like you might even like me."

I exhaled a laugh and lifted my head so I could kiss him. "Sometimes I like you a lot."

"Careful now, don't go getting my hopes up."

"Let's just say I don't regret losing the battle over the condoms."

Edward's eyes went wide. "Miss Swan, once again I am surprised by the thoughts that go on in that pretty little head of yours. No one has ever confounded me the way you do."

"Back at you, Mr. Masen."

We laughed, and he rolled off me, so we were both on our backs, looking up at the late afternoon sky above. We didn't touch. We didn't talk. We just lay side by side for a few minutes, allowing ourselves time to take in the world around us. I watched the billowy clouds sail slowly above us on their endless journey around the world, as I attempted to make sense of this strange connection between me and the man beside me.

"I think I love camping with you." Edward broke the silence first.

I rolled on my side and propped up on my elbow. He had his eyes closed and looked so serene.

"This is not camping. This *was* hiking. It is now lying down. You haven't camped with me yet."

"Then I love hiking and lying with you, and something tells me I'm really going to love camping with you later tonight." He opened one eye and smiled when he saw me looking down on him.

Mr. I-Don't-Love-Anything sure was changing his tune.

"Come on," I said, sitting up and grabbing his hand. "Let's finish hiking first."

I led him back to the trail, and as soon as we hit the pavement, I heard my name being called.

"Bells? Is that you?"

I turned and saw a moppy-haired guy headed right for me. Seth Clearwater was a twenty-year-old beast of a man. His father used to be one of my father's closest friends until Mr. Clearwater passed away when I was a senior in high school. After his death, Dad took it upon himself to be there for the Clearwaters - Seth, his older sister Leah, and his mom.

"It is you!" Seth grabbed me into a big hug before I could even process what was happening. "What are you doing here, Beautiful?"

He set me down, and I could feel the tension radiating from Edward, who was standing directly behind me. Without even looking at him, I could tell he was ready to start screaming, "Landmine!" any second. A glance over my shoulder revealed exactly what I expected, one very unhappy Mr. Masen.

"I think I could ask you the same thing, Seth. My dad didn't mention you were headed out this way. He knew I was coming here this weekend."

"It was a last minute kind of thing. Claire suggested Hurricane Ridge. You know me; I'm always game for anything."

"Hey, Bella!" Claire said, finally catching up to her much faster boyfriend. She also gave me a big hug.

Edward cleared his throat behind me. I turned sideways, so I could see everyone.

"Um, Seth, Claire, this is my friend, Edward. Edward, this is Seth and Claire," I said, gesturing to each of them. "They're friends from home."

Seth's lips curled into a playful grin. "Edward." He stuck out his hand. "Another thing her dad failed to mention. Nice shirt."

"It was a gift from Isabella," Edward replied, shaking Seth's hand firmly.

"Isabella who?" Seth's brow furrowed.

I shoved his shoulder. "Me, you idiot."

"Your name is Isabella?"

Claire rolled her eyes with me as she took her turn smacking his arm with the back of her hand. "Don't mind him. His mother dropped him on his head several times as a baby."

Edward smiled but continued to eye Seth warily.

"Seth's mom and my dad kind of date, I guess," I explained. The thought of my dad dating still weirded me out.

Seth threw his big arm around my shoulder, causing Edward's jaw to tense. "Yep, me and Bells are practically family. Sometimes I wish I could trade her for my real sister."

"How is Leah doing?"

"You sure you want to know? Then we'd have to talk about Jake," Seth answered, looking at Edward and then waggling his eyebrows at me.

Ex-boyfriends from high school were not on the list of things to talk about this weekend. I slipped out of Seth's hold and tried to change the subject.

"You know, it is so good to see you guys, but we really need to get moving if we're going to see everything we wanted to see before it gets too late."

"You guys aren't camping at Heart o' the Hills, are you?" Seth asked a little too hopefully. I nodded, and he beamed. "Great! We can hang out tonight! We got a spot there, too."

"Great," Edward mumbled under his breath.

We made plans to meet up for some s'mores later that evening. Edward didn't look too pleased, but it was Seth - there was no way I could turn him down without completely crushing him. He really was like family. I hoped Edward would see it was like telling Alice no. He said himself that that was impossible. We finished our hike and headed back to the car. Edward was silent until we hit the parking lot.

"So, do all of your male friends feel the need to molest you in public? If this is a common practice, I think I'm going to have to put an end to it. I could hire you your own bodyguard, perhaps."

I shook my head and tried to hold back a laugh. "Seth is harmless. He's like an overly friendly dog."

Edward considered that for a moment as he opened my door for me. He made his way around the car and into the driver's seat.

"Who's Jake?" he asked before starting the car.

I glanced at him nervously. I didn't want to get into who Jake was. Edward's expression was emotionless, which wasn't necessarily a good thing. I swallowed hard and stared at my hands in my lap.

"Jake is Seth's sister's boyfriend and a mutual friend. His dad and my dad are best friends." That was the simplest way to describe him. I took another look at Edward as he pulled out of the parking spot. He wore his mask of indifference and chose not to say anything in response to my reply.

Back at camp, we started a fire and roasted our hotdogs. Edward didn't hate them as much as he wanted to. Throughout dinner, he was quiet, but his eyes were soft. I could only imagine what was going on in that head of his. I hoped he wasn't stewing about our run-in with Seth and Claire. Maybe work was weighing heavy on his mind. Maybe it was killing him to have his phone off.

"Penny for your thoughts," I coaxed from my side of the picnic table.

His lips tugged upward and then fell back into a straight line. "Was Seth's sister's boyfriend once *your* boyfriend?" He popped a potato chip in his mouth, waiting for my answer.

It appeared work was not to blame for his taciturnity.

High school ex-boyfriends who should have just stayed your best friend for 100, Alex.

"For about three months when I was seventeen. We figured out pretty quickly we were better at being friends."

"Who figured it out first?" he prodded. I wasn't sure why he was so interested. It was over six years ago, hardly relevant today.

"Me, I guess." I shrugged. "Jake's a couple years younger than me. I think I felt bad that he had such a crush, so I tried to make myself feel a certain way, but it

didn't work. I love Jake, I just wasn't *in* love with him."

He put both elbows on the table and folded his hands in front of him. "Have you ever been in love?"

"Have you?"

His eyes dropped to a spot on the table in front of me. "I told you, I don't do that emotion," said the man who a few hours earlier told me he was sure he'd love camping with me. His eyes moved back up to mine. "Now, answer the question."

"I thought I was in love."

"But you weren't?"

"I don't know. At the time, I would have said I thought I was, but it wasn't the real deal."

"How do you know it wasn't real?"

He was so curious. Did he seriously not understand the concept of love, or was he just interested in my past?

"I believe that when I fall in love for real I won't just think I'm in love, I'll know."

"How will you know?" He stared at me intently, his eyes hungry for the answer.

I took a deep breath, bit down on my bottom lip, and shook my head. "I don't know. I think that when I fall in love with someone, it will feel different. I've been physically attracted to people. I've experienced the butterflies and the racing heartbeat. I guess when it's really love, it goes beyond those little physiological things. Love is more than attraction; it's about devotion. It's about putting someone else first not because you have to but because you want to. It's about being unable to imagine your life without that person in it."

These things, to different degrees, were what had been lacking in my other relationships. I was devoted to Jake. To this day, I would do anything for him. I had attempted to give him what he wanted because I wanted him to be happy, but that spark wasn't there on my end. On the other hand, with Mike, I was physically attracted to him, but when his life went in one direction and mine went in another, I couldn't give up my life to follow him. I liked having him around, but it wasn't hard to imagine a life without him.

Edward took in every word, listening to me like I was Budda on the mountaintop, spewing my wisdom. He let it all sink in and then sat up straight, pushing a hand through his hair.

"It's so foolish to let someone have that kind of power over you."

"Love isn't about power," I disagreed.

"Love is a fantasy, a game. Counting on someone to stay with you, to never leave so you'll feel complete. It's stupid, really. People leave. Choosing to love is just asking to be disappointed."

So much for being wise; according to him, I was an idiot.

"Love is a feeling, Edward. You don't choose to do it. You *feel* it."

He looked at me from across the table, his eyes now ice cold. "Everything is about power and control. Who has it and who doesn't. If you don't believe that then you're naïve and obviously one of the have-nots. If you hand yourself over to someone, they can break you. Therein lies the power."

"Love is powerful. I'll give you that much, but you make it sound like it only has the power to destroy."

His face contorted in real agony.

Landmine.

"It destroys everything," he insisted.

Oh, this beautiful, broken man. *What happened to you?* I wanted to ask. Someone must have hurt him in ways I couldn't begin to understand. I wanted to jump over the table and wrap my arms around him.

"I'd like to think it has the power to heal, too," I said, hoping that if he believed nothing else, he'd believe that. I took the chance and covered his hand with mine, giving it a little squeeze. "Either way, you can't control it. No matter how hard you try," I said, putting the subject to rest.

I jumped up and grabbed our empty plates off the table, needing to step away from the intensity of the moment.

Power and control. Fear and pain. That was Edward Masen in a nutshell. He was powerful, probably the most powerful person I had ever met. He tried to control me, sometimes with intent and sometimes without. Someone had hurt him, and his pain was all too real. Even though I was certainly no threat; I got the feeling that he was very afraid of what he felt for me. I realized now that he was afraid because he couldn't control it. He couldn't stop it. He was strapped on this ride right alongside me. I wasn't going to go as far as to call it love, we weren't there yet, but what he did feel was scaring him as much as what I felt for him frightened me. I got the fear part; no one wanted to get hurt. Me included.

Seth and Claire showed up at dusk. We pulled out the marshmallows, and I showed off my mad roasting skills. I handed Edward the first s'more and watched him examine it carefully. He seemed to be considering how he could take a bite without getting it all over his face, which was impossible because s'mores are supposed to get all over your face.

"Just eat it," I demanded after a full minute passed.

Seth started chanting, "Do it!" helping to push Edward along. He wrapped those pretty lips around it and took a bite. Marshmallow and melted chocolate oozed out the other three sides. When he pulled it away from his face, he had it all over his mouth.

I giggled at the sight of him trying to wipe the sticky mess from the corners of his mouth with his thumb, only to smear it more.

"It's good but messy." His tongue darted out of his mouth to lick it away. I'm pretty sure I heard Claire quietly gasp with me. What I wouldn't give to help lick that off him.

"Nobody makes a better s'more than Bella," Seth chimed in, oblivious to the effect Edward and his tongue were having on me and his ogling girlfriend. "Another reason why we guys fall in love with her."

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. I didn't want to revisit any part of my earlier debate with Edward in front of Seth and Claire.

"We guys?" Edward questioned, holding his s'more daintily between his thumb and forefinger, so not to get any of it on the rest of him.

"Well, just to warn you Ed, you can't know Bella and not fall in love with her. It's her blessing and her curse. You should have seen what happened to every teenaged

male in Forks when she moved in with Charlie. You would have thought they'd never seen a girl before. She was like a shiny new toy. They all wanted to have her."

Edward's attention was captured immediately. "Really?"

"God, yeah. Hell, even the guys in La Push were lining up. I was only twelve when she moved here, but I crushed hard on her for years. I seriously don't think I have ever been jealous of anyone as much as I was of Jake." He smirked at me. "I wanted to be him so bad, even when you were only friends. He'd hold your hand with that shit-eating grin on his face. You should see how his face still lights up when he talks about you."

Claire smacked him on the arm.

"What?"

"Don't start," she warned.

"She knows how he feels," Seth said, gesturing towards me. "He broke up with Leah, by the way. He said he was 'confused' and told her he couldn't ask her to wait for him to figure things out."

I could feel Edward's eyes on me, but I refused to look at him.

"Is she ok?"

"She's doing better than when Sam broke her heart, but she's been in super bitch mode for about a week. Hence, my willingness to come here with Claire Bear."

Excellent. Jake and Leah broke up, and Seth made it sound like it was because of me. It was not because of me. Leah could be a handful. I would actually consider super bitch mode an accurate description of her every day persona. I loved her like a sister, but it was true.

Claire changed the subject for me. She asked about how Edward and I met, which was kind of awkward. Edward told the abridged version of the nickels story, leaving out certain details like that he was a multi-billionaire CEO of one of the world's largest software companies. I, in turn, explained how he retaliated with the pennies, leaving out there were a hundred thousand of them. Claire and Seth also got me caught up on all the other gossip from home.

Edward was fairly sociable. He came off like an ordinary guy, even though Edward

Masen was anything but ordinary. Around ten, he started acting tired. Thank goodness for Claire. She was quick to pick up on the social cues and suggested heading back to their campsite.

Seth gave me another monster bear hug before he left while Edward busied himself with stoking the fire. Once they were gone, I worried how the rest of the night would proceed. We put the fire out, and Edward disappeared into the tent while I cleaned up a bit.

He startled me as I closed the trunk after getting my bag out. "Sorry," he apologized, smiling. "Do you want some privacy to get ready for bed?"

I nodded and slipped into the tent. There was limited space to move around with the giant air mattress in the way. The one battery operated lantern was the only light. I pulled off my smoky smelling sweatshirt and took off my bra before putting on a T-shirt to sleep in. I set my shoes and socks aside and unbuttoned my khaki shorts, sliding them down my legs and off. Before I put my sleep shorts on, Edward unzipped the door and came in. I froze in my half-dressed state.

"It's starting to rain," he explained. I could hear the faint sound of raindrops hitting the canopy. "Maybe we should go."

"We'll be fine." We had a lot of tall tree cover and a waterproof tent. Edward wasn't new to the Pacific Northwest. It rained. All the time. It probably wouldn't last very long.

"You want to stay? If it rains?"

"We'll be fine." I tried to reassure him with a smile. "This is camping."

"This is camping," he repeated with some unease. Then, he took note of my partial nakedness. I could see his mood shift immediately.

"Mmm, maybe we should stay," he said in a low voice.

He came towards me and took my shorts from me, tossing them to the other side of the tent. His hands went to my hips, and his long fingers slid under my shirt, making contact with the skin just above the waistband of my panties. My breathing hitched as he brushed his nose against mine, and his mouth came as close to me as it could without touching.

"I'm trying to figure out what you are, Isabella. A siren, perhaps? Leaving a trail of

broken hearts across the Northwest?"

I ran my hands across the thin fabric covering his defined muscles. Edward wasn't bulked up but was definitely in shape. I could feel the contours of his body, wishing I could shed him of his shirt.

"I'm no seductress."

"Ah, and yet it seems Seth would disagree. *'You can't know Bella and not fall in love with her,'*" he said, repeating Seth's words. He kissed me under my ear and his fingers found their way under the waistband of my now drenched panties.

"Good thing you're immune to all that foolishness. I don't have to worry about breaking your heart, only you breaking mine." I don't know why I let those words come out of my mouth, but they did, and there was no going back.

He pried his lips off my neck and brought his hands up to my face. Staring me right in the eye, he made himself very clear, "Now is your chance to tell me to stop before I take what I want. Once I get you naked, there will be no stopping until I am satisfied."

Dead. How am I not dead?

I knew I wasn't dead because my blood was coursing through my veins at an impossible rate. His ability to retain complete control while offering me an out was astounding. I didn't want an out, though. I wanted in, as insane as that probably was. I wanted to satisfy him, to please him.

I swallowed hard and tried to sound as convincing as possible. "I know what I'm getting myself into."

Either I was a better liar than I thought, or he didn't care. His mouth was on mine, his tongue invading, stroking. I was on fire. Every inch of skin was radiating heat as he dropped his hands from my face and stopped kissing me long enough to lift my shirt up over my head in one swift movement. There was no resistance this time. I lifted my arms and let him undress me. The thunder outside boomed loudly, and a crack of lightning lit up the tent.

"I fear I may have angered the Heavens," Edward said, glancing upwards as the rain fell harder. Then, he lifted his own shirt up and over his head. "Since I'm going to Hell..."

He grabbed me and spun us around. Never breaking the connection between his lips and my body, he lowered me onto the air mattress. He trailed hot, wet kisses along my collarbone. I could feel the tickle of his chest hair on my bare stomach. My fingers raked through his hair as he kissed down my chest, between my heaving breasts, along the plane of my stomach, and across the top of my panties. He stood up, breaking all points of contact.

Lightning flashed, and thunder crashed as he toed off his tennis shoes and removed his socks. His eyes roamed over my naked body. I should have felt self-conscious, but all I felt was desire. He wanted me. He might not love me; hell, he might not be capable of loving me, but he wanted me. That he could not deny. His hands worked the buttons of his jeans until they were loose enough to slide off his hips. He wore black boxer briefs that did nothing to hide the humongous bulge that now had my undivided attention.

I sat up on my elbows and used one hand to release the rubber band that was holding my hair up in its loose pony tail. Edward let out the sexiest groan as my hair fell down my back. The sky seemed to be trying to empty all the water it held. The rain pelted the tent relentlessly as a rumble of thunder sent vibrations through my body.

Edward hooked his thumbs in his waistband and pulled his boxer briefs all the way down his legs. My eyes were still fixated on his manhood. He was resplendent. Everything about him screamed strong, powerful, beautiful man. Lightning lit up his face for a second, and I could see the lust and need there.

He walked to the foot of the air mattress and rustled around in a bag until he retrieved what he was looking for. "This time will be about me. Next time I'll take better care of you." He opened the box of condoms and pulled one off the strip. "Take your panties off, Isabella," he instructed.

The authoritativeness in his voice was such a damn turn on. I could do nothing but slip myself out of the only thing left covering me up. He sheathed himself and then climbed back on top of me. I spread myself for him as he kissed my mouth. Lacing his fingers with mine, he lifted our attached hands above my head. His other hand roamed between my legs.

I could feel him smile against my lips. "Someone's ready."

I was sure I was more than ready. His fingers swirled and dipped, causing me to moan into his mouth. I hoped I wasn't so wet neither of us would feel anything. He continued to kiss me as he teased my entrance with the tip of his erection. My hips

lifted off the mattress in an attempt to capture him inside. I needed him. I wanted him.

"This won't be gentle," he warned as he pushed himself inside me, filling me in a way I'd never experienced before.

My worries about not feeling anything quickly dissipated. I felt *everything*. The storm outside raged on, and the sides of the tent pushed in and out in a similar rhythm as Edward pushed in and out of me. My cries of passion were covered by the loud bangs of thunder. Edward held my hand and kissed my mouth as he took me there, in the heart of the storm. It was frantic and rough, but it was completely exhilarating.

This was the part of the wild ride we were on that was going to make me never want to get off.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

So, you're all looking at your alert and saying - It's not Friday, it's Tuesday. I couldn't help myself, I want to send a thank you note to everyone who's reading, reviewing, favoriting, setting alerts, etc. and I decided this was the best way to do that. I felt like I needed to send out a little bonus chapter because of the awesomeness of the readers. And yes, another chapter on Friday. Oh, yes, it's that kind of week =)

Fridays at Noon got reviewed on the Fictionators and made my entire weekend! Then someone posted something over at TFFA and I've been totally blown away. Thanks again for all the love out there for this story. You guys are the best.

Thanks to my trusted pre-reader momof4luvntwisaga for dealing with my anxiety about discussing male private parts.

Pictures of things like Hurricane Ridge on the blog. Seriously there are meadow there that look straight out of the Twilight movies. Incredible.

Let me know what you think or share your favorite camping/Walmart experience. I don't camp but I shop at Walmart all the time. It's where I got my Eclipse DVD! I'm only a spoiled brat like Pennyward when it comes to camping. Why would I want to sleep in a tent when I could sleep in my

wonderful king-sized bed? Maybe if had Edward on the air mattress with me...

Chapter 7

A/N: What, an author's note before the chapter? Sorry, but because of what happens, I need to say that there is a song played in this chapter called Hands All Over by Maroon 5, you should buy it if you don't already own it. The whole album makes me feel like I need to smoke a cigarette after listening to it. Every song makes you think about sex, seriously. Anyways, so that's what's playing, in case you'd like to have a multi-sensory experience! Yeah, this chapter is rated M because of that...

Chapter 7

Friday, July 30th at noon

Hi, my name is Bella Swan, and I am an addict.

A sex addict, if we're going to get technical about it. Well, not one of those nasty sex addicts, who picks up random people and has sex in dark alleys and dirty bathrooms. I only wanted to have sex with Edward. Problem being, I wanted to have sex with him *all the time*. It was literally all I wanted to do, all I thought about any time we were together, and all I fantasized about when we were apart. He was *that* good at it.

Camping/thunderstorm sex had been intense. Sex in his king-sized bed was euphoric. He considered himself selfish by nature; but in bed, he was quite capable of giving. I shouldn't say he was only a giver in bed; he also gave a lot on the couch in his family room, in the shower, in the hot tub on the rooftop patio, in front of the fireplace in the living room of his condo, and against the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the bay. Edward was giving all over the place.

During the last week, getting naked was shamefully my main objective when I was with him. We never argued when we were having sex. I stayed clear of all landmines when my lips were wrapped around his glorious manhood. We didn't delve into awkward discussions about love and the meaning of life when he was buried deep inside me. The only teasing he did was with his fingers and tongue. *Oh Lord, his fingers and tongue...*

"Bella!" Rosalie snapped me out of my sex-crazed thoughts. "What is up with you this week?" She eyed me with great suspicion. I tried to appear as normal as

possible at work, but I was a full-blown addict, as evidenced by the way it was starting to impact my daily functioning.

"Nothing. Nothing is up with me. What do you need, Rosalie?"

"I need employees who aren't spacing out in the middle of their shift. That's what I need. Can you please try to stay a little more focused today? Mr. Masen should be here any minute. He cancelled his reservation last week, and I don't want anything to cause him to do that again. Am I making myself clear?"

I nodded. "Absolutely. I will make sure Mr. Masen gets the best service possible." I knew exactly how I was going to serve Mr. Masen today, because I was a sick and hopeless A-D-D-I-C-T.

Besides being the week of the greatest sex I've ever had, I also had to deal with Edward's sudden need to buy me things. Part of me started to think he was trying to make up for the fact that I gave him a gift first. Why that mattered, I didn't know, but it seemed to motivate him to go a little overboard.

It started on Sunday. After some mind-blowing wake up sex that left me in need of a nap before I had even gotten out of his bed, I was presented with Gift #1. Inside a beautifully wrapped box was a digital copy of the new Kings of Leon CD - the one that wasn't actually going to be released until October. Edward had called in a favor to the guys in the band. I got extended tracks, songs that didn't make the final record, and acoustic versions of several of the songs. Coolest. Gift. Ever. He could have easily stopped there.

Not Edward.

A Tiffany's box containing earrings was set upon my dinner plate on Monday. They were simple, one carat diamond studs in a platinum setting. I refused them, telling him he was crazy if he thought I could accept a gift that cost that much. Edward was quick to remind me that when I gave him a gift, he thanked me and accepted it without any argument. I pointed out that I did not and could not buy something so extravagant for him. He countered with the fact that he could have bought earrings that were triple the cost, but he chose ones he wanted to see on me. He also didn't see why, because he could afford to buy things that cost more, he should be penalized and refused. I took the earrings because he was right. Nine thousand dollar earrings to Edward were like a fifty dollar pair of jeans to me. That was the reality I was trying to deal with now.

Tuesday, an envelope was dropped off at Eclipse with my name on it. Inside was a

gift certificate to Nancy Meyer Fine Lingerie, along with a note from Edward that informed me I should buy some things that would surely put a smile on his face. My initial reaction was similar to the earrings because this was no twenty-five dollar gift card. This certificate was for ten thousand dollars. I would have fainted if I wasn't so mad. He knew I wouldn't refuse it because he could act like it was a gift for him as much as it was for me. He was a tricky little billionaire.

I took to the task of spending that money with one thing in mind - torturing him. With the help of my personal fitter, I was able to spend most of my gift on some of the sexiest undergarments I had ever seen. I planned on making him suffer, refusing to let him touch me until I tried everything on for him. Unfortunately, I only made it through half of my fashion show before we were both naked and, well, feeding my addiction. Anytime I was in the same room with Edward, I was worse than a crack whore in a room full of crack.

Gift #4 came on Wednesday when I got home from work. A knock at my door led to me signing for a large package. He had bought me a painting of a woman on a rock by the ocean holding what looked like a small harp. There was a man in the water below her, who was trying to reach for her. I would not consider myself much of an art connoisseur, but I could tell it was not something he picked up at Pottery Barn. According to the paperwork sent with the painting, it was called *The Siren* by John William Waterhouse. Jasper wiki'ed it and said it was painted in 1900. The last time it was sold, it went for a million euros.

A million flipping euros.

The damn thing should be in a museum, not in my apartment. I went to Edward's condo for dinner that night, million-dollar painting in tow. Edward was so nonchalant about the whole thing, causing me to become infuriated and frustratingly turned on at the same time (don't judge, I have a disease). Something told me he knew exactly what my reaction was going to be because, without any argument, he took the painting and agreed to keep it. The one thing he insisted, however, was that I had to be the one who chose where it would be hung.

Thursday, I thought maybe that was the end of it. Perhaps the gift giving floodgates had been closed. I had dinner at the condo with him, but he was preoccupied with work that night. He was constantly on his phone, ducking into his office to discuss things behind closed doors. I tried to leave, but he demanded I stay. He emerged from his office while I was half watching, half sleeping through the evening news. He picked me up off the couch and carried me to his bed where he had his way with me.

This morning, he was gone when I woke. The man had the ability to be quieter than a damn mouse. On his side of the bed was a box containing a pair of silk thigh-high stockings and a garter belt. I had never felt anything like them in my life. The note in the box, written in Edward's fancy script, stated I was to wear these with my uniform today at lunch. Panties were optional but strongly discouraged. This was the kind of gift I could handle.

Now, I was at work in my silk stockings, wearing no panties, and preparing for my billionaire boyfriend's arrival. I was such a damn junkie. I needed an intervention. I could picture myself on that show on A&E. Under my picture would be my name - Bella Swan, Sex (with Edward Masen) Addict. They'd interview Jasper about how I never slept in my own bed anymore and how he was the first to recognize I had a problem. My inner sex goddess had been unleashed, and she was unstoppable. My parents would cry, questioning how could this happen to their little girl. They tried so hard to raise me right, and here I was - a pathetic slave to wanton desire. Rosalie would complain about how it was affecting my work performance.

"Bella!" Rosalie shouted in a whisper. Speak of the devil. "Masen is here. Are you planning to wait on him sometime today?"

I nodded and tried to control myself as I made my way upstairs. He was going to know what was and was not under this skirt. I had Angela keep my section in the main dining room empty while Edward was here, so I could give him my full attention. I was hit with a rush of panic. What if Alec was with him? What if a whole bunch of people were here with him? What if he was planning on torturing me by making me wait on him, with no underwear on, in front of a room full of people? I hadn't thought of that until right now. This could be dangerous. I was jonesing for some Edward, and the stockings had done the trick of building up the anticipation. I could end up a twitching, stuttering mess by the end of this.

I opened the door to find all my worries were for naught. Edward was seated at the table alone. He wore a sly smile as he tapped something into his phone and then slipped it in his pocket.

"Isabella, you've kept me waiting."

I crossed one leg in front of the other and smashed my thighs together.

"I've been a little *distracted*. I apologize for not getting up here sooner."

He arched a brow. "Distracted, huh?"

I nodded, chancing a few steps in his direction. He looked divine in a charcoal grey suit, his hair standing in perfect disarray on top of his head.

"I'll admit my mind has been wandering a bit this morning as well," Edward said, placing one hand on the table and tapping his long fingers on the linen tablecloth. Edward's fingers were as tempting to me as lines of white powder were to a cokehead.

I moved in their direction unconsciously. Like a moth to a flame. I needed them to touch me. *Now.*

"Thank you for the gift this morning," I said as I approached those long, pleasure-inducing digits.

His lips curved upwards. "I wanted to give myself a gift this morning, but you looked too complacent in your slumber to disturb."

"Never feel bad about waking me up," I replied coyly.

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Good to know. I will not make the mistake of denying myself again."

Perhaps we were both hooked. I glanced back down at his hand on the table. His fingers had stopped tapping and seemed to be stretching in my direction. I stepped closer, and he let the back of his hand brush against my thigh. I sighed at the contact and moved closer. Edward's hand slipped between my legs, starting at my knee and moving up painfully slow.

"I take it you like them?" he asked, his green eyes glowing.

I nodded. "I think I might wear them every Friday."

He smiled in approval. His hand hit the tops of the stockings, and his fingers danced around to the back of my thigh, upwards until he was palming my bare bottom. He hissed through his teeth.

"This is how I'd like you all the time," he growled, giving me a little squeeze.

My pulse rate jumped as I got my first taste of what my body had been craving all day - his skin on mine. It was even better than the feel of the silk. He dropped his hand, leaving me wanting much more.

He smirked, knowing exactly what he was doing. "I think I'm ready to order."

Order? God, he made me forget what the hell he was really doing here. Trying hard to mask my disappointment, I cleared my throat. "What can I get you today, Mr. Masen?"

Edward stood up from the table and placed both hands on my waist. His lips brushed against my cheek, before he planted a warm kiss below my ear.

"You, only you," he murmured.

Hallelujah!

His lips were on mine, attacking and taking whatever he needed. I parted my lips in hopes that he would come inside. Without hesitation, he accepted my unspoken invitation. Our tongues rolled and explored one another. How was it possible for a man to taste as good as he looked? My hands moved over his chest and slipped under his jacket, onto his shoulders. I could feel the warmth of his body under the cotton of his shirt. We needed to get naked. I tried to push his jacket off of him when he pulled back.

He was breathing hard, like I was, a satisfied smile playing on his lips. He knew exactly what he was doing to me.

"For the sake of time, my clothes are going to stay on. You, on the other hand..." He reached up and loosened my tie. He pulled it over my head and set it on the table. "Today is going to be about you, Isabella."

I was never going to be able to function normally again.

Edward continued unbuttoning my white blouse, pulling it free from the waistband of my skirt until it was open all the way. He ran his fingers over the embroidery covering my already taut nipples.

"Mmm, I like this one," he purred, lowering his mouth to kiss the swell of my breast.

He was commenting on the bra that had the matching boy shorts I was wearing when our fashion show ended abruptly by his pouncing on me. I knew exactly what I was doing, too.

"Do you trust me?" he asked as he took my tie off the table and began undoing the

knot.

That was a complicated question. Did I trust him? With my life? *Maybe*. To pay me back if he borrowed money from me? *Sure*. To not break my heart? *Absolutely not*.

"Trust you to what?"

He smirked and tilted my head up with his thumb on my chin. Placing a soft kiss on my forehead, he asked, "Do you trust that I only want to make you feel good?"

Like any drug, they make you feel good until they kill you. I nodded, unable to make rational decisions about things like - should I try to avoid certain death?

Edward held my tie in front of me. "I'm going to blindfold you and play you a song."

He watched me carefully, waiting for me to dissent. When I made no move to stop him, he lifted the tie to my eyes and secured it with a double knot.

"Then I'm going to make you feel really, really good," he whispered in my ear.

My entire body was tingling. My mind began reeling. What if Rosalie started wondering where I was? What if she sent someone up here to check on me? Edward's teeth on my earlobe pulled me from my thoughts.

"This song makes me want to touch you," he told me quietly as he placed an earbud in my ear. "Do you want me to touch you?"

I quietly whimpered at the thought.

"Answer me, Isabella."

Bossy but so hot. "Yes," I rasped.

He placed the other earbud in my ear and then stepped away. It felt like the air was vibrating around me when the music began.

"Put your hands all over, put your hands all over me. Put your hands all over, put your hands all over me."

I was done for. Edward's hands pushed my shirt off my shoulders and ran down my arms, leaving goosebumps behind. His fingers slipped under the straps of my

bra, dragging them down my skin to where the strap met the cup and then torturously back up to my shoulder. Then his mouth was on my neck, wet and warm. He pushed the straps off my shoulders and planted a kiss where they had once been. His hands moved down to my breasts, freeing them from their demi-cups. He palmed them both gently before reaching behind me to unhook my bra.

"Love is a game, you say. Play me and put me away."

He returned his hands to the front, one hand tweaking, twisting, and teasing my nipple as his mouth came down on the other. His tongue circled the pebbled flesh in slow, languorous strokes.

"Now you've lost your mind. The pretty little girl I left behind. Now you're getting rough but everybody knows you're not that tough."

His hands fell to my hips. He lifted me up onto the table. Edward's talented but dangerous mouth never left my body. He seemed to want to touch, taste, and experience me as much as I wanted him. He flicked my hardened nipple with his tongue once more.

Then the music stopped suddenly.

"I have Tyler guarding the door, but even he's going to come knocking soon if you don't keep it down, sweetheart."

I pushed the blindfold up, so I could see Edward with one eye. I had no idea I was even making noise. He looked all too pleased with himself, smiling from ear to ear. A playfulness shone in his eyes.

"You're trying to kill me, aren't you?"

Edward chuckled lightly as he pulled my hand away from the blindfold and covered my eye back up.

"Trust me, I want you very much alive." Then he whispered, "Just quieter."

The music started up again, and so did Edward. He pushed me back so I was lying on the table.

"Put your hands all over me. Please talk to me, talk to me. Tell me everything's going to be all right."

Edward removed my shoes and kissed the top of my right foot. Slowly, patiently, he ran his hands up my leg, stopping when he reached the top of the stockings. He repeated the same on the other leg.

He was waving the drugs under my nose but not letting me take a full hit. I was going to lose my mind if he didn't touch me where I needed him the most.

"So come down off your cloud. Say it now and say it loud. Get up in my face. Pretty little girl come make my day."

Edward's tongue flitted across my thigh, above the stocking. He peppered both inner thighs with sensual kisses. I could feel his heated breath on my sensitive skin. My senses were in complete overdrive. I clamped my hand over my mouth, trying to curtail the sounds I was making like the Edward-whore I was.

Then he did it. He slid one of his long, beautiful fingers inside. I could have come right then. Two fingers slipped inside, and then his mouth was between my legs. Now, he had to be trying to kill me. He told me to be quiet, and then he went there? No way was I going to be able to hold back the noises that were involuntarily coming out of me. Not when he did that.

He stroked and sucked. He nipped and flicked. He plunged and tickled.

"Love is a game, you say. Play me and put me away."

Game over. My body shook. My muscles clenched around his fingers as he stilled them inside me. I put my other hand on top of the one that was already covering my mouth as I found my release.

When I finished and was nothing but a quivering mess, Edward pulled the earbuds out of my ears. He helped me off the table, setting my unsure feet on the floor.

"Fuck, Isabella." He was panting. He turned me around so my back was to his front. "Bend over," he demanded, pushing my skirt up all the way over my bare behind.

I still couldn't see anything, but I could hear the ripping of the condom wrapper and the zipper of his pants. Edward's palm pressed down on my back as he entered me from behind. I screamed out. I didn't mean to, but I wasn't prepared for the fullness I felt when he was inside me.

"Cover your mouth. You have to be quiet," he scolded while pulling on my braid,

so my head lifted up.

He kissed the side of my neck. I wanted to kiss him back, taste myself on his lips. I turned my head, but he released my hair and pushed me forward. I bit down on my own forearm as he pounded into me. It was raw, animalistic, and so damn hot. He reached his hand around my waist and began using those magical fingers to send me over the edge once again.

"Come with me. I want you to come again. Do you hear me?"

In my mind, I thought about telling him to hurry up then because his words sent me free falling over the edge. Instead, the only thing that came out of my mouth was something like, "Ughhahhhhhuhhh." At least that's what it sounded like against my arm.

I didn't need to tell him anything, though. Edward bit down on my shoulder as his body went stiff. He let go with nothing more than a soft grunt. He lay on top of me, careful not to put too much of his weight on my small frame.

"I have half a mind to cancel on Alice tonight and tell her I need you all to myself so we can do that again."

Sure, wave the bottle of whiskey in front of the alcoholic.

I was learning how hard it was to refuse either of the Masens. Alice was bringing her campers to Edward's estate tonight to watch a movie in his theater. Alice used his estate a few times a year for her work at the foundation. Besides using the theater, she brought kids to ride his horses sometimes. She hosted some big annual benefit there at the end of August and a Christmas party in December. Alice had asked both me and Jasper to help run the concession stand tonight. At the time, I couldn't imagine not helping her out. Now that I was addicted to her brother, I wasn't sure I would be able to fulfill my duty if he was offering to hand out orgasms that made my ovaries burst.

I pulled my tie from my eyes and blinked as they adjusted to the brightness. "They aren't staying overnight. As soon as they leave, I'm all yours."

I could feel him stop breathing for a second. I tensed, worried I had hit a landmine, but he kissed the bite mark on my shoulder.

"All mine," he said before standing up and pulling out of me.

Empty and spent from our activity, I rose slowly, pushing my skirt back down my body.

All his. For now, while I pleased him. When was he going to grow tired of me? How much of me would he take with him when he left? I was not as good as him at being able to separate the pleasure of our time together from the emotion I was beginning to feel.

I kept telling myself this was all new to him as well. He was doing things differently than he was used to; he had said so himself. I didn't know if that was good or bad. I knew I was feeling things for him, above and beyond the obvious physical attraction that made me his love slave. This was going to end badly for me someday. I hoped not too soon.

"Will you be coming with Jasper or will you be riding with me?" Edward asked as I buttoned up my shirt.

"I hadn't thought about it. Maybe I'll just drive myself, that way I have a car should something come up and you need me to go."

Edward looked exactly like he did when I first walked in the room. No one would ever suspect he just had a nooner with the waitress. I, on the other hand, probably looked like the disheveled sex-druggie I was.

"I was hoping you'd say that," he said, taking my tie off the table and roping it around my neck.

"Why is that?" I asked suspiciously. Edward complained regularly about me driving my truck. If he was happy about it, something was up.

He finished tying my tie, carefully folding my collar over and centering the knot. His eyes were alight with mischief.

"I got you something," he announced with a grin.

I sighed at the thought of yet more money being spent on me.

"Now, before you roll your pretty brown eyes at me, this is very much like the T-shirt you got me. You wanted me to fit in with 'normal' people. I want you to fit in, too."

"Fit in with whom?" I questioned warily.

"People who drive vehicles made in, I don't know, the current millennium, maybe."

"What did you do?" I gasped. I knew exactly where he was going with this.

Edward laughed as he raised his hands up in self defense. "Now, Isabella, you must know that besides being concerned for your safety and well-being, I am also looking out for the environment. In the 1950's, cars were not designed with fuel economy in mind."

"You bought me a car?"

"Not just a car. I bought you a hybrid. It's very environmentally-friendly and has fantastic gas mileage. You will not only be saving the city from harmful carbon monoxide gas and other emissions, but you'll be helping make this country less dependent on foreign oil. This is your chance to provide a real service to your country and the world if you ask me."

"You bought me a car?" I shrieked, unable to find the humor in this.

Edward's brow furrowed. "You keep saying that like it's a bad thing."

"Edward, people don't buy other people cars! Car buying is very... personal," I rationalized.

"You said your father bought you that truck. Did you stomp your foot and holler at him when he presented it to you?" he challenged me with narrow eyes.

Damn him.

"I was a child then. I was dependent on my father. I am not a child nor am I dependent on you." *Except when it comes to the desperate dependency I have on you for sex.*

Edward thought for a moment. I could see him trying to find a loophole to jump through. He opted for looking and sounding hurt. "You won't even look at it? Is that what you're telling me?"

I groaned in frustration. I had accepted the earrings, and I spent the outrageous gift certificate on ridiculously overpriced underwear. He understood when I couldn't take the painting. Yet he still went out and bought me a car? I knew it wasn't going to be some used Toyota Corolla. It was going to be expensive and flamboyant and not me.

"The earrings look nice on you, by the way," he said, waiting for my answer.

I fingered the diamond stud in my ear. They did look nice. They weren't too ostentatious for me to wear to work. They were perfect. He had excellent taste.

Damn him.

"How about this?" he offered. "Let's just say I recently purchased a new car. I don't think it fits me, so I'm looking to sell it. I will sell it to you for a very reasonable price. Way below Blue Book. How about that? You can't deny your current vehicle is on its last wheel, so to speak." He shot me that charming crooked smile that once again caused the heat to rise between my legs.

Damn him.

"Fine," I said in a huff. "I'll look at it, but I'm not making you any promises."

His hand caressed my face as he leaned in for a kiss on the lips. "You're going to love it." He kissed me again. "Why don't you ride with Jasper. I might be running a little late. I'll have Brady drive you home whenever you like, if you decide not to buy the car from me."

I was going to buy the car from him. I knew this even though I was not happy about it.

He turned to leave when I realized he hadn't eaten.

"But you didn't have lunch," I called after him.

He stopped and glanced at his watch. He was pressed for time, I could tell. He turned back to me with a smile. "Oh, I'm leaving very satisfied. My compliments to the chef." He winked and was out the door.

Damn him.

"What can I get you, darlin'? Candy or popcorn?" Jasper drawled to the sweet little girl in the brightly colored EMM Camp T-shirt.

"Both!" she shouted with glee.

"Popcorn and candy, for the little lady, it is!" he replied, handing her a small bag of popcorn and directing her my way to pick out which kind of candy she wanted. I could see the scars on her hands and arms as she reached for the box of Sour Patch Kids.

Alice worked for Northwest Burn Foundation, NWBF for short, here in Seattle. She was on the Board of Directors and was in charge of the week-long camp they ran for burn-injured children. She spent the rest of the year doing fund raising, educational outreach, and volunteering her time at Harborview Medical Center and the emergency housing facility NWBF provided to families in need while they were receiving treatment at Harborview.

It turned out that it was Edward, not Alice, who was uncomfortable with any discussion about her burns or what she did for a living. Alice, I was finding out, was not embarrassed about her scars at all. When I found her in the kitchen of my apartment one morning, dressed in nothing but one of Jasper's T-shirts, I figured out she was not as shy about it as I first thought. Jasper told me that it was Edward who hated seeing her scars, so she tended to cover them up when she spent time with him. Her issues with fire, however, were real. She did suffer from nightmares and tended to stay clear of big open flames. But again, Jasper thought the issues were definitely more Edward's than Alice's.

Jasper and Alice were very cute together. When they weren't together, they were calling and texting one another almost constantly. Up until she had camp this week, they were spending almost as much time together as Edward and I were. I couldn't ask for a better girlfriend for my best friend than Alice. She was kind and compassionate. She had a desire to care for him as much as she wanted him to take care of her. It was kind of nice actually liking and being liked by Jasper's girlfriend. In six weeks, our lives had changed more than we could have ever imagined.

We got everyone their snacks, and Alice and her staff had all the kids settled into their seats for a special viewing of Toy Story 3. Leave it to Edward to get them a movie that was still in the theaters. That was his only contribution to the night, however. I was told he was dealing with some work issue when we got here and wouldn't be helping pass out snacks. Alice didn't seem surprised.

I was helping clean up with one of the camp counselors while everyone else enjoyed the movie. I was still hopeful Edward would make an appearance. The counselor's name was Riley, and he was going to be a senior at UW in the fall. We commiserated about school, and he went on and on about how awesome it was to work for someone like Alice.

"It's so weird to think someone so down-to-earth like Alice could be related to someone who owns all of this," he remarked, looking around at the fanciful lobby of Edward's private theater. "Can you imagine owning your own theater? Is there a reason he can't go to movies like a normal person? It's so weird."

"It's indulgent, I'll give you that. I guess I don't know what I'd do with billions of dollars. I'm sure I'd think of something that other people would find weird, too," I said in defense of my boyfriend. "Did you know Bill Gates has a trampoline room? That's weird."

"That is weird." Riley laughed. "Can you picture Bill Gates jumping on a trampoline?"

"I know, right? Weird." We both giggled as we swept up the spilled popcorn.

"I bet Masen is weird. I mean, don't get me wrong, the guy practically funds NWBF single handedly, and I totally respect that, but money like he has must make a dude a little off. He never shows his face. I've been working this camp for three years now, and he never comes out here when we're here. He doesn't attend the big parties Alice throws here either. If he wasn't always in the society pages of the paper with hot models draped on his arm, I wouldn't even know what the guy looks like."

Hot models and society pages? Was that what Edward was known for? Sadly, I had never looked into Edward's celebrity status.

"He's not weird," I continued to defend. "He has some quirks, but he can be pretty normal most of the time. He works a lot. If he isn't around it's because of work."

"Do you work for him or something? I thought you were that Jasper guy's friend," Riley questioned.

"I am that Jasper guy's friend," I snorted.

Just then, Tyler walked in.

"Miss Swan, Mr. Masen would like you to join him now." He held the door open as if I was going to go running out it that very second.

"He's not coming to watch the movie?" I asked, feeling disappointed.

"No, ma'am. He'd like you to come up to the house."

"Tell him I'll be there when I'm done here, Tyler."

Tyler stared at me like I had just told him to jump off a cliff. "I think he meant now."

Riley looked back and forth from me to Tyler. I could only imagine what he was thinking. It didn't sit well with me that Edward thought I was supposed to be at his beck and call.

"I'll be up as soon as I can," I replied, smiling tightly.

Tyler looked like he wanted to say something but then thought better of it and left.

"You sure you don't work for him?" Riley snickered.

I could feel my face flush. I suddenly felt like I did work for him, like some sort of high-priced call girl. Boyfriends didn't send their security guard next door to get their girlfriend. Boyfriends made the effort.

"I do *not* work for him," I said stubbornly.

Riley smirked at me. "I believe you, Miss Swan."

"Bella. Please call me Bella."

"Bella. That's a pretty name," he said, handing me the broom back. "Now, get back to work. You might not work for Masen, but tonight, you work for the NWBF. Stop all this messing around and get busy."

I cracked up at his military-like tone.

"Yes, sir," I answered with a salute.

We finished cleaning up and were discussing Flowers Bar and Restaurant on campus. For some reason, Riley had never been there. It seemed impossible to me that anyone who attended UW for three years had never eaten Flowers Bar's vegan buffet.

"What's the point of eating if you're going to be a vegan?" Riley asked. "Is that how you stay so skinny? You don't eat anything?" He playfully poked at my sides.

I took a step away, suddenly aware of our close proximity to one another. "I'm not

vegan, Flowers serves more than just vegan. Guys like you can get chicken or a burger. You really have to go."

"Maybe you can come with me," he said, his cheeks turning a little pink with the invitation. He moved closer and backed me into the corner of the counter.

"Oh." I hadn't realized he thought I was flirting or that I was available.

Before I could let him know I was in a relationship, the door leading outside opened, and Edward came storming in.

"Isabella!" he roared. "Did Tyler come down here and tell you that I wanted you up at the house or was he imagining things?"

He took in the scene before him, and his jaw clenched. As if he wasn't already angry enough, catching me pressed up against the counter with a guy significantly invading my personal space did not help matters whatsoever. He stared daggers at Riley, who took a step back in obvious surprise.

"No one's imagining anything. He came and told me. We just finished cleaning up." My voice was shaking slightly. "I was just about to come up."

Edward looked absolutely lethal. I stepped around Riley and out from behind the concession stand.

"It was nice meeting you, Riley. Good luck when you go back to school."

Riley awkwardly raised a hand in farewell. "Yeah, maybe I'll see you around, Bella. Flowers Bar, I'll check it out."

I smiled and headed out the door with Edward right behind me. My heart was pounding in my chest, but this time it wasn't because of lust or attraction. I was angry, embarrassed, and scared all at the same time.

Edward grabbed my arm, halting my march towards the house. "You want to tell me what the fuck that was about?"

"I was helping Riley clean up." I knew that wasn't all he was asking about. "He goes to UW, we were sharing stories, since it's where I went to school. Thanks for treating me like some sort of disobedient child back there. I really appreciate it," I snapped, yanking my arm from his grasp and continuing my journey back to the house.

"Well, I wouldn't have to treat you like a child if you showed me a little respect."

I whirled around, pissed off being the emotion in charge at the moment. "Respect? Respect? Where's the respect in sending your bodyguard to get me for you? I'm not a pet or some sort of concubine, Edward. I don't know about you, but I think in a relationship like ours, both people deserve to be treated with respect."

"Is that boy back there what you're looking for, Isabella?" Edward shouted, pointing back towards the theater. "You want a little college boy do-gooder? By all means, go back and fuck him up against the popcorn machine. You probably still aren't wearing any panties, I'm sure he'll like that as much as I did."

My fury got the best of me. I raised my hand and smacked him right across the face as hard as I could. If he was hoping to break my habit, he did so with his ugly words and accusations. I was going to start crying. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of crying in front of him, so I ran. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew I needed to get away from him.

I had no car. I had driven with Jasper, who was sitting in Edward's theater with his spectacular girlfriend, who somehow shared the same genes as the asshole I considered my boyfriend up until a few minutes ago. Jasper would take me home if I asked him. He would leave with me if I told him I needed to go, but I didn't think I would be able to get out the words without turning into a blubbering mess. I certainly wasn't going to take the car Edward bought for me. In fact, I was going to keep my truck forever just to spite him.

I ran down by the stables. The horses wouldn't care if I cried myself silly for a few minutes. I pulled open the barn door and sat down on a wooden bench outside Twilight's stall. I could hear the quiet shuffling of the horses' feet and the occasional snorting sounds they made until my own sobbing drowned it all out. I pulled my legs up and cried with my arms wrapped around my knees.

Twilight stuck his big head out and snorted loudly, like he was trying to get my attention. I dropped my legs and wiped my face with my hands.

I scowled at him. "What are you looking at, huh?"

Twilight whinnied and shook his head side to side. He didn't like being snapped at either.

I stood, placing a hand on the horse's neck as he dipped his head towards me.

"Sorry, I'm not mad at you. Your owner, however, pisses me off." Twilight snorted in what I took to be agreement. "What is wrong with that man, huh? Can someone explain him to me because he's killing me with all this unexplained rage. I know there's someone good in there, but he sure know how to be an asshole."

The door to the barn creaked loudly as it opened. I turned my head towards the sound as Edward took a tentative step inside. His forehead creased with regret.

"Brady will drive you home, if you want."

I shook my head, and he looked kind of hopeful.

"I'm going to wait for Jasper. I don't want anything from you or anyone who works for you," I said indignantly.

His face fell as he took another step inside and closed the door. He stood there, unmoving for what felt like forever. I wiped my face again. He didn't deserve to see my tears. He didn't deserve to be sharing the same space with me. I was going to leave. I was ready to tell Jasper I needed him to take me home.

"He was standing very close. Too close," Edward said, breaking the silence.

That's how he wanted to start this?

"So calling me a whore made you feel better?" I quipped.

"No!" he asserted, his tone was pained. He deserved to feel pain. He had wounded me worse than anyone ever had. He continued speaking even though I didn't want to hear it. "Tonight has been difficult for me for a variety of reasons, causing my temper to be extremely short. You stumbled into a very explosive mine field. You are not a whore. I don't *ever* want you to think I feel that way about you."

"You're always full of vague and metaphoric excuses, Edward. I need to go." I tried to walk past him to the door, but he grabbed my arm again. Twilight let out a grumble and became agitated in his stall, gaining our attention.

Edward looked over at the horse that reminded me so much of him. Twilight calmed down under his glare, and Edward returned his gaze to me.

"I'm sorry. Please don't go. Don't... leave me." His eyes were the strangest color of green, they looked almost like jade - cloudy and translucent. The confident, arrogant Edward was gone and in his place was a sad, scared little boy. "I hate that I hurt

you. I'm so sorry."

He let go of my arm, and I didn't leave. My feet were locked in place. I wanted to leave. I wanted to tell him to go to hell. But I stayed.

He lifted a hand to my face. His thumb gently stroked my cheek. "I didn't mean to make you cry. I don't want to make you cry." His lips were soft, and he pressed them to my forehead and then on one eyelid and then the other. He kissed my cheek and the corner of my mouth. "I'm sorry." He kissed my lips, and my traitorous lips kissed him back. He broke the kiss first.

Damn him.

His nose skimmed along my jaw, and I felt my body lean in his direction.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered again, kissing my ear.

"I'm still mad at you," I said, trying to stand my ground.

"I'm still mad at me, too."

"Good."

Edward wrapped his hands around me and pulled me flush against his body. I pressed my cheek against his chest. He smelled like sandalwood and citrus. I loved the way he smelled, and I hated myself for it. My arms snaked around his waist.

"Will you please come up to the house with me?"

"I'm still mad at you," I reminded him, squeezing him a little tighter.

I could feel him breathe into my hair. "I know. You should be. I'm a jerk. A total ass."

"Well, that's not very comforting," I mumbled.

His body shook with a tiny bit of quiet laughter. I couldn't help but smile. His mood swing were almost comical.

"I'm not very good at this, Isabella. I'm trying, but I'm just not very good at this." One of his hands rubbed my back while the other fingered my braid.

What could I even say to that? He wasn't very good at this. *This* being a real relationship. I wasn't the kind of woman he could wear on his arm, show off around town, send for when he wanted someone warm in his bed, then disregard when he felt like it. He was going to have to treat me differently. He was going to have to try harder. Otherwise, I was not going to be able to stay. No matter how much I wanted him. No matter how I was beginning to feel about him.

"I don't want anyone but you," I admitted, even though I was still angry with him. "I don't know why you thought different."

"I don't deserve you."

His words wrenched my heart. I wanted to ask him why he thought that when his phone rang in his pocket. He didn't lessen his hold on me, however.

"Aren't you going to get that?" I asked, tilting my head up so I could see him.

"It will only make me angry." He sighed sadly. "And I'm so tired of being angry."

I closed my eyes and hugged him harder. I felt like he wasn't just talking about tonight. I was beginning to think Edward had spent too much of his life angry. He didn't want to be this way. He wanted to be good and kind. He wanted to be... happy. I could feel it, his almost desperation to be happy.

"Let's go watch the movie," I suggested. "Maybe we'll get a few laughs out of it."

I could feel his body go rigid. "Please don't make me. Please come up to the house. I can't do it, please."

This was new. New and not exactly good. This was not the Edward I knew. There was no way I was going to refuse him. We went back up to the house. Edward eventually checked his phone and sent a text to someone. Alice and Jasper came up to the house to say goodbye before the bus left with all the campers. Alice only had a one more fun-filled day of camp left, then it was back to the grind of educating and fundraising. Jasper took note of my mood and gave me that *are you ok* look. I gave him my most convincing *I'm fine* smile, and he bought it, at least I thought he did.

Edward didn't try to have sex with me that night. He just held me in his arms, tenderly kissing the top of my head and rubbing his hands up and down my back until I fell into contented sleep.

Something pulled me from my unmemorable dream that night. I woke to find

Edward's side of the bed empty. The clock beside the bed said it was a little after two. My mind wandered, wondering where he could be in the middle of the night and why he wasn't here with me. Maybe it was those Asian markets again. The man could never escape the demands of his work. I stared at the ceiling, trying in vain to fall back asleep when I heard the piano.

I crawled out of bed and silently made my way up to my favorite room in the house. The melancholy of the melody made my heart hurt. The tempo of the song changed pace and quickened my steps. It was haunting, yet absolutely beautiful. In the dimly lit library, I could see Edward. He sat at the piano shirtless, wearing only his sleep pants. His back was to me, there was no indication that he heard me stumble upon him. His head bobbed slightly up and down as his fingers moved gracefully across the keys.

I stood in the doorway, watching in awe of his talent and his beauty. He had never played for me. All the times we sat in here, we only discussed literature and looked at several books, sometimes reading our favorite parts to one another. I didn't even know he could play, and here he was making the most amazing music I'd ever heard. There was so much about this man I didn't know. He was a complicated maze with so many hidden spaces and blocked off areas. I didn't know if I would ever figure him out.

He stopped playing, and I thought maybe he heard me. I froze, afraid that I might anger him with my presence. He banged down on the keys in frustration. I was just about to apologize when his head fell into his hands and he began to cry. His whole body shook with heavy sobs. Edward did not know I was there, and somehow I knew it was best to keep it that way. That didn't stop my heart from breaking as I watched him weep, knowing he wasn't ready to let me ease his pain. Not yet.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Again with the yelling. All I can say is all the little campers make Edward kind of a mess. There's also all that big trouble at work. This boy needs to start talking or else things are going to get ugly. For my insights and my defense of Bella not leaving his ass- check my blog (link on my profile).

Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for cleaning this bad boy up and toning down a few parts so you don't all start chanting for Bella to kick him to the curb just yet.

Everyone that reads this is awesome. I read all your reviews and thank you for all the support. Back to the once a week Friday posting (don't be mad, please!) but there will be a teaser up on the blog on Tuesday. A few new arrivals next chapter to make things even more interesting - it's very fun, I promise.

So, if you didn't listen to Hand All Over yet, go do it now. I have it embedded on my blog. Tell me what you think - Friday lunch was a tad bit more interesting today, huh?

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

Friday, August 6th at noon

Who's taking your reservation today?

I waited patiently for Edward to respond to my text. He had flown to Miami for a business trip on Wednesday and was not due back until tomorrow. At least that was what I thought was happening until I overheard Rosalie ask someone if the private room was ready for the Masen reservation.

My sister. Should have warned you. Don't listen to a word she says about me. It's all lies.

I chuckled at his worry. Alice never said anything but good things about him. She seemed to really want me to like her brother.

Good to know. She's always going on about your charity work and what a stand up guy you are. Glad to hear you really are the egotistical SOB I thought you were.

I hit send and hoped he got that I was kidding.

I'm one hell of a catch, what can I say? Walking into a meeting. Will call you tonight.

I slipped my phone into my apron pocket, glad he took it the way it was intended. I walked back to the kitchen to grab an order for one of my tables. My phone buzzed as I made my way to deliver the food.

"Let me know if there's anything else I can get for you," I said with a smile and a nod to the two very wealthy-looking older women at Table Six.

I made my way back to the kitchen and pulled out my phone to check the message.

I miss you more than I should.

I held the phone against my chest. My sweet Edward. Mr. Masen could be a SOB sometimes, but Edward could tug at my heartstrings.

"Where the hell is Bella?" I heard Rosalie say as she popped her head in the kitchen.

I shoved my phone back in my pocket and grabbed another order.

"The Masen party is here," she informed me as I walked towards her.

One of these days, Rosalie is going to like me. One day she is going to appreciate how hard I worked around here.

"I'll head up there as soon as I deliver these," I replied happily.

She returned my cheery smile with an icy glare.

Obviously not today but one of these days, she's going to love me.

As soon as I entered the private room, Alice jumped up and bounced over to me. She wrapped me up in one of her over-exuberant hugs.

"Bella!"

A glance over her shoulder revealed two very nervous looking people watching our exchange. A man and a woman, perhaps in their early to mid-fifties, sat at the long, white linen-covered table. The woman, with her caramel colored hair and lovely purple sundress, smiled kindly at me. The man, handsome and dressed in a shirt and tie but no jacket, was blond and looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

"I just saw you this morning, Alice." I patted her back in an attempt to end the hug. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming here for lunch?"

Alice pulled back and grabbed both of my hands, tugging me towards the table. She had the biggest smile on her face and looked like she was going to burst with excitement.

"Well, I wanted to tell you, but I hadn't totally convinced them it was okay for them to come. They finally agreed, so here we are. Surprise!" She was literally bouncing where she stood.

I had no idea what she was talking about. I decided it was best to keep this thing moving.

"Welcome to Eclipse," I said to the other people at the table. "My name is Isabella, and I'll be your server today. May I start you out with something to drink?"

"Oh my gosh! Can't you just sit with us a minute? I mean, I know you're at work, but just sit a second. A minute. A couple minutes," Alice rambled, pulling out a chair for me.

I shook my head and was going to refuse when the woman at the table spoke up. "Alice, dear, I think you're scaring the poor girl. Maybe you want to start off with introductions."

"Oh! Sorry!" She shook her head in an attempt to refocus herself. "I'm just so excited. Sorry. Bella, this is Esme and Carlisle Cullen. They're my aunt and uncle, but they've been my parents since I was ten, so sometimes I call them Mom and Dad. Edward only refers to them as his aunt and uncle, so...yeah...you should know that, it can be confusing. We're a confusing family."

I blanched at the realization that Edward's family was sitting in the private dining room of Eclipse when he was not.

"Does Edward know about this?" I asked, knowing there was no way in hell he did by the looks on Carlisle and Esme's faces.

"This was a bad idea, Alice. He is going to find out, and he is not going to be happy. Even she knows it," Carlisle said, gesturing to me.

Alice sighed heavily. "Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't know that he dictated who I was and was not allowed to introduce you to." Esme and Carlisle frowned at her sarcasm. "Bella is the best friend of the man I am madly in love with, so I don't see what's wrong with me introducing my parents to her!"

Alice was madly in love with Jasper? Did Jasper know this and not tell me?

"Don't get sassy with us, Mary Alice," Esme chided her.

"I'm just saying, you should have told him what you were going to do. He isn't going to be happy that we did this behind his back," Carlisle said, explaining his discomfort.

Alice folded her arms in front of her like a pouting child. "He would have *forbid* it, which is totally ridiculous because he can't forbid me to do anything. I'm not a child, and he is my brother not my keeper."

Carlisle rolled his eyes at his niece/daughter. "It's about respecting his wishes in regards to his feelings about this young lady, not about you and your brother's control issues."

"Well, Bella won't tell, right, Bella?"

My eyes went wide at the thought of keeping this a secret from Edward. I could picture myself standing in Edward's mine field as all the mines exploded at once.

"You're not putting this girl in that position, Alice! You came up with this idea, you will own up to it when he comes home," Carlisle said with tested patience.

They were all talking about me like I wasn't in the room, and it was getting a little annoying.

"You need to tell him sooner than that," I said, finding my voice. "He's calling me tonight, and I will not be able to pretend this did not happen."

The three of them all chuckled lightly. Carlisle and Esme both stood up from the table.

Carlisle extended a hand to me. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Bella. Alice has told us a lot about you. I apologize for the position we're putting you in by being here."

Esme came around the table and wrapped her arm around Carlisle's waist. "This is probably just as much my fault as it is Alice's. We met Jasper earlier this week. Between what he had to say about you and everything that Alice has been saying for the last couple weeks, I couldn't wait to meet you. When Alice came up with this idea, I jumped at it. I figured Edward would understand in the end."

Carlisle roped his arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. They were quite the idyllic couple.

"My wife is an eternal optimist. I tend to be a bit of a realist. Edward may not understand, and for that, I am sorry."

They definitely knew the Edward I knew.

"Please, sit for just a couple minutes," Esme begged. "Then we'll order and get out of your hair. We promise."

I sat with Edward's family, trying not to think about how furious he was going to be with Alice when he found out. I could only hope he wouldn't be angry with me as well. They seemed harmless. His aunt and uncle were pretty much like Alice, unbelievably nice and amiable.

"So Jasper told us that you're an English teacher looking for a position in a high school?" Esme asked with genuine interest.

"I prefer high school, but I'm certified to teach grades 7 through 12. Right now, I would teach pre-school if someone wanted to give me a job."

Esme looked at Carlisle. "What's Marcus Wenzel's wife's name?"

"Why?" His eyebrows bunched together.

"She's some administrator with Bellevue School District. Maybe she knows of some openings. We could put in a good word for Bella."

Edward's aunt wanted to help me get a teaching job? I sat in stunned silence.

"You could send me your resume, and I can see what I can do, if you'd like," Carlisle said to me and my frozen brain.

"That would be...amazing. Thank you."

We chatted a little more, mostly about how Jasper and I met in college and became friends. They were taking it easy on me, I could tell. We did not discuss Edward or anything about our relationship. I figured it was purposeful and something that would make him more amenable to all of us meeting again.

Alice's predilection for initiating physical contact was obviously hereditary. Esme and Alice both hugged me when they left. Carlisle handed me his business card, so I could forward him my resume. *Dr. Carlisle Cullen* was the Chief of Surgery at Harborview Medical Center. I hoped Edward would allow me to speak with his aunt and uncle again. I had imagined they must be awful people, which was why he didn't want me to meet them. Now, with that illusion shattered, I started to wonder what he thought was wrong with me that caused him to not want *them* to meet *me*.

Near the end of my shift, Angela sat a small group of people in my section. There

was a woman with such vibrant red hair that it couldn't possibly be natural. She caught my attention almost immediately. I, on the other hand, seemed to catch the attention of the younger of the two men with whom she was dining. This guy had blond hair and the palest blue eyes I had ever seen, and those eyes followed me whenever I was near. It was becoming a bit unnerving.

He also liked to say my name.

When I brought his drink - "Thank you, Isabella."

When it was time to order - "What would you recommend, Isabella?"

When I came by while they were eating - "Isabella, everything tastes fantastic."

When the redhead went to the ladies room and the dark-haired, olive-skinned gentleman had to take a phone call - "How long have you worked here, Isabella? I feel like I've seen you before."

"Not long, about two months," I replied. I had never seen him before. I would remember him for sure.

"Well, you provided us with excellent service. I hope I get to see you again." He handed me the bill folder.

"Thanks." I took his credit card back to run through the computer quickly. I was looking forward to him leaving, for no reason other than he made me very uncomfortable. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something about the guy was off.

I brought him his credit card slip, and he placed his hand on mine as I set it on the table. I gasped quietly at the contact, pulling my hand away.

"Sorry," he muttered. "My name's Jim, by the way."

I nodded once, not sure what he wanted me to say. I had noticed his credit card said James Hunter.

"I don't usually do this, but would you be interested in getting a drink with me tonight? I know this great new bar-"

"I have a boyfriend," I interrupted his invitation.

He nodded and looked down at the table. "Of course you do. A beautiful woman

like you, of course you have a boyfriend. He's a lucky man. Very lucky." He looked back up at me and smiled sadly.

"Have a great weekend, Jim." I left off my usual "please come back soon", because I really didn't want him to come back.

"You, too, Isabella."

The redhead returned. "Ready?"

"Yes, Victoria, I'm ready," he replied, keeping his eyes on me as he slowly rose from his seat. Something about him came off as very predatory, and I was more than happy to see him exit the restaurant.

I finished my shift and decided to take a walk since it was such a nice day. I had nothing better to do since my drug of choice was in Florida. He was on the other damn side of the country, practically the furthest he could be from me and still be in the United States. This had been the longest three days of my life.

I walked to one of my favorite little bookstores and spent a couple hours hanging out there, perusing new books as well as some of my favorite old ones. It was so easy for me to get lost in a book. I could shut out the world around me and imagine myself wherever the author took me, places real and imagined, places I wanted to see and places that I hoped really didn't exist. Worlds full of characters that enchanted me and sometimes infuriated me.

I texted Jasper to see what he was doing for dinner and got a message that he was meeting Alice before they went to some fashion show. I laughed. He was still a damn pushover, but at least Alice was worth it.

I was on my own for dinner. I stopped at a Jimmy John's near my apartment, feeling deserving of the #13 Gourmet Veggie Club. I earned some good tips today, so I even added chips and a cookie. I was splurging on myself tonight. When I came out, with my dinner in hand, someone walking by slammed into me.

"Isabella!" the man exclaimed in surprise. Mr. James Hunter.

"Jim, hey," I responded anxiously. "Sorry. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

He laughed. "No, it's fine. Are you ok? I bumped you pretty hard."

"I'm fine. I gotta get going." I used my head to point in the direction I was headed.

"Yeah, have a good night. Looks like you have an exciting dinner ahead of you."

"Yeah."

"You're boyfriend can't take his girl out on a Friday night?" He followed me down the sidewalk.

Damn it. I hoped he didn't think I was lying about my boyfriend. I had a boyfriend. I had a boyfriend, who had very strong opinions about guys who hit on me and invaded my personal space.

"He's out of town until tomorrow." I cursed myself for saying that of all things.

I started walking faster, but Jim was hot on my heels.

"Do you live around here? I'm not trying to stalk you or anything," he added quickly when my face must have given away my concern. "I know I ate where you work today, but you seem so familiar, I thought maybe I've seen you around."

"Um, yeah. I live a couple blocks from here," I answered as non-specifically as possible.

"Really? Maybe that's why. I'm new to the area, and I felt like I had seen you somewhere before. Familiar faces are hard to come by, you know?"

I felt bad. I knew what it was like to come to a new place and know no one.

"Where are you from originally?" I figured I'd make conversation since he was still walking with me.

"Chicago. I moved out here a couple months ago. My company relocated."

"I've never been to Chicago. I hear it's a great city, though. Lots to do and see."

"Yeah, I loved it. Seattle's nice. A little rainy."

"A little." I smirked.

"I traded wind for rain. I don't know which is worse. No, wait, rain, the rain is definitely worse. It messes with my hair worse than the wind ever did," he said with

a wink.

I laughed. Maybe Jim wasn't all that bad. We made it to my street. I thought that would be where we parted, but he crossed the street with me and stayed with me the whole way to my building.

"Well, this is me," I announced when I stopped.

He looked disappointed but took a good look at my building. "Oh. Well, have a good night, Isabella. Maybe we'll run into each other again."

"Maybe," I said noncommittally.

Jim slowly walked backwards, so he could still see me. "I hope that boyfriend of yours treats you right. Otherwise, I'd feel the need to steal you away."

A chill ran up my spine. Jim jumped back on the creepy train. "He's great. Really great."

Way to sell it, Bella.

"Good." He nodded his head, then shook it slightly. "No, that's...really good."

"Bells." Jasper's voice was music to my ears. He was walking out of the building and towards me. Jim stopped moving.

"Jaz." I sighed, throwing my arms around him. "Play along," I whispered in his ear. "I thought you weren't coming home until tomorrow!"

My best friend played his part beautifully. With one quick look towards the sidewalk and a gaping Jim, he stepped back and cradled my face with his hands. "I couldn't be apart from you another second, so here I am, darlin'."

He gave me a chaste kiss on the lips and then scooped me up in his arms, carrying me back into the building. I looked over his shoulder at Jim, who wore quite a confused expression.

Jasper set me down when we were safely inside. "What was that all about?"

I shook my head. "I literally ran into some guy I waited on at the restaurant today. He was skeptical of my 'I have a boyfriend' excuse when he asked me to go out for drinks. Thank you for the rescue. The carrying me over the threshold was laying it

on a little thick, but thanks."

"What can I say, when I'm given a job, I put 110% into it. You sure you're ok?"

I punched his shoulder. "I'm fine. You are the best best friend ever, you know that?"

"Hey, the best deserves the best, right?" He punched me back softly.

"Go have dinner with Alice. I hear she might be kind of mad about you."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Really? What did you hear exactly?"

Giggling, I shook my head. "That's for me to know and you to find out, when Alice wants you to find out."

"She likes me, though, huh?"

"Oh, she likes you, that's for sure."

Jasper's smile could light up the entire city. "I like her, too. I like her a lot. *A lot.*"

"I got it. She's mad about you and you like her *a lot*. I, on the other hand, have a boyfriend in Florida and a Veggie Club that's calling my name." I shook my bag at him.

"Goodnight, Bells. Although our love affair only lasted a mere forty seconds, it was forty of the best seconds of my life," he joked, giving me a quick peck on the cheek.

I let myself into our apartment and dragged myself to my room to change out of my work clothes and into a tank top and shorts. No silky negligees tonight. Making myself comfortable on the couch, I enjoyed my "gourmet" sandwich. The cookie for dessert was delicious. I was glad I had indulged. I tried watching some lame Friday night TV but decided to make some rice krispy treats. Edward had never had s'mores, and I began to wonder what else he missed out on growing up.

Edward came from a wealthy family. They weren't as wealthy as he is now, but Jasper had mentioned something about Alice having a trust fund once. Trust funds meant pretty damn wealthy. I pictured formal dinners with too many forks for a little kid to know what to do with. Maybe I was wrong, but I got the feeling Edward's childhood was very different from mine. What I still didn't get was why Edward and Alice were so different. Alice had the same parents but didn't seem as messed up. Of

course, she said Carlisle and Esme were her basically her parents since she was ten. Edward would have been fifteen. Maybe that made a difference. The fact that those were the same ages they would have been when Alice was burned was not lost on me. I started to believe that Edward's parents died in the fire. It was the only thing that made sense. What didn't make sense was why Edward was more affected by what happened than Alice, who was in the fire. I was missing something. Something I didn't know if Edward would ever tell me.

I finished making the sticky, marshmallowy treats and turned on the TV again. After watching the news and then flipping back and forth between Jay and Dave, I realized it was after eleven. Edward had not called. It was already past two in the morning in Miami. I had the sinking feeling that he had talked to Alice. He knew I met his family, and he was furious, so much so that he couldn't even talk to me.

I figured a quick text wouldn't hurt. He was probably asleep, but he'd get it in the morning and then, hopefully, call me.

You didn't call. Hope I'm not in trouble. You're the one who let your sister take your reservation.

I hit send before I thought about the fact that it was possible Alice hadn't talked to him today. I snatched my phone back up and texted Alice.

Please tell me you told Edward about lunch.

Before Alice answered, I got a reply from Edward.

You're in huge trouble.

Shit, shit, shit!

I was so pissed at Alice. I knew he was going to be mad at me. As if I had any control over the situation! What would he have had me do? Refuse to wait on them? I had nothing to do with it. This was on Alice not me. It was totally unfair for him to be mad at me.

A knock on my door caused my heart to jump in my chest. I couldn't imagine who would be knocking on my door this late. Another knock, and I jumped off the couch, staring down the door instead of answering it. What if it was crazy Jim? What if he saw Jasper leave and then, while stalking me like the psycho he might be, he noticed Jasper never came back?

My phone buzzed with another text.

He was a little mad but not as mad as I thought he'd be. Don't worry ;)

The knocking got louder. I was in the middle of texting her to send Jasper home immediately when I received another text from Edward.

Open your damn door before I break it down.

I have never been so relieved to have someone threaten to break down my door before. I unlocked the door and swung it open to find Edward standing on the other side. I threw my arms around him, startling him.

"Whoa!" he grunted as I pummeled him. "Someone missed me."

"You scared the crap out of me."

"I wasn't really going to break the door down," he said, sounding slightly affronted.

I let go and took a good look at him. How was it possible that he travelled all the way from Miami and still looked like a billion bucks?

"I wasn't scared of *that*. The unexpected knocking in the middle of the night is what scared me."

"Sorry." He gave me his trademarked lopsided smile. We certainly had gotten over the "I never apologize" hurdle. Edward had no trouble telling me he was sorry anymore.

I pulled him inside and locked the door back up.

"I thought you weren't coming home until tomorrow."

"I wasn't, but then I explained to everyone that I had to hurry back and plan my sister's funeral."

I cocked my head at him. "She said you weren't that mad."

"Did she now?" His brow furrowed. "That's funny, because I am certain that I was pretty fucking mad when I talked to her."

"If you were worried I wouldn't like them, don't be. They were nice, surprisingly...normal." I didn't know how he would take that last part of my assessment.

Edward pulled me into an embrace. He was still wearing a suit. I could almost smell the Miami sunshine on his clothes.

"They are nice. Very nice and completely normal." He snorted lightly, luckily seeing the humor in it. "That still doesn't give my sister the right to present you to them without my knowledge."

"They seemed to feel really bad about going behind your back if that makes you feel any better. We didn't even really talk about you."

He pulled his head back but still held me in his arms. "You didn't talk about me? What in the world did you talk about then?"

I started to laugh. "Good to see the ego is fully intact."

"Seriously." He looked perplexed.

"There are other things to talk about other than you. They wanted to know about me. They already know you."

He contemplated the possibility that I might be telling the truth, like the true egomaniac he was.

He kissed the tip of my nose. "You are possibly as interesting as I am. I can see how the conversation may have centered on you."

I pushed at his chest, but he tightened his grip on me. I was glad he wasn't really mad. In fact, he seemed, dare I say, happy, even playful. He was handling this a million times better than I thought he would. Mr. Masen was always full of surprises.

He inhaled deeply. "I missed you."

I pressed my cheek against his chest. "I missed you, too."

"I want you to know that I really wanted to buy you a present in Miami, but I knew you'd get mad, so I resisted temptation. Aren't you proud of me?"

I snickered. "What did you want to buy me?"

Edward contemplated telling me for a second. "A boat," he confessed.

I rolled my eyes. Something told me we weren't talking about a little rowboat. Something told me he was lucky he didn't give into temptation.

"A boat? Tell me, if I saw this boat, would I call it a boat?"

He pulled back enough so he could see me. He had a huge grin on his face. "God, you know me so well."

"Good thing you're getting to know me well. I swear to God, if you had come back with some crazy-ass yacht, I would have freaked out, in a bad way."

"It was named Sea Swan, and it made me think of you. Of course, everything makes me think about you lately."

I smiled as I pressed myself back against him. For someone so against emotional attachments, he sure knew how to make me feel like he was becoming quite attached to me. "I am very proud of you for exercising such self-control."

I could feel him shrug his shoulders. "I figured you should have some say in the boat I buy you someday. I also think we should name it together. Something like Pennies and Nickels."

He made me laugh, even though he was crazy to think he was going to buy me a yacht someday. I looked up at him.

"I'm not sure I will ever get used to your world."

"But you'll try, right?" He brushed my cheek with the back of his hand.

"How about you spend a little bit more time in my world?"

Edward gave me a curious look. "Your world? What more do I need to experience in your world?"

"I'm glad you asked." I grabbed his hand and pulled him into the kitchen. "I made you something."

"You made me something?"

"Rice crispy treats," I said, presenting him with the cellophane wrapped goodies.

"What is with you and marshmallows?" He squinted at me like I confused the hell out of him.

I smiled, pulling the wrap off. "Tell me you have had one of these when you were a kid."

I handed him one and took one for myself. We sat down at the table as he inspected the gooey treat.

"I have had them before, thank you very much. My uncle has a sweet tooth."

"Your Aunt Esme made them for you?" I asked, pulling my square apart. The strands of marshmallow stretched out between the two pieces.

He nodded as he took a bite and swallowed. "These are actually Carlisle's favorite. Esme made them quite often when we lived with them."

"You had your first rice crispy treat when you were a teenager?"

Edward sighed. "My father didn't do messy."

Holy shit, he was talking to me about his dad.

I swallowed down my bite. "Yeah?"

He examined his fingers, which were now lightly covered in melted marshmallow. "He was a little bit anal retentive. Some might've considered him a controlling asshole."

"A Masen who was controlling, how weird," I said, trying to keep the conversation light, so he would keep talking.

Edward laughed through his nose. "Unbelievable, I know."

"So, he banned rice crispy treats, huh?" I shoved the rest of my treat in my mouth, hoping he wouldn't stop sharing.

"My father banned anything that made it obvious that there were children in the house."

I tried to remain neutral. His answers were creating so many more questions. I didn't want to overwhelm him, and I certainly didn't want to set off a landmine. I could tell I was surrounded by them, however.

"And your mom?"

Edward stared at the bite of treat he had left pinched between his fingers. His jaw tightened. "My mother regrettably loved us more than anything."

"Regrettably?"

Edward smashed the marshmallow and rice cereal between his fingers. "Land mine, Isabella."

We were done, but we had gotten much farther than I ever imagined. I leaned towards him and kissed his cheek. It was my way of thanking him for letting me have that much. He grabbed a napkin and stuck what was left of his treat on there. He looked at his messy fingers. Grabbing his hand, I lifted his finger to my lips. I stuck his finger in my mouth and let my tongue swirl around his finger, sucking the marshmallow off. Edward let out a quiet hiss. I repeated the same treatment to his other finger. Marshmallow covered Edward, now that was a dessert.

"Shit, Isabella."

He kissed me as soon as I finished. We stood up, and his hands roamed down to my backside. My dealer was back in town, and I was going to get trashed tonight. I kissed under his jaw. He had a bit of stubble there that tickled my lips.

"You ever done it on a double bed before?" I asked unabashedly.

He looked down at me with hooded eyes. "No, but it's on my bucket list." He gave me a quick peck on the lips.

"Well, I think you're crossing that one off the list tonight, mister."

I pulled him back to my room and quickly shed my clothes.

"Someone really missed me." He smirked as he loosened his tie.

"I missed you a whole lot," I confessed, helping him unbutton his shirt. I kissed the defined plane of his chest as the shirt opened up.

He moaned as he undid his belt while kicking off his shoes. I pushed his shirt off his shoulders and continued to kiss his beautiful body. He yanked his pants and underwear off at the same time. His arousal pressed against my stomach as he pulled me to him and our mouths connected. My tongue lapped at his while his hands groped my ass, his fingers slipped in between my legs and teased my wet folds.

"I don't have any protection," he muttered against the skin of my neck.

I ignored him, unable to think about things like protection when he was kissing me and naked, and touching me and naked, and letting me touch him and *naked*.

"Isabella, do you have protection?" He grabbed my face and pulled my lips from his.

"Protection?" I repeated, because that was all my brain was capable of at the moment.

"Protection. Condoms? Something?"

I pulled back, so his erection wasn't actually in contact with my body, making it possible for me to think clearly. I didn't have condoms.

"I can call Tyler and have him pick some up." Edward leaned over to pick his pants up off the floor.

I swatted the clothing from his hands. "You are not having Tyler buy us condoms. Oh, my God!"

"He's bought-" The look on my face must have told him not to tell me he had Tyler buy him condoms before. That was not information I wanted to know. "Never mind."

"Jasper!" The light bulb above my head went off. I took off for his room and started digging through the drawer of his nightstand. He had to have one damn condom somewhere.

"Bingo!" I held up the only condom in my best friend's room. I ran back to my room, where Edward sat on my bed taking off his socks. He was so damn hot. I knelt down in front of him and ripped open the condom. "I think this is his last one."

Edward snickered as I pulled it out of the wrapper, then hissed as I gripped him so I could sheath him in the latex. It was the only barrier that would exist between his

skin and mine. I rolled the condom down until I hit the bottom. I pressed my thumb against the prominent vein that ran from the base up to the tip of his substantial erection. Edward closed his eyes as he gripped the edge of the bed tightly.

"Come here," he said, letting go of the bed and pulling me onto his lap. He grabbed my hips and gently lowered me onto him.

"Mmmm," I moaned in complete ecstasy. He fit inside me like he was made for me. I raised myself up and then back down, relishing in the feel of him moving inside me. Edward kissed along my collarbone and down to the swell of my breasts.

"God, I missed you," he whispered as I lifted up again and then slammed down a little harder.

His hands left my hips and gently cupped my breasts. Gripping them in his hand, he brought one up to his mouth, sucking hard on my tender nipple. I arched my back as I tangled my hands in his hair, holding him there in front of me. He lavished my breasts with attention until it all became too much for him.

"If this is the only condom in this fucking place, we need to make it last, baby."

He picked me up off of him and laid me on the bed. This was what I had been missing for the last three days - the softness of his hands on my body, the reverent way he looked at me like I was something precious, the way this was becoming more than just sex. We were making love. It was intimate, and it was real. I had missed the feel of his hair in my hands and the way he closed his eyes and smiled when he could tell he was making me feel especially good. I loved when he held my face as he kissed my mouth and when I could feel his heart beating as fast as mine. Edward was beginning to make me feel like I was the most important thing in his insane and extraordinary world, just as he was becoming essential to mine. I had myself convinced we were connecting on a new level because we belonged together.

He kissed my mouth and down my chin. He moved up my jaw and across my cheek, back to my mouth. I could feel the spring coiling deep in my belly. My release was imminent. My hands splayed across his back, feeling his muscles tighten and flex as he moved his body above mine. I unraveled underneath him and screamed out his name along with various other nonsensical words. Just as I was thinking I never wanted this to end, I could feel him pulse inside me, and this time, it was my name cried out in passion. He sank onto the bed, cradling me with my back against his front. His hands palmed both of my breasts as he tried to steady his breathing.

"I'm glad you came home tonight," I whispered.

He kissed my shoulder where there was still a faint mark from where he had bitten me a week ago. "Me, too."

Edward got up to dispose of our one and only condom and rejoined me in bed. He pulled the covers up over us and played with my hair as I lay my head on his chest.

"I have to go to London on Monday. I'll be gone all week."

I groaned, frustrated that I would never get enough of him.

"You could come with me," he said after a short pause.

"I have to work."

"You don't have to work."

"Yes, I do," I said, trying to be the realistic one. "Rosalie would never agree to giving me the week off with only a couple days' notice."

"Quit that stupid job. It's not even your chosen profession. In fact, you don't even need a job."

I rolled off him and propped myself up on my elbows, unable to comprehend what he was saying. "Um, exactly how am I going to live without a job? I have to pay rent and bills and school loans. Until I get a *real* job, I need this *stupid* one."

He rolled to his side and placed his hand on my cheek. "Let me take care of you, Isabella. You practically live with me now. I can pay off your school loans, you can have the car I bought for you. You would need for nothing."

For a minute, all I could do was stare at him in horrified disbelief.

"How about some self respect? That's what I would need if I just let you take care of me." I sat up, needing to put some distance between us. "Edward, do you have any idea what people would think if I let you do that?"

"I don't really give a fuck what people think. All I know is, I want you to come to London with me. Then, when we get back from London, I want you to be there when I get home from work and to wake up with you every morning. Tell me you don't want the same things."

As romantic and loving as all that should have sounded, I was suddenly terrified.

"Edward," I began, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Tell me that's not what you want," he implored me. His green eyes were flashing with a need for his feelings to be validated.

I closed my eyes. Edward Masen, the man who loved nothing, was quite possibly in love with me. That, or he was trying to hire me like Richard Gere hired Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. I opened my eyes and looked down at the uncertainty that was beginning to cloud his face.

"I want to be with you." *God, did I want to be with him.* "But this is all moving really, really fast for me. We still have a lot to figure out. There's still a lot to learn about each other. Living together full-time is a big commitment."

"I've been thinking about it." *He's been thinking about it?* "You could move into the condo. It could be yours, and the house could be mine."

"Edward, the condo could never be mine! I can't afford to live in that condo, and I wouldn't feel right calling it mine when it's so obviously yours! I mean, what are you imagining exactly? I quit my job, move into the condo, and then what? You give me a weekly allowance, and I hang out all day waiting for you to come home every night?"

"Sure, why not?" he asked so innocently.

"Because that makes me a kept woman! Don't you see that?"

"Jesus, Isabella, women all over the world call that a fucking marriage!" He paused, flustered with himself for a moment. "Not that I'm offering marriage." He stopped again, closing his eyes and needing to regroup. He looked at me with real hurt in his eyes and voice. "This is not some dastardly plan on my part to make you my wife or my sex slave. I am telling you I want to be with you, to take care of you, and I have the means to do just that. If that offends you, well, I'm sorry. Just...forget it!" He fell back on the bed and covered his face with his arm.

I scrubbed my face with my hand. This conversation had taken a terrible turn.

"I appreciate that you want to be with me. I appreciate the offer to take care of me, but I am capable of taking care of myself. Someday, I would love it if our relationship grew into something where we combined forces and took care of each other while still maintaining some semblance of ourselves as individuals. I can't get lost in you, Edward. I don't trust you or me enough to do that right now."

He didn't move nor speak for a full minute. He tried to wipe his eyes inconspicuously.

"You're right. You're absolutely right. I need to use the bathroom. I'll be right back," he said in a hollow voice. He sat up and climbed out of bed.

My heart clenched. I didn't want to hurt him, but I had to be completely honest with him. I was not ready for that kind of a commitment. I certainly didn't want to be supported by him financially. That was never what our relationship was about. His money was never the draw, and I knew that was hard for him to believe.

I was falling in love with him, this I knew, but Edward made it very clear all along that love was not what he was offering. This sudden declaration of unlabeled feelings was so unexpected. Was it possible that he loved me? Did he even recognize that was the emotion he was feeling? Was he going to freak the hell out because that's what it was? I needed to be sure of his feelings before I jumped in head first.

We were both scared. I knew why I was afraid; the origin of his fear was still unknown. I didn't know what made him get up in the middle of the night and sob over his piano. I didn't understand why love destroyed more than it healed things in his world. Until I had answers, I needed to protect myself.

He came back in the room and grabbed his boxer briefs, sliding them back on his body.

"Maybe I should go," he suggested, raking his hand through his hair.

I bolted upright. "No!"

He looked at me, trying so hard to mask his feelings, to lock up whatever it was that he let out a few minutes ago.

"I don't want you to go. I want you to stay. Here. With me. There's no reason for you to go. Please," I begged.

He said nothing but climbed back into bed with me. We lay side by side, not touching, not talking. It was almost worse than if he had left.

There was a rattling at the front door and then lots of giggling as Alice and Jasper returned from their night out. I could hear them bumping into things and shushing one another. Alice's musical laughter sounded right outside my door, and Jasper tried to keep her quiet.

"Don't wake Bella," he whispered.

"Well, come here and cover my mouth, Mr. Hale."

Edward chuckled quietly from his side of the bed, sending me into a silent bout of the giggles. We heard them go into Jasper's room and close the door. After a few minutes, we could hear them begin to argue.

"I had one left, I know I did," Jasper asserted. I could hear him opening and closing drawers in his room.

I knew exactly what he was looking for.

"Hurry up and find it then," Alice said just above a whisper.

"I'm looking, but it's not here. I swear to you. It was here. I remember from the other night."

"Well, if you don't find it, there's going to be no fun had tonight!" Alice said sourly.

Edward and I could barely contain our laughter.

"Oops! Did we use the last condom? Serves you right, you meddling pixie!" Edward shouted out.

My door flew open a moment later, and I clutched at my sheets, making sure they covered my naked body.

"You!" Alice seethed, her shirt halfway unbuttoned and her lipstick a little smeared.

"The next time you go behind my back, you will suffer a fate worse than a sexless evening," Edward threatened menacingly.

Alice showed no fear. She stared us both down with evil eyes. Then she turned and stormed out, slamming my door behind her. I jumped at the noise. Edward pulled me against him, allowing me to rest my head on his chest again. We tangled our legs up like we were a giant pretzel. I still believed we belonged together, but we had some work to do before I could give myself over to him completely.

"I guess we'll just have to improvise! Loudly!" Alice shouted from across the hall. "Oh, Jaz, be careful not to choke me!"

Edward groaned in obvious revulsion.

"Fine!" He tried to make a deal. "I'll buy you a lifetime supply if you keep it down over there!"

Alice didn't answer but stopped making noises. I could only imagine how mortified Jasper was at this moment. I felt safe to laugh at the absurdity of it all.

Edward pulled me closer. "This is exactly why I never had a roommate. You might reconsider my earlier offer after a few more nights of *that*."

I kissed his chest. "I won't forget it's on the table. I promise."

I somehow fell asleep that night, even though I wondered where all this was leading. I had no idea what the future held. The possibilities were endless but there were as many bad as there were good. I needed to figure out how to get my life on the right track, so I didn't end up with regrets or a broken heart. That task seemed easier said than done.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Oh Pennyward, you do love her, we all know it! This is going to mess with his already messed up head. More of my ramblings on my blog. Link on my profile. You can also chat with one another on the Twilighted thread, link also on my profile.

So much excitement coming up, I promise. Hope you enjoyed meeting Carlisle and Esme. James has entered the picture as well - what do you guys think? What can go wrong while Edward is in London all week?

Who wants to have some fun? Here's what I was thinking, the first person who can guess what is significant/symbolic about next Friday in the story will win a prize. I don't actually have any prizes but maybe an advanced look at the next chapter? A chance to pick an EPOV outtake? How are those for prizes?

Lastly, unlike Edward, I have no trouble sharing my feelings of love. I was not good about responding to reviews this week - the holidays are kicking my butt. I do read them all and love them! I love you all. I love momof4luvntwisaga. I love that this story has gotten a better response than

I ever imagined. I love Christmas and that Christmas is coming. I promise to post on Christmas Eve even if many of you are out enjoying the day with family and friends. Then I have to go away but will be back to post on New Year's Eve like usual. We're not skipping for the holidays I promise! See ya Tuesday over at the blog for the Tuesday teaser! =)

Chapter 9

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Friday, August 13th at noon

Friday the 13th was usually a day associated with bad luck, but today I was feeling very lucky. Most notably, my man was coming back from London today. In fact, he was probably in town right now. Unfortunately, he had cancelled his lunch reservation because of his travels, and there was no way in hell he was ever giving it to Alice again.

I hadn't talked to him in a couple days. I figured between the massive time difference and all the things he was dealing with at work, we just hadn't been able to connect. I'd been busy this week, too, which helped with the withdrawal symptoms I was suffering from as a hopeless Edward addict. I had interviews with two different schools this week. Dr. Cullen was a man of his word and had forwarded my resume to Mrs. Di Wenzel, who contacted me right away and asked me to come in for an interview. She had a maternity leave position open in the English department at a high school. She could only guarantee me a year, but it was more than I had now. She called me the next day to set up a second interview with the principal and Department Chair for next Monday.

Strangely enough, I also got an interview at a private school in Seattle called University Prep. I didn't remember sending them my resume but, then again, I had sent so many out at the end of last school year, I couldn't remember if I had or not. Obviously I had, or they wouldn't have called me. I thought the interview went well; the school's headmaster, Aro Volturi, seemed to be working harder to sell me on working there than trying to get me to convince him why I should be hired. He said he'd get back to me by the end of the week.

For the first time this summer, I was feeling hopeful that I would not have to work at Eclipse the rest of my life. There were times Edward's offer of a weekly allowance and free room and board sounded awfully good, especially when Rosalie was on my back about everything or customers were particularly annoying. I would never regret taking this job, however. Working at Eclipse is the only reason I met Edward. Had I not, I couldn't imagine how our paths ever would have crossed. It was funny how things work out like that.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I ran in the back to answer it, so Rosalie

wouldn't find me. It was Mr. Volturi.

"Hello?" I answered, just above a whisper.

"Miss Swan? Aro Volturi from University Prep."

"Hello, Mr. Volturi."

"Let's cut right to the chase, Miss Swan. We want you to work at University Prep. At this time, we can only offer you a part-time position, teaching three classes, but I am certain that full-time will be made available to you in no time. We're offering you \$45,000 to start, obviously when you go full-time that will increase. Full benefits are being offered as an incentive."

I must have misunderstood. He could not have said he was going to pay me \$45,000 to teach three classes. That was unfathomable. I was barely making \$40,000 last year, working full-time. Who knew private schools were the way to go?

"That's incredible. I mean, it's such a generous offer."

"I will put the offer in writing and have it overnighted to you. I need to know your intentions by Monday, Miss Swan."

"Okay, thank you. I'll look over the paperwork and get back to you on Monday."

"Wonderful. Have a good weekend," he said, ending the call before I could reply.

I had a real job offer. I was a little disappointed that it was part-time but, part-time was better than no time. The pay was worth it, if nothing else. University Prep was a fantastic facility, top of the line everything. I certainly wouldn't be spending all my money on supplemental supplies like I had to do last year at Seattle Public Schools. I was lucky they gave me a desk. University Prep would provide me with much more than a desk. I thought about calling Edward, but then I imagined the way he'd look at me when I told him my good news. I could imagine the crooked grin and the pride in his eyes. He would be happy for me because he knew this was what I wanted. And let's not forget we would definitely have I-got-a-job sex, and I was in need of a fix - big time. I sent him a text instead.

Hope you made it back safely. Can't wait to see you tonight. We have a lot to celebrate...

I figured I'd keep it vague. I was kind of hoping he'd get curious and call me, but I

got no immediate reply. I texted Jasper about the job offer, and he sent back a row full of smiley faces almost right away.

I stepped back out into the dining room and noticed Jim sitting by himself today at one of the tables in my section. Jim was becoming the guy who couldn't take a hint. All week, we had these "coincidental" run-ins. Don't get me wrong, he was a nice guy from what I could tell, but he was suddenly in my face all the time. We bumped into each other at the grocery store, at the Starbucks, outside Eclipse one day, and when I went for a run yesterday. Jim was popping up everywhere. He didn't ask me out or make any more advances, but he was always *around*.

I walked over to his table with a smile because I wasn't going to be waiting tables for much longer, and I couldn't imagine running into Jim at University Prep.

"Hi, Jim."

"Isabella. Did I get in your section?" He held up his hands in innocence. "I swear to you, I am not stalking you. I didn't even request you."

"So you're telling me I should cancel that restraining order I just called in?" I asked in jest.

Jim laughed and looked at me with wonder. "You are such an interesting girl, Isabella. Not at all what I expected."

I wasn't sure what he meant, but I let it go. I took his order and got back in work mode. He wasn't much of a bother while he ate, only making polite conversation a couple times. When he finished, I brought him his receipt to sign, and he asked me about my weekend plans. I was ready to happily report that I would be spending the entire weekend with my boyfriend when Tyler appeared in the main dining room. He caught sight of me and headed in my direction. My eyes widened in fear. What the hell was Tyler doing here? Terrible things popped into my head. *Did something happen to Edward? Was he hurt? Is that why I hadn't heard anything from him? Was he...worse?* I couldn't go there.

My mouth went dry as Tyler approached the table, but instead of telling me some horrific news about Edward, he glared at Jim.

"Mr. Hunter," he said, without hiding any of his apparent dislike.

"Tyler." Jim smirked as he slid his credit card back in his wallet. "You look well."

"You look like you're looking for trouble. You should leave and not come back," Tyler replied in a low voice.

What the hell was going on?

Jim stood up and put his wallet in his pocket. He was shaking his head at Tyler's unspoken threat. "He can't tell me where I can eat. He actually can't tell me jack shit. I'm dead to him, remember?"

My blood ran cold. Jim knew Edward. Did Jim know I knew Edward?

"You've been warned," Tyler said coolly.

"Ooo, I'm so scared," Jim said, shaking his shoulders, pretending he was trembling. He took a step towards me, causing Tyler to tense at my side. "Isabella, please believe me when I say everything is not always what it seems. Be careful who you put your trust in."

Tyler pulled me back, placing himself between me and Jim. The two stood toe to toe until Jim backed down and walked away. I couldn't even process what was happening. I took a couple deep breaths and looked around. The intensity of what just happened made me worry that the whole restaurant must have stopped to watch their exchange, but instead, everyone was eating and going about their business like nothing had happened.

"Miss Swan, I need you to come with me right now," Tyler said, tugging lightly on my arm. He walked me to the front of the restaurant before I realized what he was doing.

I stopped moving. "I-I can't come with you," I stammered. "I have to work. Is Edward all right? Did something happen to him? How in the hell do you know Jim? What the hell is going on?"

"Miss Swan, all I can tell you is I have been asked to collect you and bring you to Mr. Masen's residence in the city. He is waiting for you there."

I felt slightly relieved at the fact that Edward was alive and well, but I was also in no mood to be told he had sent Tyler here to *collect* me.

"How do you know Jim Hunter? How does Edward know Jim Hunter? What was all that about? What was he talking about when he said I should be careful who I trust?"

Tyler was unwavering. "Please, Miss Swan. I've been directed to carry you out kicking and screaming, but I really don't want to do that. I think it's best if you just come with me willingly."

"Are you kidding me right now? If you put one hand on me-" I stopped myself and grabbed my phone out of my apron. I quickly dialed Edward's cell. It went to voicemail. "Don't be a coward. Pick up the phone, and tell me what's going on. I cannot and will not be dragged out of work. You need to call me and tell me what is going on."

I hung up and looked at Tyler, who was sizing me up.

"My father is the Chief of Police in Forks. If you touch me, he will drive here and arrest you himself. He has no issues with police brutality when it comes to people who touch his daughter," I said as menacingly as I could muster.

Tyler chuckled and gave me a nod while we waited for Edward to call me back.

"Bella!" Rosalie snapped. She stopped short when she saw Tyler. Her tone changed drastically. "Isabella, you have some tables to attend to. Is there a problem?" she asked Tyler more so than me.

"Miss Swan needs to come with me. There's a family emergency and it's imperative that I accompany her across town," Tyler replied smoothly.

I shot him a frustrated glance.

"Oh, I hope it's nothing serious," Rosalie said, looking at me suspiciously.

"Me, too," I huffed. Tyler was not going to leave without me. Something told me he really would pick me up and carry me out eventually, and Rosalie would probably fire me instead of calling the police to report a kidnapping. "I need to get my bag. I'm sorry, Rosalie."

"I hope everything is okay," she responded with lukewarm concern. "I'll have Emmett pick up your tables."

I started to walk back to get my stuff, but Tyler followed. I stopped and turned on him. "You can wait for me up front."

"My instructions were to keep an eye on you until you were delivered."

Oh, this just keeps getting better.

"You'll wait up front, or I will start screaming," I threatened.

Tyler smiled. "I don't think you will, Miss Swan," he said, calling my bluff. "I'm just doing what I'm told. Let's not make this a bigger issue than it needs to be."

I was livid. He was right, I wasn't going to scream, but I wanted to. I went to the back room, with Tyler in tow, and grabbed my messenger bag. I followed Tyler back to the front and outside. Brady was there waiting with the car. He opened the door, and I slid in, throwing my bag in ahead of me.

Once I figured out what the hell was going on, I was going to give Edward a tongue-lashing he wouldn't believe. I pulled out my phone to call him again. Voicemail. *Bastard*.

"Why are you not answering my calls? Is it because you know how pissed I am right now? Because, just to be clear, I am so pissed right now, I make angry grizzlies look like cuddly teddy bears. If this is your way of showing me you missed me, you are going about it all wrong. We're on our way. I should be *delivered* any minute. I hope that *pleases* you."

I pressed end and sunk in my seat. This was totally ridiculous. We had this conversation about respect and how being "delivered" made me feel. Did he hit his head in London and forget about all of that? To add to my confusion, Jim, my new shadow, knew Edward and obviously did not like him very much. The feeling appeared to be mutual, considering Tyler looked like he was ready to kill the man and probably would if Edward told him to. Because, as I learned today, Tyler did whatever Edward told him to do even if it was criminal, like abducting people from their places of work "kicking and screaming". I was so pissed.

My phone buzzed, but it wasn't Edward, it was Jasper.

What family emergency? You OK?

Rosalie must have been checking out my story. Now, she had Jasper all worried. I sent him a quick *I'm fine*, as we arrived at Edward's building. Tyler jumped out to open my door. I stormed past him and into the building. Security was ready to say something to me when Tyler entered and gave the guy some secret security guard look that told him it was okay for me to be there. I pressed the button for the elevator and waited impatiently, chewing on my bottom lip.

Tyler entered the elevator with me and stood away, giving me space.

"How do you know Jim Hunter?" I prodded, unable to stand not knowing.

He refused to answer.

"I am asking *you* about *you*. Not how does Edward know him, not how does he know Edward. I want to know how do you, Tyler whatever your last name is, know Jim Hunter. Can you tell me that much?"

"How do you know James Hunter, Miss Swan?" Tyler replied coldly.

"I... don't," I said with a slight shake of the head.

He pressed his lips in a thin line and gave me a nod, but something told me he didn't completely believe me.

"What?" This lack of two-way communication was killing me.

"Nothing," he said with a shake of his head. "I like you. I hope you're telling the truth."

I sighed in frustration. I would have to wait for Edward to answer my questions.

The elevator stopped on Edward's floor, and we exited, me first. I stood in front of his door, unsure if I should knock or if Tyler would just walk in. Tyler approached the door and did just that. I followed him in, and he led me back to Edward's office. My infuriating and psychotically controlling boyfriend was sitting at his large mahogany desk, calmly looking over some papers.

I stood in the doorway, waiting for him to acknowledge me, my blood pressure rising with each second he made me stand there without doing so. I crossed my arms in front of my chest petulantly. I had half-expected to show up and find him grinning arrogantly because he got me to leave work to be with him. The reception I was receiving told me that his summons had nothing to do with missing me. He was just as angry as I was, but his ire made no sense. I had not done anything to make him mad.

Edward pushed the front of his hair back with his hand, and his hard, verdant eyes lifted up to meet mine.

"Thank you, Tyler," he said, shifting his glare to his bodyguard.

"Contact was made, by the way," Tyler informed him.

Edward looked surprised. "Just now?"

"Yes, sir."

"At the restaurant?"

"Yes, sir."

Edward took a moment to process the information. "We'll discuss it when I'm done here. Thank you."

Tyler nodded and stepped out of the room.

"When you're done here? Gosh, Edward, it's good to see you, too. I sure hope you had a good trip. Me, I've had a great week, today especially, until about twenty minutes ago." My sarcasm was thick.

His jaw tensed. "That's enough, Isabella."

I took a step into the room. "That's enough? Oh, trust me, that is not enough! What the hell is going on?"

Edward didn't speak, he only glared. Emerald eyes bore holes through my head with their intensity.

I grabbed the door and slammed it shut, causing him to jump out of his chair.

"That's enough!" He moved around his desk.

"What is going on? Why are you angry? Why are you sending Tyler to *collect* me? Why are you treating me like this?" My anger was dissolving into despair. I didn't understand what was going on or why he was being so cold. I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes.

"Why don't *you* tell *me* what's going on, Isabella? Why don't you tell me what's been going on this whole time?" he shouted accusingly.

I was at a loss. "I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about."

"No?" he contested. He snatched a file folder off his desk and shoved it at me.

I took it from him and opened it to find pictures, not just any pictures but surveillance photos of me. Me and Jim more specifically. Pictures of me walking with him down the street, in the Starbucks, leaving the grocery store. Pictures of someone walking into my building, a car parked on what looked like my street, me walking into my building. They went on and on. I stared at the photos in complete disbelief. I felt sick, absolutely violated.

"Who took these?"

"It doesn't matter," Edward said dismissively, picking up his glass of scotch and downing the entire thing.

"The hell it doesn't! Did you have someone follow me and take pictures?"

"I had security set up to protect you while I was gone."

"Why in the world would I need security? Since when do I need protecting?"

"Stop changing the subject, Isabella!" he raged, throwing the glass against the opposite wall. It shattered and left a huge dent in the wall. "Are you going to tell me what you and James are up to or not?"

My head was spinning, my heart was pounding. I was struggling to make sense of this insanity. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't figure it out. All I knew is Edward had someone follow me. He had someone take pictures of me without my knowledge.

"I don't even know James. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Are you sleeping with him? Or did he hire you?" The veins in his neck were bulging. My face flushed in anger, but before I could respond, he was shouting more questions. "Is Jasper in on it? Are you fucking with my sister, too?"

"What does Jasper have to do with any of this?"

Edward walked back around his desk and snatched up his phone. He pressed a few buttons and then came over, thrusting it towards me. A grainy video was playing, something taken by a camera phone. It was shot from a distance, but you could see a man pick up a woman and carry her. I recognized it immediately as me and Jasper from last week. Our little charade for Jim/James/whatever his name was.

"I'm giving you a chance to explain before I throw you out."

My heart ripped from my chest. *Before he threw me out?* The tears I had been fighting began running down my cheeks. It didn't matter what I said. The man I thought was falling in love with me truly considered me nothing more than a lying, cheating con artist. He wasn't going to believe me regardless of what I claimed as the truth.

I pulled out my phone and dialed Jasper, putting it on speaker and setting it on the desk. If he thought that Jasper was involved in this, I could only think of one way to prove him wrong. I sat down in one of the chairs, unable to hold myself up anymore. Edward cautiously returned to his side of the desk and sat down as well.

Jasper answered, sounding a little worried, "Bells, are you okay? Why did Rose text me about a family emergency?"

I cleared my throat, hoping I could do this. "I'm fine. I need to talk to you about something."

"Why am I on speaker?"

"I'm doing something, I... I can't hold the phone," I stumbled over my words. My lying ability was limited at best. "Listen, I've been thinking about coming clean with Edward."

"Coming clean about what?" Jasper questioned like I expected him to.

"I think Edward knows anyway," I replied, continuing my charade.

"Can you hold on a sec?" I could hear him shuffle some papers, and then it sounded like he was moving to a different place. I looked across the desk at Edward, who was sitting forward in his chair with his elbows on his desk, one hand was running through his hair nervously. Jasper came back on. "Sorry, I had to go somewhere private. What the hell are you talking about, Bella?"

Jasper had the patience of a saint, but he could only listen to so much nonsense.

"About Jim, I mean James," I quickly corrected.

"Who the hell is James?"

This was so mean of me to do to my best friend, but at least I knew I would be able to explain to him later, and he would forgive me. For now, I needed to confuse the shit out of him to make a point.

"The guy who hired me to mess with Edward."

Jasper was silent for a couple seconds. "I don't get it."

"I just thought you should know it's all over."

"What's going on? Are you okay?" He sounded like he was beginning to panic. He was picking up on my emotional strain.

"I'm fine," I lied.

"Bella, you text me about the job offer, then my sister texts me that you left work because of a family emergency, and now you call me about being hired to mess with Edward. What does that even mean? I love you, but if this is some sort of joke or something, I really don't have time for this."

I wiped my face and refused to look across the desk at Edward.

"I love you, too, Jaz. You should probably break it off with Alice. The gig is up. We can go back to the way it was before."

Silence. Then I could hear Jasper laughing.

"I knew it! What the hell? You two are fucking with me, aren't you? Are you guys are out celebrating the new job without me?" I couldn't bring myself to answer. "Thanks a lot. Don't come rescue me from work, just call and fuck with me. I didn't get that whole 'somebody hired you to mess with Edward' part, but Alice thinks she's pretty funny pretending you and I are together. She's been giving me shit since I told her about our forty second love affair. That's the last time I try to help you out with a stalker, Bella. Next time, you tell Edward and his fucking security guards to save your ass. Nice try, Alice Masen, but I figured it out!"

I pressed my fingers against my eyes, hoping that I could keep the tears from falling.

"I'm not with Alice." My voice started to crack. I was going to start sobbing any minute. "Please don't bring her over to the apartment tonight. You'll understand when I talk to you later. I have to go. I'm sorry I took you away from work."

"What? Bella, what's going on?" When I didn't answer, he began to panic again. "Take me off the goddamn speaker! Who's with you?"

"I'll call you back as soon as I get home."

"Where are you?"

"I gotta go," I choked out.

"Shit, Bella, why do you sound like that?"

I picked up the phone and hung up on him. I chanced a look at Edward. He was hanging his head and clawing at his hair.

I assumed he understood the point I was trying to make. Edward was insane. He was completely fucked up. He was a paranoid psycho, who didn't trust me at all. Without trust, what did we have? We had nothing.

I took a deep breath and willed myself to have my final say.

"I don't really know who James Hunter is. He ate at Eclipse last week with two other people. A woman with really red hair and some guy. Jim, which is how he introduced himself to me, asked me out for drinks, and I turned him down. On my way home, he bumped into me on the street and walked with me all the way home. I was fighting a weird vibe, and Jasper happened to be leaving when Jim, James, whatever, was standing outside with me. I asked Jasper to play along and pretend to be my boyfriend to chase James away. Jaz went a little overboard, picking me up and carrying me into the building."

Edward didn't move, but I could see he was clutching his hair so tightly his knuckles were turning white.

"Even with that little show, the guy kept popping up wherever I was this week. It seemed like no matter where I was or what I was doing, he was there. He seemed to believe I had a boyfriend; but I'll admit, I would have probably mentioned it to you because it was beginning to bother me. I don't know how you know him or if he knew you and I were involved. James told me today that things aren't always what they seem and to be careful who I trust. I didn't know what he meant, but now I see he was trying to warn me about you."

Edward's head snapped up. "You can't believe a word he says! He's a liar. He's the most deceitful person on the planet!"

I stood up and shoved my phone back in the pocket of my bag. "The most deceitful person on the planet?" It felt like he had punched me in the gut. "Yet, you believed

that I was working with him, or worse, sleeping with him?"

That was what hurt the most. For two months, I had been letting Edward into my life. I had given him my body and my heart. I was honest with him about my fears and my past, but when push came to shove he believed me capable of deceiving him in the most horrible way, with a person he found completely despicable.

"You know, when Tyler walked into Eclipse, and I saw the look on his face, there was this terrible moment when I thought he was there to tell me something had happened to you." My voice was thick with emotion. "I couldn't imagine anything more horrible than him telling me I was never going to see you again." My chest heaved, and I choked back the sob that almost escaped. "This... is worse."

I started for the door.

"Isabella," Edward called out.

I closed my eyes as I reached for the doorknob. There was nothing left to say.

"You refused to move in with me, you mentioned nothing about James following you home last week, then as soon as I'm out of the country you're spotted with him all over town."

As if the sting of his accusation wasn't enough, now his justification was that I was afraid of moving in with him after dating for six weeks? I spoke to someone I had no idea was connected to him? I was not going to take the blame for his inability to trust.

Edward continued making his excuses. "James Hunter has been out to get me for years. He has made multiple attempts at bringing an end to Masen Corporation. He plays games. No act of deceit is below him. He has even hired spies to infiltrate the very heart of my organization. What was I supposed to think?"

I laughed humorlessly. "What were you supposed to think?" His question was as pathetic as he was. "What do you think now?" I asked, turning to see his tortured face.

He stood up but didn't move closer. "I think he's been tracking you, trying to find out how you're connected to me. I think he's hoping he can manipulate you, so he can somehow use you against me."

"I guess thinking the worst of me was just easier, right?" I asked rhetorically.

Edward said nothing, finally out of excuses. He couldn't even look at me.

"I missed you so much this week. I had good news to share about a job offer. I couldn't wait to tell you, to have you be happy for me, to celebrate with me." My chest constricted with the ache that was overwhelming my heart. "I've tried so hard. I've put up with all your landmines and temper tantrums. I've accepted all your apologies, given you the benefit of the doubt. I'm always trying to find the good in you. In return, I get yanked from my job to be interrogated like a criminal, my privacy invaded, and my heart broken. You don't want to see the good in anyone. I'm done. I am so done. You don't have to throw me out. I'll happily leave on my own."

I pulled on the door and walked past Tyler, who was standing just outside.

"I'll call Brady and let him know you're coming down, Miss Swan," Tyler offered as I made my way to the front door.

I wiped at the torrent of tears that were streaming down my face. "Please, don't."

Just then, a startling crash came from Edward's office causing me to look over my shoulder. One of the chairs from in the room flew out the door and smashed against the hall wall. Then another crash. It sounded like he flipped his desk over. I left, knowing I needed to be anywhere but there.

Jasper was waiting for me when I got home, along with a very worried looking Alice. She was on her phone but hung up when she saw me. I was mad that he brought her into this when I had asked him not to.

"Thank God." He sighed in relief. "Are you all right?" He jumped off the couch and wrapped his arms around me.

The entire taxi ride home, I had shut myself off, letting everything go numb so I didn't make a fool of myself. Now that I was here, I couldn't hold back. I fell into my friend's arms and released all the emotion I had been holding back. Jasper did what he does best and held me, letting me get it all out before asking me again to tell him what was going on.

"You scared me half to death, Bells. You can't call me like that and then not answer when I call you back. I started to think you were sending me secret messages because you were kidnapped by someone named James or something. Then Alice said she knows of a guy named James, who has it out for Edward. So, we

both started freaking out. She tried to get Edward on the phone, but he must still be in the air. We were ready to call your dad and get the police involved."

"You were with Edward," Alice said intuitively. "He did this, didn't he?" Her voice was small and sad.

I held onto Jasper a little tighter. I didn't want to have this conversation with Alice. She was Edward's family, not mine. Jasper was the only one I wanted right now.

"Why don't you go check on your brother? I got this," he said to her, understanding completely what I felt without me having to say it.

"But," she started.

"Alice, I'm most definitely going to be calling your brother names that I don't want you to hear. It's better if you go. I'll call you later, I promise."

I couldn't see her while I was buried in Jasper's chest, but I heard her open the door.

"I'm sorry, Bella. I know I don't know what he did, but I do know he cares about you more than he's ever allowed himself to care about anyone. He's not bad, he's just broken. Really broken."

"Not now, honey," Jasper told her with a shake of his head.

I didn't need to feel bad for Edward right now. I needed to be free to hate him, to hate his need to control everything, his inability to trust and to see the good in people, and most of all I needed to hate him for making me love him when he was incapable of loving me back.

I heard the click of the door as she left us alone.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

I'm not sure what to say... Merry Christmas? I know, I know. Not the most uplifting chapter for the holiday. But how much joy and frivolity can you stomach, though, really? I'm sure we all needed some angst to change things up a bit! ;)

So, she's done. Everyone was wondering how long it would take and what the final straw would be. This was it. You know me, I have a bunch of ramblings on my blog if you're interested. Teaser Tuesday should be happening like normal.

Big thanks to momof4lucrtwisaga as usual. Thanks to everyone who reads, reviews, and added this to your alert list and favorites. I appreciate all the support. I responded to about half the reviews last chapter - which was pretty good considering how busy things are. I read them all and love them all, though!

Give me some Christmas love, shout at me, or tell me what you asked Santa for! Merry Christmas to all of you who celebrate. See you back here for New Year's Eve fun!

Chapter 10

A/N: It's Friday and noon in Sydney, Australia. So, in reality, I'm actually *not* posting early.

Chapter 10

Friday, August 20th at noon

It had been twelve days. Twelve days since I last touched him. Twelve days since I last kissed him. Twelve days since I last lay beside him in his bed, naked and sated from our love making.

It had been seven days. Seven days since I last laid eyes on him or heard his voice. Seven days since he admitted to having me followed and photographed. Seven days since he broke my heart with his accusations.

It had been five days. Five days since I returned the earrings by leaving them at the security desk at his building. Five days since Alice told me that all he did over the weekend was drink scotch and stare out the window at the city below. Five days since I asked Alice to not tell me anything about him ever again.

It had been two days. Two days since I realized he was keeping his reservation. Two days since I last slept more than a couple hours at a time. Two days since the anxiety began to take over.

It had been one day. One day since Jasper talked to Rosalie because I couldn't do it myself. One day since Rosalie promised I wouldn't have to work the private room. One day since I realized seeing him was painfully all I wanted and didn't want at the same time.

I had been checking my watch about every five minutes since I arrived at work. I *thought* I could maintain control. I *thought* I could make sure I was in the kitchen when he arrived, so I wouldn't have to see him. I *thought* I could survive being so close without any contact.

I thought wrong.

Like a magnet, I was drawn to him before he even stepped foot in the restaurant. I

found myself standing by the entrance, talking to Angela about something completely pointless when he walked in. I could feel the energy around me change, and I didn't even have to turn around to know it was him. I could feel him; every cell in my body seemed to have a chemical reaction to his presence.

"Mr. Masen," Angela greeted him with a pleasant and friendly smile. "Welcome back."

My hand automatically ran over my hair, trying to smooth back any straying strands. I had fretted over how I looked all morning. I put a little more effort into my hair this morning, combing it back into a slick ponytail. I tried to use makeup to cover up the pathetic state I was in. I was so pale, my eyes were dull and had dark circles under them, and I hadn't eaten in days making me look gaunt and surely unattractive.

I slowly turned around, bracing myself for the flood of emotion that would hit when I saw his beautiful face.

Edward, of course, looked like he stepped off the pages of Gentleman's Quarterly. He was wearing one of his million-dollar, black suits and a green tie that made his eyes even more noticeable, if that was possible. His hair was perfectly coifed; in fact, it looked like he had gotten a haircut since I last saw him. He unbuttoned his jacket and tucked his hand in his front pocket while the other dug through those freshly trimmed tresses.

"Isabella."

The way he said my name made me want to cry. It was like he was reaching in my chest and squeezing what little was left of my heart after it was blown to bits by the last of his landmines.

I said nothing. I turned and walked away like a coward, unable to speak even a simple sentence in greeting. I went back to check on a table and tried to distract myself at the bar as Edward and several of his cohorts headed for the private dining room. He stole one glance in my direction, his eyes not lingering long enough to kill me, but it still stung like a bitch.

I was the worst waitress known to man while he was in the building. I brought the wrong food to one of my tables and then proceeded to drop one of the entrees on the ground, trying to correct my mistake and causing the customer to have to wait even longer for his food. Then, I dropped an entire tray of drinks, splashing rum and coke all over some woman's six hundred dollar Jimmy Choo pumps. Rosalie looked like

she was ready to kill me. I walked back to the kitchen to calm myself down.

"Bella, I need some help bringing up food to the Masen party. Come help me," Emmett demanded, waving me over like it was no big deal.

"Emmett, I can't," I said, feeling utterly deflated. I couldn't carry food to people on the main floor, how was I going to keep myself from doing something terrible in the same room as Edward?

"Come on, no one else is back here. Help a guy out. I need a good tip on this one. Masen's been pissy the whole time because he got me instead of you. Maybe you can save my tip if you bring up some food with me. Come on," he begged.

Edward was pissy I wasn't waiting on him? Did he really think that I would work his lunch after everything that had happened? I couldn't even walk outside without looking over my shoulder every minute, looking for someone hidden away with some telescoping lens, taking pictures of me. I also had nightmares about James coming after me - vivid dreams, where he followed me and trapped me in an alley. He tried to give me money to help him take Edward down. Edward always showed up just before I screamed for help, but instead of saving me from James, he only shouted at me that I was dead to him. His cold, black eyes were full of hatred and caused me to wake with a chill every time. Edward Masen had effectively turned me into a paranoid recluse, who only left the house to go to work.

Emmett's pleading continued. "Bells, come on. Help me out, please?"

I could not and would not let Edward Masen dictate how I lived my life. It was ridiculous. I grabbed the other tray and followed Emmett up the stairs, praying I wouldn't trip and fall. I kept my head down as we walked in the room and made sure to go to the far end of the table away from where I knew Edward always sat. A quick look up caused me to make eye contact with Alec. He smiled sadly at me like he knew exactly what happened between me and his stupid boss, who I was not going to look at because he was stupid and heartless and...stupid. Lack of sleep was really limiting my creative use of the English language today.

Emmett diligently placed the correct food in front of the correct people and then asked if there was anything else anyone needed.

"I need a minute with Isabella," I heard Edward say from the head of the table. When I looked up, he was on his feet walking towards the door and waiting for me to exit with him.

My heart began thrumming at an uncontrollable rate. No amount of deep breathing or visual imagery was going to calm me down. Not that there was any time for that. All eyes were on me as I kept Edward waiting. The room was so quiet, perhaps they had all stopped breathing. I stepped out before the walls collapsed on me, my anxiety making me feel claustrophobic.

Edward closed the door behind us.

"You look unwell. Are you ill? Have you not been sleeping?" In normal person speak this would have sounded like, "*Boy, Bella you look like shit.*"

His concern made me want to laugh if I could laugh, which I couldn't.

His hand lifted and gently he skimmed the back of his fingers across my cheek and then down my jaw. I closed my eyes at the contact. I wanted to smack his hand away but part of me craved his touch so badly I couldn't stop him.

"Answer me, Isabella," he demanded.

I blinked a couple times. My anger resurged. "I would have thought with all the eyes you have out there, you'd know how I was doing better than anyone. No one sent you the video of me taking a nap yesterday?"

Edward frowned, his forehead creasing in frustration. "I don't want to fight with you."

"Well, I don't want to talk to you," I replied snarkily. I tried to make my escape, but he grabbed my arm.

"Don't walk away from me," he snarled, tightening his grip as I tried to pry his fingers off me.

"You don't get to tell me what to do, and you don't get to put your hands on me!" I smacked his hand and arm, trying to get him to let go of me.

"Why do you want to fight with me?" he shouted back, releasing my arm and then roughly tugging on his hair. "Can't you just give me two fucking minutes of your time?"

He glanced back at the closed door, probably thinking the same thing I was. All those people in there could hear us fighting, I was sure of it. I had been attracting all the wrong kinds of attention today. If Rosalie found out I was shouting at a

customer, she'd have my head. I reluctantly decided that I could hear him out.

"You have two minutes," I said, folding my arms in front of me.

He took a deep breath and kept his hand in his hair. "Are you feeling all right?"

Did he want to know that I was a disaster? Did he need to hear me say that I was sick without him? That I've cried every day since I left him last week? I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

"You don't get to know how I'm feeling, Edward," I spat. "You invaded my privacy; and now, I am shutting you out. You don't get to know whatever you want, whenever you want."

His jaw tensed, and I could see him fighting the urge to snap back at me. He reached in his coat pocket and pulled out the box I had sent back to him earlier in the week.

"These are yours. They are of no use to me. They were given to you. You can give them away or lock them up and throw away the key. Shit, you can throw them in the bay. You *don't* get to give them back." He held out the earrings, waiting for me to take them.

I was stunned that he could still surprise me with his need for control. "I already gave them back. I'm done letting you call all the shots."

"I call the shots? *I* call all the shots?" he asked in complete disbelief. "Isabella, you have been calling the shots from the very beginning of this relationship, and if you don't see that, then you're either blind or totally ignorant. Take the earrings. They belong to you."

I didn't understand what he meant, but I snatched the earrings out of his hand and shoved them in my apron pocket.

"Please take care of yourself," he said quietly, retreating back into the dining room and shutting the door.

He was absolutely infuriating. I wanted to punch him. Punch him and then make out with him, in that order. Why did I still want to make out with him?

Damn him.

I've been calling all the shots? He was the bossy one. He always tried to call the shots. *Do this. Don't do that. Answer me. Landmine. Take your panties off. Please take care of yourself.*

I was fairly sure that was the first time the man had politely asked me to do something instead of just demanded it. It was almost as if he really cared. No, he had used the word please one other time. The time in the stables when he didn't want me to leave him. When he didn't want me to make him be around all the campers. The day he cried over the piano. I was not going to feel bad for him. I was not. Maybe a little. No, not even a little. I ran down the stairs and into the bathroom. I wondered if Angela could use a new pair of earrings as the tears threatened to run down my face. My heart was never going to be the same, and it was entirely his fault.

I was lying in my designated sulking spot on the couch, remote in hand. I had a blanket draped over my legs, my Dr. Pepper on the table in front of me, and party size bag of Pretzel M&M's on the couch ready and waiting. I decided I was going to ingest as many calories as humanly possible, so I would stop wasting away. I was ready to embark on an evening of mind-numbing reality TV watching. There was a Cake Boss marathon on, and I love me some Buddy and his crazy cakes.

Jasper closed the front door with a little more gusto than usual. He must have had a bad day at work; he was looking a little peeved. He pushed my legs aside and sat down on the couch with me. Unexpectedly, he snatched the remote away from me and shut off the TV.

"Hey!" I shouted, attempting to get the remote back from him.

"This is an intervention, Bella. I can't stand to watch you sit like a zombie in front of the television one more day," he informed me, sticking the remote down the front of his pants - the one place he knew I wouldn't reach for it.

"I don't need an intervention. Geez, where were you a couple weeks ago?" It would have been nice if someone would have stopped me from my dangerous Edward addiction but nooooo, Jasper only wanted to stop me from enjoying a look into the fascinating world of the culinary arts.

"Alice wants you to come to the Summer Bash tonight. There's going to be games and food, real food," he said, moving the M&M's to the table. "Alice rented a Ferris wheel and there's going to be fireworks later. Come on. Go put on some clothes and

come with me."

"The Summer Bash that she hosts at Edward's?" I asked with a kinked brow. Did he really think I was going to go anywhere near Edward's house?

"The Summer Bash that she has hosted every year at Edward's that he purposefully avoids like the plague. He has never once attended a NWBF function, even the ones at his estate," Jasper corrected me.

I remembered that Riley had said he had never seen Edward until that night he got to witness him in all his jealous, psychotic glory. Still, I wasn't sure I wanted to be close to anything that had to do with Edward. He might not attend the party, but that didn't mean he wouldn't be in the house. *Too close.*

"Buddy's making a life-size replica of his wife out of cake for her birthday. That's going to be some freaky shit. I don't think I should miss it."

Jasper sighed but didn't give up. "Come with me, Bella. It will be good to get out. Have some fun. Interact with normal people."

I sat up and tossed the blanket at him. "Fine, but you better disinfect that remote before tomorrow."

I stomped off to my room to get ready. I swore I would make his ass leave the party if I even caught a whiff of Mr. Masen.

The circle drive at Edward's was a flurry of activity. Cars were being handled by a valet service. From the car, I could see the giant Ferris wheel spinning on the main lawn. There were colorful canopies set up with picnic tables underneath them. The Summer Bash was a celebration for all the staff and volunteers at NWBF, all the camp counselors, and campers and their families. It was Alice's way of thanking everyone for their hard work in making camp a huge success. It was also paid for completely by her brother. He gave her the money to do all of this for these people.

Jasper pulled up, and a young man opened the car door for me. I looked at the house, wondering if Edward was somewhere inside, hiding, lurking, or maybe just pretending all these people weren't here. The more I thought about it, the more I figured he probably stayed in the city where he wouldn't have to deal with all of this. I was sure of it, until we walked over to a check in station, and I saw Tyler. There was no way Tyler was here and Edward was not.

"Miss Swan," Tyler said when we approached. I gave a nod in his direction, painfully recalling the last time I had seen him. I remembered perfectly the sound of Edward trashing his office and the look on Tyler's face when he realized what was going on.

"Name?" another man with a clipboard and a fancy headset asked.

"They're cleared. Miss Swan and Mr. Hale are guests of Miss Masen. Let them through," Tyler answered for me.

The clipboard man looked at me for a second and then waved us through.

"Well, now I know he's here," I whispered to Jasper.

"We go when you say go."

"Promise?"

"Promise," he affirmed, throwing his arm around my shoulders. "Come on, let's go win you a giant stuffed animal. My baseball skills are pretty phenomenal, I'm sure I can knock over a pyramid of milk bottles."

"Jaz!"

We could hear her before we could see her. Alice pushed her way through a group of people, pulled off her headset, and jumped into Jasper's arms. It was as if they hadn't seen each other in forever. In reality, they went out to dinner together last night. Alice was a Masen who had no trouble at all showing her loving feelings. Maybe Edward had some sort of genetic abnormality.

"Bella, I'm so glad you came!" Alice said, finally disentangling herself from my best friend. "It's going to be so fun. You have to ride the Ferris wheel and please eat. We have so much food. You two need to stuff yourselves tonight."

Edward's main lawn was covered in a myriad of carnival game booths with flashing lights and annoyingly large, stuffed animal prizes. I saw at least five kids walk by with stuffed bears or dogs that were bigger than them. There were also food stands handing out cotton candy, snowcones, popcorn, and every other treat imaginable. By the big canopy tents, there were three huge grills, where men in aprons and chef hats were cooking up burgers, hotdogs, and sausages for people. It looked like this carnival must have cost a small fortune. Of course, Edward had a large fortune, so it was nothing to him. I had to admit, it did look like it was going to

be fun.

Alice readjusted her headset and said something to someone about being back online.

"I have to check on a couple things, but I will find you guys soon. We can eat together."

Jasper gave her a chaste kiss on the cheek. "Sounds good, sweetheart. I gotta go win this one a teddy bear," he said, throwing a thumb in my direction.

I was about to protest and explain I was perfectly capable of winning my own stuffed animal when I heard my name.

"Bella!"

I turned to see Riley headed my way.

"Riley, hey," I said with an awkward wave.

"I was hoping you were going to be here," he said with a genuine smile.

"How fun is this? I couldn't stay away." I tried to ignore Jasper, who was grinning obnoxiously at the two of us.

"This is incredible. Alice blows us away every year with an awesome party. This year, though, her brother really let her go all out."

"Edward was a saint about all this." Alice jumped at the chance to say something positive about her brother. "He has been in such a good mood the last month or so, it was almost too easy to get everything I wanted. Edward's generosity was at an all time high for some reason." Alice looked at me, checking for a reaction. I had none to give. Edward and I broke up. It didn't matter how generous I made him over the last few weeks. Not that anyone could say for sure that I made him generous. Who knew why he decided to let her do whatever she wanted this time.

Riley wasn't here to talk to Alice about Edward, however. He was only interested in me. "So, I checked out Flowers Bar, and it was great. You were totally right. I don't know why I hadn't gone there before."

Jasper piped up. "You'd never been to Flowers before? Their buffet is incredible. Bella and I used to go there all the time. Why haven't we gone there lately? We

should go." Alice looked at him confused. "We have to go there this weekend. All four of us should go. What do you say, Riley? It'll be great."

The fact that I didn't strangle Jasper right there in front of all these witnesses was a testament to my amazing self control. Was he seriously trying to hook me up while I was standing on Edward's freaking lawn?

Alice looked mortified. "We can't this weekend. We...have other things...things we have to do...things that can't wait...things...we have things. I need to check on one of the booths. Jasper, can I talk to you for just a second?" She grabbed his T-shirt in her fist and pulled him away from me and Riley.

"Okay, I guess they're busy," Riley said, raising his eyebrows and shoving his hands in his pockets.

"With things," I added with a nod.

We both busted out laughing. It was the first time I had laughed in a week. It felt so good.

Riley was boyishly handsome. He had short blonde hair that he spiked up in the very front. He was well built but slender, and he was at least six feet tall, a prerequisite for me. I could not imagine dating a guy who wasn't at least six feet tall, it was my cutoff. Edward was my perfect height, six foot two. My head rested perfectly between his spectacular pectorals, so I could listen to his heartbeat when he hugged me. I loved it when he rested his chin on top of my head. I also loved the way he'd put his hands on the small of my back; and occasionally, he'd let one drift down to my behind. It was never anything rude or overtly sexual, but it used to set my body on fire.

"Bella? Are you okay?" Riley asked with an extremely concerned look on his face.

My eyes and mind refocused on the present day. I could feel my face flush with embarrassment. I had no idea how long I had been standing there thinking about Edward and his damn hands.

"Sorry," I said, shaking my head. "Do you want to grab some cotton candy with me?"

Riley was all too willing to do whatever I wanted. We walked around, eating cotton candy off paper cones. I got pink, he got blue. We were so gender appropriate. We watched some kids playing the ring toss game. Even when they

didn't win, they were given a prize for trying. At another booth, I smiled at the look on one little girl's face when she popped a balloon with the last dart in her pile, earning her a poster of a shirtless Taylor Lautner.

"You wanna take a ride on the Ferris wheel with me?" Riley asked after we finished devouring the melt-in-your-mouth strands of sugar. He reached out his hand, but I didn't take it.

Riley was a nice guy, a really nice guy, but this was not going to become anything anytime soon. He dropped his hand, picking up on my hesitation.

"We'll just be two UW Huskies enjoying a ride at a carnival. That's all," he reassured me with a smile.

"I know. My hands are just sticky from the cotton candy. Maybe I should clean up real quick," I said, covering for my reluctance.

He went to get in line while I ran over to the food booth to get some napkins and a bottle of water. I cleaned off my hands and reminded myself that I was free to do whatever I wanted with whomever I wanted. Riley wasn't asking me to marry him; he was asking for a ride on a Ferris wheel. I pulled myself together and got in line with him. We were sharing stories about our favorite amusement park rides when Alice and Jasper pulled us out of line.

"I need Riley," Alice explained. "We need a new person in the dunk tank, and all the girls voted for you. Come on, I'll get you some shorts to change into. Come on." She was being beyond pushy.

Jasper rolled his eyes but kept his mouth shut. I wondered what was going on with the two of them.

"We were going to get on the ride, Alice. Can't it wait until after that?" I asked, feeling like she was bossing the poor guy around in typical Masen fashion.

"Jasper will ride with you," she answered simply. "Right, *honey*?"

Jasper inhaled, puffing up his chest as he contemplated how to answer her. Something was up. These two were up to something, at least the little one was.

"You're going to go on the Ferris wheel with me? Really?" I eyed my silent friend suspiciously.

Alice's face was scrunched up in all kinds of *you better say yes*. What she didn't know was Jasper Hale was deathly afraid of heights. If he ever went to Edward's condo in the city, the man would be pressed against an interior wall the entire time because looking out those floor-to-ceiling windows would make him more anxious than an arachnophobe in a room full of spiders.

"Maybe Bells and I will go check out the petting zoo."

"Yeah, I didn't think so," I said with a smirk. Twenty-four years old and afraid of going on a Ferris wheel.

"Why don't you come with us? I'd love to see if you can get me all wet," Riley challenged flirtatiously.

"I think I'd love to see you all wet." I flirted back, more for Alice's benefit than anything. Who did she think she was? She was a Masen, that's who she was. An interfering, spying, mistrustful Masen. Those were genetic traits she shared with her brother, most definitely.

Alice shot Jasper another *do something* glare but Jaz just shrugged. He lopped his arm around my shoulders again.

"Don't worry, Al. She throws like a girl. She won't be able to hit the target."

I elbowed him hard in the ribs, making him shout out in pain and laugh at the same time.

Alice got Riley changed while Jasper and I hung out in front of the dunk tank.

"What was all that about?" I asked when the coast was clear. I chewed anxiously on what was left of my thumbnail.

Jasper stared at the ground as he swept his foot across Edward's perfectly manicured lawn. Back and forth his foot moved, like he was trying to draw a line in the grass. "She likes you, Bells, and he's her brother. She likes the possibility you represent."

"I represent possibility? What possibility?"

"I don't know." He shrugged. "She thinks you offer him possibility."

"The possibility of jail time for stalking me and having me followed by

camera-toting private investigators?"

Jasper's pretty hazel eyes met mine. "I'm with you, completely. I don't know him well, but I told you from the beginning that I thought he was trouble. She's his sister. She loves him unconditionally. She knows all the shit that's happened to him in his life. She admits he can be a total pain in the ass, but I guess he was less of a pain when you were around. I don't know. All I know is I am not supposed to encourage you to go out to dinner with that Riley guy, or I'm dead. She hoping you and Edward will work things out."

My mouth hung open. I didn't even know how to respond. Alice was hoping we'd work things out? We weren't going to work things out. We broke up. I broke up with him, and he let me. He didn't try to win me back. He didn't grovel at my feet or send me a huge bouquet of flowers with a note that begged for forgiveness. Not that any of that would have mattered, but maybe it would have made me think about it. Maybe then I would have considered the possibility that he actually felt something for me. Instead, his life went on. He got a damn haircut this week. I was lucky I showered for work. Edward didn't want to be in a relationship with me. Edward didn't know how to be in a relationship.

Alice reappeared before I could say any of that to Jasper. The look on his face seemed to be begging me not to let on that he told me of her true intentions. I wanted to tell her I couldn't help her save her brother from himself. I wasn't the one who was going to change Edward Masen.

"Why don't we go get something to eat?" she suggested, not so subtly trying to get us to move away from the dunk tank.

"You two go ahead," I responded. "I want to get Riley soaking wet. Is he going to be wearing a T-shirt or shirtless? If that man is not wearing a shirt, I'll miss for sure because I'll be so damn distracted."

Jasper knew exactly what I was doing and had difficulty hiding his smile.

"No. No. We all need to eat." Alice was unrelenting, pulling on our arms.

Riley came striding over in nothing but a pair of pale blue swim trunks. I wasn't lying about being distracted by his body. Without a shirt, he was quite a pleasant distraction.

"Are you up for the challenge, Miss Swan?" He smirked at me with his hands on his hips.

"Oh. My. God."

I turned my head towards Alice's voice. She looked like she was going to pass out or like she'd seen a ghost. She wasn't looking at me or even Riley. She was looking past us. I turned to see what was causing her to freak out.

Strolling across the lawn like a Greek god was none other than Mr. Masen himself. Not only was he making an appearance at Alice's Summer Bash, but he was wearing the T-shirt and jeans I gave him, along with a baseball hat and sunglasses that made him look like an abnormally good-looking, normal person. There was nothing normal about Edward, however. If Alice didn't look so completely stunned, I would have thought this was her doing.

"What the hell is he doing?" she croaked, grounded in her spot. "What the hell is he *wearing*?"

I covered my smile with my hand, I didn't want him to think I was smiling at him.

"Some party, Alice," he said when he came upon us.

"Thanks," she replied, a flabbergasted look still overtaking the features of her face.

"Jasper," Edward greeted him with a nod, even though Jaz was standing with his arms folded in front of his chest, trying hard to look tough.

He turned towards me, adjusting his cap, looking unsure what to do with his hands since he was not able to run them through his hair.

"Isabella, it's nice to see you again," he said, making me weak in the knees. I was so frustrated with my lack of control around him. Would he always have this effect on me? I was afraid he might.

"Edward." My voice was steady but soft.

He turned his attention to Riley. "Half-naked person, whose name I don't know."

It was a good thing he was wearing sunglasses because something told me had his eyes been visible, Riley might have been killed by some death rays.

"Riley, Riley Biers, Mr. Masen. I'm one of the camp counselors."

"Are those my swim trunks?" Edward looked down at the clothed portion of Riley's body.

"I let him borrow them. He's going in the dunk tank," Alice chimed in anxiously.

Riley winked at me. "Let's go Bella. Let's see if you can get me wet." He climbed up the stairs and into the tank, perching himself precariously on the small seat in there. Edward looked at me with an amused half grin.

"Are you actually going to stay out here?" Alice asked her brother.

"Why not?"

"You just never come t-"

He interrupted her, "I'm trying lots of things I never do, Alice. Is there a problem?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm glad you're here. I mean, you're the reason all of this is even possible. I've always wanted you to come and enjoy it. I'm going to hug you now, so don't freak out."

She looked like she was going to cry as she wrapped her little arms around his neck and hugged him tightly for a couple seconds. He patted her back, his signal that he was uncomfortable with the PDA. She let him go and wiped under her eye. I wondered if he had any idea how much it meant to her that he was out here.

Like Riley, Edward only seemed interested in me. "So, Isabella, you think you can hit the target?"

I shrugged, suddenly unable to spit words out. Edward walked over to the table and took the balls from the girl manning the dunk tank. He tossed one at me.

"Let's see what you got."

I would never claim to possess any amazing athletic ability. In fact, I lacked any real talent in anything sport related. Baseball, however, was perhaps where my weakest skills lay. I basically threw like a girl - a very little girl with maybe some sort of visual impairment on top of some motor control deficits. I tried to mask it with a really cool wind up, but when the ball left my hand, I could tell I wasn't going to be hitting any targets. Hell, I was going to be lucky if I didn't hit any innocent bystanders. My first pitch flew high and just missed some guy with a mustache.

"Sorry!" I called out, giving him an apologetic wave when he turned to see who was hurling softballs at his head.

"Oh, come on, Bella! Do we need to get you some glasses? I'm over here." Riley started trash talking from the tank.

Edward tossed me ball number two, and I threw that one a little short. Okay, a lot short. It fell about two feet in front of the target. Maybe I was overcompensating for the last throw.

"Bella, Bella. My ten-year-old sister can throw better than you!" Riley shouted.

"Just relax. You're over thinking it a little," Edward said as he handed me ball number three.

Ha! Over thinking it? I couldn't think at all. He was standing less than two feet away from me. I was lucky I remembered how to breathe.

I threw the next one, and it went wide right, hitting a teenage boy in the leg. I apologized, and the kid threw it back to Edward, who had his hand up, waving it in. His smile told me he was enjoying my humiliation a little too much.

He handed me ball number four. "You can do it. Just take a deep breath, baby."

Now, I needed to take a deep breath because he called me baby. He really wasn't allowed to use terms of endearment since we were broken up and all. I took three deep breaths as Riley continued to provoke me.

"Maybe we need to make this more interesting. If you don't hit that target, I'm going jump out of this thing and throw you in. It's me or you, Beautiful Bella!"

He was flirting, and he knew it. I knew it, and Edward knew it. I bit down on my lip and tossed the ball. It was not going to hit the target; it wasn't even close. I could see Riley's lips turn up in a satisfied smile and then - WHACK!

The target was nailed by a smoking fastball, and Riley was plunged into the water with no warning. I turned to look at Edward, who was grinning from ear to ear and empty handed. I stared at him for a couple seconds.

"What?" he said, holding his palms up. "The boy thought he was going to put his hands on you if he didn't go in the water. That was never going to happen."

Before I could say anything, Alice was jumping in between us. "Okay, let's get something to eat!" She hooked arms and pulled me towards the food tent.

I shouted a goodbye to a drenched Riley as he coughed the water out of his lungs. Edward and Jasper followed behind us.

We found an empty picnic table after getting our food and sat in awkward silence while we ate. Edward had gotten a cheeseburger but was looking at it like it was some foreign delicacy he had never seen before. The man must have had a cheeseburger before. He took a bite, and ketchup shot out the other side and dripped on the table. I stifled a laugh the best I could, but he caught me and narrowed his eyes, pretending to be mad.

I looked around the tent at the other people, trying to keep my eyes off him. I noticed a large sign that was propped up on an easel by the exit. On it was a picture of a beautiful, smiling, redheaded woman with her arms around two children, a boy and a younger girl, but it was what it said that caught my attention more than anything.

Thank you for supporting the Elizabeth Masen Memorial Camp!

I looked at the picture again. The boy was in his early teens with reddish-brown hair and green eyes that stood out even from a distance. The little girl was petite and dark-haired with an infectious smile. She didn't look like she was much older than eight or nine. It was them. It was Edward's mother. My suspicions about her appeared to be true. Elizabeth Masen died in the fire that hurt Alice.

I swallowed down the bite of food that was in my mouth as the revelation was made in the quiet of my mind. I looked at Edward, who had picked up on my mood shift. He looked over his shoulder in the direction I had been looking. He turned back immediately, knowing what I knew. His jaw clenched, and he set his food down, pushing the plate away from him before crumpling up the napkin on his lap and throwing it on the table. I could hear him screaming "Landmine!" inside his head.

His mother had died in the fire. His sister had been burned badly. He was not burned, and I had no idea what happened to his father. The reason he financially supported Alice's foundation but never participated in any of the events became clear. Edward's wounds had never healed.

"I'm done, too. You want to walk around or play another game?" I asked him, needing to talk to him but not wanting to do it in front of Alice or Jasper.

He sighed, not wanting to talk to me about it, but followed me out anyway. I walked ahead of him, thinking about what I was going to say. I needed him to open up to me. I needed him to tell me what happened and if it played into why he couldn't trust me, why he couldn't love me.

I walked over to the fence by the stables. The horses weren't out, so no one was down there. I leaned against the white horserail fence, placing one foot flat against one of the lower rails. Edward readjusted his hat, taking it off and putting it back on.

"Let's talk about it," I said. I opted not to ask him but rather tell him, like he did to me all the time.

"There are several 'its' between us, Isabella. Where would you like to start? I'd love to start with the 'it' I dropped into the water earlier. That was the same boy from a couple weeks ago, wasn't it?"

"You don't get to play jealous boyfriend, Edward. You aren't my boyfriend."

"Another 'it' we could discuss," he said, shoving his hands in his front pockets. He was willing to talk about everything except his past. He was so frustrating.

"Let's get all your 'its' out of the way, and then we'll cover mine. How about that?" I offered, knowing I was going to have to give him what he wanted if I was going to get anything in return.

"Fine," he conceded, picking up a small rock and tossing it away from the stables. "Is that boy the kind of person you want to be with?"

Sometimes Edward spoke like he was a hundred years old.

"Just because I talk to someone, doesn't mean I want to *be* with that person. I'm not going to feel bad about talking to a nice guy, who probably couldn't imagine raising his voice at me or treating me unkind."

Edward put his sunglasses on again, and it was hard to know what he was feeling without seeing his eyes. "You shouldn't feel bad about that. You, of all people, deserve to be with someone good."

I was quickly becoming exasperated. "What does this have to do with us?"

"Us." He let out a humorless laugh. "I'm not a good person, Isabella. We've been over this," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. He was wound up, I could tell that

much without seeing his eyes.

"You are a good person! When you want to be," I clarified. I pushed off the fence with my foot.

"All this," I said, motioning behind him at the carnival on his lawn, "is you doing something good for others. Your charity makes all this possible. Not to mention what you did for your sister today. Did you see her face when she saw you? It means the world to her that you're here."

He stared at the ground, his hands back in his pockets. "I didn't come out here because of my sister."

"It doesn't matter. Your presence is more important to her than your reasons."

"Are my reasons important to you?" He chanced a look at me while his head was still tilted downward. I couldn't tell if he really didn't get how transparent he was sometimes.

"Should they be important to me?"

"It probably doesn't matter. You've made it clear that you're done with me. I was never good enough for you."

His self-pity was not going to work on me. It was like he missed the whole point of why I walked out on him a week ago.

"You aren't my boyfriend because you aren't good, Edward. You aren't my boyfriend because you were so willing to believe I was bad. You thought the worst and gave up on me. You acted like everything between us meant *nothing*, like I meant nothing."

That got his attention. He lifted his head. "Nothing? Jesus, do you have any idea how you've turned my entire world upside down? Because of who I am, I have to think the worst. I *can't* trust people. People are greedy. People are selfish. People want things from me. People want to take things from me just because I have them and they don't."

He was pacing in front of me. His hands were out of his pockets and flailing all over as he spoke.

"But you, you come into my life, and you want nothing! Not only did you ask for

nothing, but you turned around and gave me things. You bought me dinner even though I was a total prick. You bought me presents with no hidden agenda." He tugged at his shirt. "You made me rice crispy treats because you were worried I'd never had them before. Because of you, Isabella, I don't know anything anymore!"

He pulled off his hat, needing to yank on his hair as his agitation increased. I didn't realize how my treating him like a normal person had caused him so much confusion.

"You make me feel things I have never felt, feelings I don't trust because I don't understand them. You make me crazy because you never respond the way I expect. So, I screwed up. I screwed up because I let history dictate my expectations. I should have known you would be different. You *are* different, and I love it and hate it at the same time. I love that you surprise me. I love that you challenge me, but I hate that I don't always know what you're going to do or say. I hate that you don't want me the way I want you. I hate that I miss you so goddamn much that it fucking hurts to think about you!"

My heart stuttered before it took off at lightning speed. He missed me. He thought he wanted me more than I wanted him. I stepped in front of him to stop his frantic pacing. I took off his sunglasses and threw them on the ground. Even his eyes were manic looking. They were unable to stay focused on anything. I put my hands on his face, and he closed his eyes.

"You're wrong about one thing," I countered. He opened his eyes, green and glowing. "I want things from you. I want you to trust me. I want you to let me in. That's all I've ever wanted from you."

"That's why you scare me so fucking much," he whispered. "What if I let you in, and then you leave?"

"You have it all backwards. I only have to leave if you refuse to let me in." I didn't just want him to trust me, I needed it. It was time to address my "it". "Your mom died in the fire that hurt Alice, didn't she?"

He nodded as I held his face.

"That's why you don't usually come to these things. It hurts to think about her."

Edward nodded again and clenched his eyes shut. "I loved my mom. She's the only one I ever loved, and she left me."

"I'm so sorry, baby." I let his face go and wrapped my arms around his neck. He dropped his head on my shoulder and clung to me for dear life.

This was why he was broken. The way people treated him because of his money screwed him up, for sure. It caused him to believe that people only cared about what they could take from him, but Edward was broken when he lost his mom in the fire. He was afraid to care because he was afraid to lose.

"I need you, Isabella. I need you so much."

He missed me, he wanted me, and he needed me.

Damn him. All the fight was sucked right out of me in that instant. All I wanted was to go inside with him and shut out the rest of this crazy world.

"Then trust I'm not in this to hurt you. Nothing bad is going to happen because you let me in. I mean, look, you told me something personal and nothing exploded," I said into his neck as I ran my fingers through the hair on the back of his head.

Almost as soon as the words left my mouth, there was a series of loud booms. It sounded like fireworks being set off, but it wasn't dark yet. It didn't make sense for them to be set off now. I laughed at the impeccable timing, but Edward bolted upright and looked around. His eyes went wide.

"What?" I could see he didn't think it was as funny as I did.

He stepped away from me and looked at the stables. "That noise came from over here, and the fireworks are supposed to be way on the north-side of the property, nowhere near the stables."

That's when we both saw the smoke. Grey smoke was billowing out of the stables.

Edward blanched. "Go get Tyler, Isabella! Tell him to get the fire marshal over to the stables, now!"

I started running for the house, but a look over my shoulder caused me to stop. Edward was running into the stables, the stables that were now very much on fire.

"Edward!" I wanted to chase after him, but I knew I needed to get help. I pulled out my phone and called Jasper. He thankfully picked up right away.

"Jasper, tell Alice to radio to the fire marshal. The stables are on fire! Someone set

fireworks off in the stables!"

"What? Is that what that was? Shit." Jasper relayed the message. "Where are you?"

"I'm right here by the stables. Jasper..." I was afraid and beginning to panic. "Edward ran inside. He sent me to get the fire marshal, but then he ran inside. You need to get them here now!"

"What the fuck?" Jasper shrieked. I could tell he was on the move, and a look back at the crowd revealed him and Alice running my way.

I hung up the phone and waited for them to get to me. I looked back at the stables that were now almost engulfed in flames. The place had gone up so fast. All that hay was the perfect kindling. The two Palominos ran out the side doors and into the field. They were running like they knew they needed to run for their lives.

"Where is Edward?" Alice shouted as she ran up beside me. "Where is he?" I could see the sheer panic on her face.

I hated to have to tell her. I could feel the tears filling my eyes. I only had to look back at the stables for her to know exactly where he was.

"No!" Alice moved towards the burning building. Jasper grabbed her around the waist and pulled her back as she continued to wail.

Finally, out the front door came Edward and the grey Arabian. He was pulling her by her lead. She was skittish, and he was having a hard time controlling her. Once they were out of the burning building, Edward let her go, and she ran away.

I ran full speed for him and leapt into his arms, wrapping my legs and arms around him tightly. His body was so hot, and he was coughing hard, but he held me against him anyway. I had no idea how long we stood there, him coughing and me crying.

"I couldn't save him," Edward finally said, sounding very winded. I had no clue what he was talking about. Then it hit me. *Twilight*. Twilight was still in there. "I'm sorry."

I was going to scream at him for risking his life to save my favorite horse, but a firefighter pulled me off him and took Edward somewhere to check him out. Because of the fireworks show later tonight, they had the fire marshal and some firefighters

on the grounds, only they were stationed closer to where the fireworks were supposed to go off. By the time they got over to the stables, it was too late. The stables were going to burn to the ground.

I didn't need to scream at Edward, though. Alice did it for me. When Edward sat down, she was all over him. Alice knelt next to him and began hitting him with her fists.

"How could you do that? How could you do that to me?"

Edward held his arms up to cover his head as she continued her attack. He was coughing like crazy, but she didn't care.

"You're so afraid of being like him, but you're just like her! Why did you do that? Why? You are so stupid! Do you hear me? I would have never forgiven you! Never!"

Edward put his hands down and tried to wrap them around her. He pulled her against him as he wheezed and coughed. Alice stopped hitting him and clung to him tightly, sobbing into his chest. Esme and Carlisle appeared out of nowhere and huddled around the siblings. Carlisle pried Alice off Edward and handed her off to Esme, who hugged her as she continued to weep. Carlisle was checking Edward out and looked at Tyler, who I hadn't noticed was at Edward's side.

"He needs to go to the hospital. Now," Carlisle told Tyler. The two men pulled Edward up, and Tyler got on his phone.

"I want to come," I said, stepping forward. They all turned to look at me, and Edward reached out his hand for me. I took it and stood at his side.

In a matter of seconds, Edward's Mercedes was flying down the service road that led to the stables. Brady whipped the car around, and Tyler opened the door so Edward could get in.

"I'll meet you guys over there," Carlisle said, closing both of us in.

The nearest hospital was in Kirkland, just south of where Edward lived in Woodinville. It only took Brady and his professional driving skills ten minutes to get there. Tyler called ahead to let them know we were on our way and that Edward was suffering from smoke inhalation. Someone was waiting for us when we pulled up at the ER.

They whisked him away so quickly, I didn't get to say anything to him. I wasn't

family, so I wasn't allowed to go back with him. Instead, I waited in the waiting room with Tyler. Carlisle and Esme weren't far behind us. Esme stayed with me, while Carlisle went back to check on Edward. Jasper texted me that he was taking Alice home and to keep him updated. She was in real bad shape, he said. If Edward was afraid a lit fireplace might cause her nightmares, I could only imagine what her brother rushing into a fiery inferno would do to her.

I had been doing fairly well until I had to sit and let the enormity of what had happened hit me. Twilight was dead. Edward could have died. I dropped my head into my hands as the emotion washed over me like a tidal wave. Esme rubbed my back and whispered words of comfort.

Carlisle came out after a few minutes when my tears were finally subsiding.

"He's on oxygen, and they have to run some blood tests, but he should be fine. He has some second degree burns on his arms and hands. He wants to talk to Tyler and then Isabella," he said with a small smile in my direction.

I tried not to be offended that he wanted to talk to Tyler first, but I failed. Tyler picked up on my disappointment immediately.

"There was a major security breach, Miss Swan. That makes this my fault. He needs to scream at me a little bit before he'll be ready for you."

I hadn't thought of it that way. I nodded, and Tyler made his way to Edward with Carlisle.

A security breach? Someone did this on purpose? Why would someone want to set Edward's stables on fire? A chill ran down my spine.

Carlisle returned to the waiting room while Tyler and Edward discussed the security issue. He had a clear plastic bag in his hands.

"Here are Edward's things. I didn't think it was wise to leave his money and things laying out," he said, handing the bag to Esme.

Inside, I could see his wallet, a huge roll of cash, a watch, and his phone.

"He's going to want his phone," I said, knowing he was not going to like being out of the loop when Tyler headed back to the estate to check things out. "Maybe I should take that in with me when I go back."

Esme nodded and stuck her hand in the bag to fish it out. She grabbed it and let out a giggle. Carlisle and I both looked at her curiously.

"What?" he asked her as she handed me the phone. She slipped her hand back in the bag.

"He had one nickel in his pocket. How weird is that? Why in the world would he have one nickel in his pocket?"

My heart clenched as she lifted the shiny nickel out of the bag, pinching it between her thumb and forefinger.

Damn him. He missed me, he wanted me, he needed me, and he carried around a nickel.

"Can I have that?" I barely choked out.

Esme looked surprised but handed it to me. One nickel. It couldn't be a coincidence. I clutched it in my hand and pressed my fist to my chest as the tears flowed freely.

When it was my turn to go back, I wasn't sure how I should handle all the questions that were swirling around my head. Edward was sitting on a hospital bed in a horrible blue gown with an oxygen mask covering his nose and mouth. His arms were wrapped in white gauze. He wasn't coughing anymore but he looked tired, like it was work to just breathe.

I took a seat next to him, pulling the chair as close to him as possible. He took my hand in one of his and lifted off his mask with the other.

"Thank you for coming with me," he said hoarsely.

I grabbed at the mask and set it back on his face. "Don't you dare take that off."

He smirked and then gave me a little salute. Now was not the time to ask him all the questions I had. Now was the time to be with him.

"My shirt and jeans were ruined," he mumbled with the mask on.

I smiled. "That's why it's such a good idea to buy clothes that don't cost so much. That way when they get ruined, you can just shrug and say, 'Oh well.'"

He laughed, but that made him start coughing again. "They were special, though."

"We can get you a new T-shirt," I replied, leaving off the part where I wanted to say, "*But I couldn't get a new you.*" He knew that better than anyone. Alice had already beaten him up and made that very clear.

"I think Twilight had a heart attack because of the explosions. They went off so close to him, he was literally scared to death. At least, I hope that's what happened."

There was not a more horrible death I could think of other than being burned alive. I didn't know if that was what happened to Edward's mother, but I suddenly knew why he had to go in there and save the animals. He couldn't stand to think of them being put to death like that. Did someone else know that about him as well? I couldn't let my mind go there. The questions were going to wait.

I held his hand in both of mine and brought it up to my face, making him cup my cheek. How I had missed his touch the last couple weeks. I turned to kiss his palm and rested it back on my cheek.

"I brought you your phone," I said, knowing it would make him smile, which it did. He set his hand down and dug it out of my pocket, placing it on the tray table beside him.

"I also brought you this." I set the silver nickel down next to the phone.

"Well," he said with a sigh, reaching back up and touching my cheek. "Now you know."

It had been twelve hours. Twelve hours since I gave up pretending to sleep. Twelve hours since I sat on my couch, drinking my morning coffee with Jasper while he gave me my morning pep talk about how Edward had no power over me. Twelve hours since I foolishly thought I could make myself believe that load of crap.

It had been seven hours. Seven hours since he walked into Eclipse. Seven hours since he said my name and made me want to cry. Seven hours since I learned he had more power over me than I wanted to admit.

It had been five hours. Five hours since Rosalie told me to go home for the day. Five hours since I asked Angela for the earrings back because thinking I could really part with them was pretty stupid. Five hours since I cried in the back room over my broken heart.

It had been two hours. Two hours since my theory that Elizabeth Masen was killed in the fire was confirmed. Two hours since we walked down to the stables. Two hours since I decided I was going to give him one final chance.

It had been one hour. One hour since we arrived at the hospital. One hour since I tried to imagine my life without him in it and couldn't. One hour since I began to think I was in love with Edward Masen.

Now, without a doubt, I knew.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Happy New Year!

I think I hear a collective, "Awww." Mr. Masen carries around a nickel. For all of you that think she needs to still get her answers - never fear - that's what she's going to get next chapter. In love with him - yes. Ready to jump back into this relationship without some answers - hell no. For those of you that like to hear me ramble on about character motivations, click on the blog link on my profile.

Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for her help and advice. Thanks to my mom, who got me a Rob Pattinson calendar for Christmas that I now get to hang up in my kitchen and look at every day for a year! Thanks to all of you who read and reviewed over the last week. It amazes me how many of you there are out there. I love to hear from you all. Thanks to the ladies over at Twilight Fanfiction Addicts who have been pimping this story out big time and sent out a special teaser earlier in the week.

Tell me what you think or let me know your New Year's resolution. My resolution is to continue writing a story that keeps everyone interested. Let's all hope I accomplish that! =)

Ch 10 Outtake EPOV

A/N: So, Mr. Masen and I were talking this weekend and we decided we needed to post this little diddy. It is also zeeber's birthday, and although she was hoping for an RPattz calendar, she is getting this from me! I thank her once more for all the wonderful reviews she has given to all my stories! See what happens when you're nice to me and tell me it's your birthday?

Friday, August 20th *before* noon

I stared hard at my reflection in the mirror. I buttoned up the last button and flipped up my collar, preparing to put on my tie. Which tie, however, was the question.

I couldn't decide. Two ties sat before me - a red one and a green one. I held up the red one to my chest and then the green.

Which would she want to see me in?

What an asinine thought! *She* wasn't going to want to see me in either! She wasn't going to want to see me period. *She* was done with me. I had blown any chance I had with my idiotic accusations. I turned into a fucking lunatic and made her out to be a bad guy. She wasn't the bad guy. I was the bad guy. She was good. Too good.

"Char!" I shouted, knowing she hated it when I did that.

Both Charlotte and Tyler came to the door of my bedroom. Tyler probably thought I broke something again. He'd been hovering all week. He was practically my shadow - my giant, six-foot-seven, bald, African-American shadow.

"Mr. Masen?" Charlotte looked so apprehensive. I couldn't really blame her; I'd been a bigger bear this week than ever before. We had workers in the condo daily, repairing the damages I caused with my tantrums.

"Green or red?" I asked, holding up both ties.

Confusion and a little bit of relief were evident on both of their faces.

"Um," she said, taking a moment to consider my question.

"Red," Tyler stated clearly from behind her. "Sir."

"I was going to say green." Charlotte smiled and shrugged.

"You two are a lot of fucking help." I turned back to the mirror. Both were nice ties, expensive, of course. All my ties were expensive. *She* didn't care about how much things cost, however. It wouldn't matter to her if I bought it in an exclusive shop in Italy or down the street at Walmart. The thought of that place sent a shiver down my spine. I would go there again if she wanted me to, though. I would go there every day if it meant I could be with her again.

"Why did you say green?" I looked back at Charlotte.

She took a step into the room, less afraid of me than she was when she first arrived.

"It brings out your eyes." She blushed at the admission. "If that matters."

I looked back in the mirror. I could see that. Perhaps if I played up my best features, that would help in getting her to talk to me.

"Yeah, I change my vote. I'd go with the green," Tyler said from the doorway.

I glanced back at him. He stepped back into the hallway, knowing I didn't need anymore of his help. I roped the green tie around my neck and began to tie it. Charlotte walked over to me and helped fold my collar over in the back.

"It looks good. It'll be hard to look away." She smiled at me in the mirror.

I push up my hair. I had let it grow too fucking long. It also didn't help that I had been pulling on it so much that I now resembled the nutty fucking professor.

"If she can see my eyes under all this damn hair."

"Well, you know, I've had two boys and a husband to care for my entire adult life. I used to cut their hair. Breakfast is all ready. If you want, I could cut your hair when you're finished, before you go to work."

I inhaled and exhaled deeply and nodded, unable to speak my gratitude for her willingness to help me, to go above and beyond her duties. Charlotte had always been so good to me. Esme was right about her when she recommended her for the job as my house manager. I was so fortunate to have someone like Charlotte

working for me. Loyalty like hers was hard to come by.

I slipped on my suit coat and walked to the kitchen for my breakfast. I had spent the weekend after *she* left doing nothing but drinking myself into a stupor. When Monday rolled around, I tried to pull my shit together, stick to the routine of my nearly pointless life. I got up, ate breakfast, went to work, dealt with all the bullshit, and then came home, ate dinner, and went to bed. Oh, and I missed her like fucking crazy. All the time. Every waking second.

I couldn't even think her name, it hurt too much. That didn't stop me from seeing her in my mind. Her heart shaped face, those big brown eyes, and those full pink lips. I could imagine the smile she wore when she woke in the morning. Nobody should be that happy when they wake up, but she always was. I could also imagine the look of complete devastation on her face when she told me she missed me while I was in London. When she told me all she had wanted to do was celebrate her good news with me. When she said I broke her heart. When she said she was done. When she said she was *so* done.

I swallowed down my food, not really tasting it or letting myself enjoy it. Charlotte set me up at the breakfast bar. After clearing away my plate, she draped me in a couple towels. She wet my hair with a spray bottle and began combing it out.

"You have no idea how long I have resisted the urge to sneak in your room at night and cut this mess while you slept." Charlotte smirked and cut some off the side.

"I can't imagine how Tyler would have taken you down if you tried to come at me with scissors while I slept." I smiled for the first time all week.

Charlotte stopped for a second and then continued cutting. "Hadn't thought about that."

I didn't mean to scare her. "I'm sure with the way I've been acting the last couple days, he may have encouraged you to do away with me. Save you all the trouble of dealing with me."

Charlotte's movements were almost comforting. Comb, comb, pull, cut, cut.

"No one wants to do away with you. We all want you to be happy." She paused, adding warily, "It was nice to see you happy."

I was beginning to feel happy. Before. Before I fucked everything up.

"Happiness is always short-lived," I replied tersely. "I knew better than to think it would last."

Charlotte tsked me. "This from a man who's built an empire all by himself. A man like you should believe anything is possible."

"I can't control everything. As much as I'd like to..."

She stood in front of me and pulled the hair above both my ears, making sure it was even. "You can't control her, but your temper and your behavior are a different story."

I tensed at her words. She was right, but she was also my employee. I shouldn't be talking to her about this stuff, about *her*. Of course, I had no friends. No real friends. Those who I counted as friends were also on my payroll. I often wondered if they would choose me as a friend if they were not.

"Carlisle thinks I should talk to her. Explain myself. Apologize for jumping to conclusions." I didn't know why I was sharing this much personal information, but I knew Charlotte would keep my confidence. Just as I knew Carlisle would do the same. My uncle was a good man, who never pressured me, always accepted my aloofness, but welcomed me like a son whenever I sought his counsel.

Charlotte stopped cutting and put a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I've always thought your uncle was a very smart man."

I knew she was going to say that. The only problem was there was no guarantee *she* would even accept my apology, nonetheless take me back. She deserved better than an emotionally-stunted asshole. I should never have talked her into a relationship with me in the first place. I was better suited to meaningless flings with faceless, nameless nobodies. No one got hurt that way, me especially.

Charlotte looked me over and used the comb to spike the front of my hair up a little bit.

"All done," she announced, removing the towel carefully so the cut hair did not fall on my suit.

I got up and walked to the hallway where a large mirror hung on the wall.

"Jesus, you cut it all off! Shit!" I ran a hand through it and it felt completely foreign, like it wasn't even my hair.

"It looks nice," she defended. "You've needed it cut forever. Now maybe you'll keep your hands out of it."

I frowned at her as I continued to run my hand through the impossibly short tresses.

Charlotte tried to reassure me. "You look very handsome. She's going to think you look great. Trust me."

Ha. If I had a nickel for every time I heard that one...

I bolted back to my room and shoved my wallet in my pocket. I grabbed my money and the earrings. I was going to give the damn earrings to her today and tell her she had to keep them. I refused to take them back.

Before I left, I picked up the nickel that sat on my nightstand. I rubbed it between my finger and thumb before putting it in my pocket. I had carried it around all week, just as I had all week in London while we were apart for different reasons. It reminded me that she was real and not something I conjured up in a dream. The girl who dumped the nickels on my desk surprised me that day with her spirit and spunk. No one could deny the woman had guts. Little did I know that she'd continue to surprise me at every turn. She was like no one I had ever met, like no one I would ever meet again.

I slipped the coin into my pocket and went to work, reminding Charlotte that my sister would be at the estate by ten to start setting up for her little Summer Bash.

My morning sucked. With Irina's betrayal uncovered and confirmed, I spent my time in meetings, listening to everyone explain to me that it wasn't their fault that she was able to embed herself so deep. Irina had claimed that she was in love. She was in love with James' business partner, Laurent Cassel. Love made her do it. This was why I didn't do love.

Trust no one. I needed that tattooed somewhere I would be sure to see it every day.

Tanya stopped in my office to report that she and Kate had everything in order and wanted to update me on the new Denali timeline. In an effort to flush Irina out, we had created some fake glitches in the program. Now, we needed to reestablish the program's integrity. I had planned on bringing Alec to lunch with me, in hopes that he would act as a buffer between me and *her*. Although, I couldn't guarantee she'd even be working today. She could easily call in sick to avoid seeing me.

The Denali group would have to come to lunch with me. I had limited time for them after lunch. I needed to meet with the board and convince them that my new program would launch by the end of September.

"Sir," Tyler said with a nod as he opened the car door for me.

Alec and I slid into the backseat. The rest of them would meet us there. The ache in the center of my chest that had been driving me to distraction for a week now was making it hard to breathe. I adjusted my stupid green tie and tried to take a deep breath.

I had given her time and space. I hadn't spent thousands of dollars on expensive gifts or written sappy cards with my apologies. I knew she wouldn't accept those. She was not someone I could spend money on and get what I wanted. I had tried all week long to respect her need to be away from me. I was going to leave it up to her to give me a sign that she wanted to hear my apology.

What if she wasn't there today? My doubt was tangible.

If she wasn't there, then she was sending me a message loud and clear. If she wasn't there, she was really and truly done with me.

"Your haircut looks nice, Edward," Alec said politely.

I said nothing. Alec knew enough to know that I was more than anxious about this lunch. I wanted to see her so badly but knew it was going to hurt so fucking much whether she was there or not. I deserved it, the pain. I was the one who fucked it all up.

Brady pulled up in front of Eclipse, and Tyler was quick to jump out and open the car door.

"Good luck, sir," Tyler said quietly as I buttoned my jacket back up.

Luck? Was that what I needed? I needed more than luck. I needed a fucking miracle.

Tyler walked to the entrance and opened the door. I barely stepped foot inside when my entire body reacted. There she was. Her back was to me, but it was most definitely her. The urge to kneel at her feet and beg her forgiveness was so strong. Never in my life have I wanted someone to forgive me as much as I wanted her to. Her forgiveness would mean that maybe I was worth something, something far more

meaningful and important than twenty-eight billion dollars.

"Mr. Masen, welcome back," the dark-haired hostess said with almost believable friendliness.

I didn't answer her, though, because all I could do was focus on the woman in front of her. I held my breath as she ran her hand over her hair and slowly turned around to face me. She was here. She was waiting for me. It felt like my heart was about to jump out of my chest. It was Friday at noon. She knew this was when I would show up and here she was, waiting for me.

I tried to fight a smile. I still had a long way to go. I knew I had a very long way to go when I saw her face, her beautiful face. She looked tired. She looked pale. She looked unhappy to see me. She didn't smile. She only stared with those gorgeous chocolate brown eyes.

I unbuttoned my jacket and slipped one hand in my pocket, so I could feel the nickel - my only connection to her until she forgave me. My other hand ran through my hair, my short, short hair.

"Isabella."

I hadn't spoken her name for a week. It almost hurt coming out. Why did she affect me this way? Why couldn't I stop her from having this power over me?

She stood still for a moment and then, without a word, walked away. She walked away, and I could feel my heart completely rip in two. She was done. She was still so done.

A/N: So what do you think? He's kind of adorable, right? Now we know why he wore the hat to the Summer Bash. Bet that's the last time he let's Charlotte cut his hair!

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

Friday, August 27th at noon

Today was my last day at Eclipse. My "real" job was starting next week in the form of some orientation meetings. It was a little bittersweet. I had to admit I was going to miss Emmett and his fun-loving spirit. I was going to miss seeing Angela and talking about things like how she should totally ask Eric out because that boy knows a lot about wine, and he would definitely try to get her drunk on the good stuff before he had his naughty way with her. Then, there was Rosalie. I was really going to miss...okay, there was nothing I was really going to miss about Rosalie. I was glad to go back to being just her brother's friend and roommate. Rose aside, I was going to miss being at Eclipse.

At the same time, I was looking forward to being the new part-time English teacher at University Prep. My mom thought it sounded very fancy, like I was a professor at a college instead of a boring high school teacher. I was excited to start something new yet familiar. Getting back in the classroom was what I needed. I was in desperate need of that part of me that existed before I even knew who Edward Masen was.

I did know who Edward Masen was, though, and his presence in my life was turning my world on end. This last week had been interesting, to say the least. A week ago I thought I was out of his life for good, and now I was sucked right back into his crazy world. A world full of corporate espionage, security breaches, arson, attempted murder, and who knew what else.

I had to wait until Saturday night to run through my five hundred questions with Edward. He was released from the hospital late on Friday. I regretted going back to the estate as soon as we walked in the door, because he locked himself away in his office with Tyler and the rest of his security team for hours. The evening's activities had taken so much out of me that I fell asleep on the couch in the family room waiting for him. When I woke up Saturday morning, I was in Edward's bed with his gauze-covered arm draped over me and his warm breath on my neck.

Edward spent the morning with the arson investigators. I watched them from the rooftop patio as they circled around the charred remains of the stables. Edward had moved the three surviving horses to a local ranch until the stables could be rebuilt.

My heart ached for Twilight, my dark prince. I was never very fond of horses, even as a young girl growing up in the Southwest. There was something about Twilight, though. I felt connected to him, especially after he comforted me the day I was so mad at Edward. Now he was gone, and I knew I wasn't the only one sad about it, even if the emotionally-stunted Mr. Masen wouldn't admit it.

I needed some companionship after spending the morning on the third floor trying to read and distract myself. After a quick lunch with Edward, who retreated back into his office with Tyler, I carried the dishes into the kitchen. I surprised the hell out of poor Charlotte. You would have thought the woman had never seen anyone clean up after themselves before. She looked at me wide-eyed as I started to fill the sink with water and looked in the cabinet for dish soap. We argued for a minute before she finally gave in and let me wash while she dried; making me swear not to tell Edward she let me help with the chores.

Some of my most interesting conversations have been had while washing dishes. The "I hope you're being careful" talk with my dad the Thanksgiving I brought Mike home was one of the more memorable ones. Mike was watching football with Billy, Jake, Seth, and Leah in the other room. That was a winner. My mom and I used to catch up on each other's lives during dinner clean up when I was younger. She'd wash and I'd dry while we talked about what I learned in school that day or what was happening with me and my friends. Being with Charlotte reminded me of those times the most.

Charlotte had a gentle and caring demeanor, very maternal. She told me she was a widow with two grown sons. One just graduated from UCLA, thanks to Edward, who paid for his entire schooling. Her other son was a pilot, Edward's pilot, actually. Charlotte had been working for Edward for six years, her son for four. She began her own cleaning business after her husband died, but it was hard work being the boss and the employee. The Cullens were her clients for a year, and then one day she received a call, offering her the job of "house manager" for the illustrious Mr. Masen. She said it was such good money she couldn't turn it down, even though it meant giving up her own business and her house. She moved to the estate with her youngest son, who was still in high school.

Charlotte couldn't say enough nice things about Edward. She admitted he could be ornery sometimes, but she truly believed that all he needed was a little love in his life. "Love heals," she had said as we chatted at the kitchen island long after the dishes were done. I smiled, since that was what I had told him when we went camping. I did love him, but whether that would be enough to heal him, I wasn't sure.

Charlotte entertained me all afternoon. She and I decided Edward and I would eat dinner in the solarium. She let me help her plan the meal and even offered to let me cook a little bit. It almost made me feel normal, which was a feeling I was struggling to keep a hold of lately. Edward's kitchen was amazing, of course. I tried to imagine myself living there with him, being the one who discussed the weekly grocery list with Charlotte, and giving her the night off every once in a while so I could cook. It was still too strange.

I chose the solarium for dinner because that way we would be in our favorite place when I started asking all my questions. I was sure he had no clue I had so many. Before I launched into my interrogation, I made it clear that he could not say landmine as an avoidance technique. He reluctantly agreed. I was foolish to think it would be that easy. If our conversation read like a court transcript, it would have been something like this:

Me: Do you know who set off the fireworks?

Edward: I believe I do.

Me (waiting for a whole minute for him to elaborate): Who?

Edward: The police are looking into it.

Me (eyes rolling): That's not what I asked. Who do you think did this?

Edward (shrugging): Someone who doesn't like me very much.

Me: That also doesn't answer my question. Can you be more specific?

Pain in my ass: I could.

Me (waiting another annoying minute for him to elaborate): Do you want me to leave?

Edward (looking confused by the question): No.

Me: Who doesn't like you so much that they would set fire to your horse stables?

Edward (desperately looking like he wanted to say landmine): Don't threaten to leave, Isabella.

Me: Stop avoiding the question, Edward.

Giant pain in my ass: You have no car. You can't leave even if you want to.

Me: I'll walk home.

Edward: No, you won't; it's too far.

Me: I'll hitchhike.

Edward (eyes blazing): I would chain you to my bed before I'd let you hitchhike home, Isabella.

Me (face flaming and needing to fan self): Tell me who burnt down the stables or go get your damn chains.

Edward (contemplating his choices carefully but choosing wisely): James Hunter or someone who works for him.

James Hunter. That answer led to a hundred other questions, which were all met with almost the same amount of resistance. After I threatened to leave two more times and had to get up and walk towards the library to leave once, Edward sat with me on one of the loungers in the solarium and answered my questions. He securely wrapped me up in his arms so I couldn't leave, not that I really wanted to. I was sure he was trying to distract me by skimming his nose along the crook of my neck and up towards my ear during his questioning.

Despite his best efforts at distraction, I was able to learn a lot. Edward was surprised I had never Googled him. He said much of what he told me was public knowledge to some extent or at least in the unauthorized biography that was written about him last year. How absurd, right? Whose boyfriend had an unauthorized biography written about him? I was happy to hear the authorized version straight from the man himself.

James and Edward knew each other as children. They both grew up in Chicago. When Edward's parents died (his mother in the fire that burned Alice, his father's death was still a mystery that I decided would not sidetrack us), he and Alice moved to Seattle to live with Carlisle and Esme. James and Edward lost touch but both ended up at MIT together. While at school, Edward had begun developing the program that eventually would become Masen Security. Edward was a freaky genius or something like that. He had a photographic memory and a knack for computers. He was hacking into his school's computers as early as ten years old. Edward ended up dropping out of MIT at twenty-one when he decided he knew more than the professors who were supposed to be teaching him. It didn't hurt that around that

same time, he became in control of his trust fund. He started Masen Corporation and launched Masen Security within a year of quitting school.

James worked with Edward for the first couple years. When Masen Security became a worldwide success, he became somewhat disgruntled. According to Edward, James was being paid fairly for the work he was doing, but it was not the millions and eventually billions of dollars that Edward made as the CEO. Rumors that James was making claims that he had helped create Masen Security and was being screwed over made their way up the ladder.

Edward said James was full of it. James knew Edward was working on something while they were at school, but James was never a part of developing the program. Masen Security was all Edward's. He had spent so many years figuring out how to get around firewalls and steal encrypted information, developing a security program that kept people like him out was easy.

It wasn't long after the rumors of his unhappiness circulated that James was caught embezzling money from the company. Edward didn't press charges but did confront his former friend. James claimed that Edward owed him that money for work he did that Edward refused to acknowledge. James left the company, vowing to bring Edward down. Edward informed James that he was dead to him. That was five years ago.

James, with the help of some partners and probably the money he stole from Edward, began a company called Nomad Industries. It was based out of Chicago for a while but recently relocated to Seattle. At least James had been honest about that much. For the last couple years, it seemed James' only objective was to crush Masen Corporation. Edward first became aware of it when his security caught an employee accessing documents she did not have clearance to view. After some investigating, Edward found out the woman was selling information to Nomad Industries so they could develop the same product and launch it before Masen. The plan was thwarted, and James and Edward had a very public confrontation at a party somewhere in New York. It seemed like there was more to the story, but the main point was that there was a lot of bad blood between these two men. James' appearance at Eclipse and everywhere else I happened to be was no coincidence.

The espionage didn't stop, however. In fact, Edward learned of another corporate spy working on his Denali project. The woman, Irina Katakov, was caught but seriously compromised the project. Hence, Edward's foul mood the last month or so. Denali had been set to launch mid-August but now was not going to be ready for another couple of weeks. It cost Masen Corporation a lot of money but not nearly as much as it could have had Irina's treachery not been discovered.

Besides the trouble James had caused Edward at work, it was believed that he wreaked some havoc in Edward's personal life as well. Edward's house in Aspen was broken into after their big fight in New York. Nothing was stolen, but everything in the house was destroyed. Likewise, he had several cars vandalized, and on two separate occasions, his plane was grounded due to mysteriously malfunctioning parts that Edward's extremely competent and overly cautious pilot had caught before takeoff. That tidbit of information gave me reason to respect Charlotte's son as much as I did his mother. A couple years ago, Edward was run off the road and luckily was not hurt when his car flipped. This was why Brady pretty much drove him everywhere, and he kept Tyler with him at all times. No one has gotten that close to him again, but there have been times security was sure Edward was being followed.

Edward believed that the fire was James' way of proving he could still be anywhere anytime. James was probably still pissed his plans to use me were unsuccessful. Edward said James always retaliated with a personal attack when he'd been beaten business-wise.

Edward tried to explain that until now, he didn't think I was at risk. Our relationship had intentionally not been made public. Not wanting to take any chances, however, when he was out of town he thought it was a good idea to have someone keep an eye on me, from a distance. The security he put in place recognized James and was going to report the contact but, in the end, made a judgment call not to. The recent troubles with Irina had everyone on high alert, looking for other people who might be compromised. So, thinking that perhaps I was in on it, the security guard switched from protection detail to surveillance. His final report to Edward led to the disastrous confrontation a couple weeks ago.

Everything Edward told me, quite frankly, scared the hell out me. I never imagined being in danger because of who I dated, and I certainly didn't like the thought of someone trying to kill the man I was in love with. I also couldn't deny that it still hurt a little bit that Edward believed I had been in cahoots with the person who wanted him dead. I understood that he had his reasons for being mistrustful, but it seemed like he should have given me the benefit of the doubt, considering how open I had been with him and how easily he could have checked my side of the story. Trust was a big issue. I needed it and he had a hard time giving it.

I had him make Brady drive me home that night, needing to clear my head, not to mention take a shower and change into clean clothes. Edward came along and walked me up to my apartment. He kissed me goodbye like I was going away forever. I could tell he wanted to argue about not getting to spend the night with me, but he knew better than to push me after all we had been through.

He promised to give me some space but lasted all of about twelve hours before showing up at my door, giving me those puppy dog eyes and begging for a lunch date. I accepted; but before we left, I did express some of the concerns that still lingered after a good night's sleep. If I was going to make him tell me things, I needed to be willing to reciprocate. I could tell my worries became his worries, but I tried to convince myself it was good that they were *our* worries.

One, I was worried about his trust issues. I could not handle another confrontation like the one we had a couple weeks ago. Either he trusted me or he didn't. If he didn't, I needed to walk away. Two, I didn't like the idea of people following me. I wasn't sure if I needed to be protected, but the whole idea of someone watching me when I couldn't see them was very disconcerting. That led to worry number three. Was I in some sort of danger? James never tried to do anything to me, but he was everywhere I was that one week. I hadn't seen him once since Tyler told him to get lost, but I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do if James "accidentally" bumped into me again. I was definitely feeling over my head, and it was making me want to run. The only thing keeping me from bolting was the fact that I was bound to Edward in a way I couldn't even explain to myself, let alone him.

Edward understood my issues about trust and could do nothing but promise to try harder. He also promised not to have anyone follow me, but he was not ruling out the need for me to have some sort of bodyguard, which would eliminate worry number three all together. If I had a guard, James would not get near me. I struggled with the idea of having someone like Tyler escort me everywhere I went. It was completely ridiculous, and it certainly wouldn't be feasible while I was at work. Not to mention, Edward was sure to win over my parents when I had to explain I needed a bodyguard in order to date him. My dad would *love* that.

We spent the day together, eating down by the waterfront and slipping into the aquarium for a couple hours. It was amazing that in spite of everything that had happened, we could still be two people on a date, looking at marine animals, and cracking whale jokes. I made him take me home at the end of the date. The goodbye kiss was still a little desperate. He still seemed afraid I was going to run for the hills the second I was out of his sight.

It wasn't easy to reassure him. We had dinner together every night this week, but I did not stay overnight to his growing dismay. We kissed and cuddled on the couch at his condo, but I needed to stay on the wagon and stick to my 12-step program until I was sure I was going to see this through. The hills were very tempting.

Rosalie, like everyone in Seattle, had heard about what happened at Edward's the week before. She didn't seem surprised that I wanted to work the private dining

room on my last day. I had made the paper. The reporters and their big cameras were all waiting outside the hospital when Edward was released. They blinded me with their flashes and the video camera lights that seemed capable of casting light on an entire freaking football field. Mr. Masen, they reported, left the hospital with his "female companion". That's what I was known as now, his gender-specific companion. What the hell did that even mean? Were we taking a trip together? Another thing to add to the long list of ridiculousness.

I waited up front with Angela, waiting for Edward on purpose this time. Tyler opened the door for Edward and Alec when they arrived. It was just the two of them today, just like the first time. It seemed fitting.

"Isabella," Edward said with a smile. This week, he made my heart melt when he said my name. He kissed my cheek but held me a little bit longer than socially appropriate.

"Feeling hungry?" I asked, leading them back to the room.

Alec patted Edward on the back. "He's either very hungry or very anxious to see you, Isabella. The man paced in front of my desk for a good half hour before our reservation, asking me repeatedly if it was time to go."

"Good one, Alec. I'll remember that at bonus time," Edward shot back. When I turned my head, I could see he was smiling.

He missed me.

"I can't imagine what we'll do without you on Fridays," Alec said as we entered the private room.

Before I could say anything, Edward took my hand and answered for me. "She'll have to join us as a customer. She's only going to be working part-time. She'll be able to have lunch with me every day."

I pulled my hand away and handed him his menu by smacking it against his chest. He was going to be the death of me.

"I plan on making myself as useful as possible at work, so they'll give me a full-time position. I won't be running off after my last class to have lunch," I replied. "Students have free periods throughout the day, and I'd like to help after school."

"Oh my, a workaholic. Just like someone else I know..." Alec chuckled as he took

his seat.

Edward scowled at him, taking his seat. "Then you'll join us on Fridays only. You can let the children fend for themselves one day a week. No one wants to meet with a teacher on Friday anyway."

"Did you have teachers who looked like Isabella when you were in school?" Alec laughed again.

Edward wasn't laughing, which made me laugh. I walked behind him and put my hand on his shoulder.

"I would love to come to lunch with you on Fridays, gentlemen." I gave Edward a little squeeze. "Stop with the frowning. It reminds me too much of our first lunch together."

"The look I'll never forget is the one that was on his face when you left his office that day." Alec shook his head, snickering softly.

Edward glared at him. "You want me to fire you, don't you?"

Alec raised his hands up in surrender. "I'm done. I apologize." He turned his attention to me. "Edward didn't say which school you're going to be working at, Isabella."

"University Prep, here in the city. It's a private high school."

His face lit up, and he looked at Edward sitting in front of me. "University Prep? Your-" He stopped and his face changed from animated to startled.

I stepped around the table so I could see Edward's face.

"Your what?" I looked back and forth between the two men.

"You're going to love it there, I bet," Alec said nervously. "I've heard good things." He was suddenly very interested in getting his napkin situated on his lap.

I stared at Edward, who was trying to appear like he wasn't part of this conversation at all.

"What?" I challenged him.

Edward looked up at me with his innocent eyes. "What? I said nothing. I'm very proud of you. You're going to do very well there. It's a fantastic school, and you are a fantastic teacher, I'm sure."

I continued to stare him down, but he was immune to my non-existent mind control. I dropped it and took their orders. I had one table on the main floor to go check on, but when I returned to the private room, all I heard was Edward's fist hitting the table and him saying, "Drop it."

"Everything all right?" I set down their drinks.

"Fine." Edward smiled up at me. "Now that you're back."

Something was up with him. Alec smiled, but it looked a little forced. Maybe Alec had just pushed Edward a little harder than he should have today. I had seen Alec joke with Edward before, but I knew Mr. Masen could only handle so much ribbing.

I met Alec coming down the stairs as I went up with their food.

"I hope you're not really in trouble," I said, stopping his descent.

Alec smiled genuinely and shook his head. "I need to remember who I'm talking to sometimes. I consider Edward one of my dearest friends, but he is first and foremost my boss."

I nodded.

"As his friend, I will tell you that he likes you so very much, Isabella. Everything he does, he does because he cares for you."

I nodded again, not sure why he was telling me that. He continued down the stairs, and I went up to see the man who apparently liked me very much.

I set the food down, and Edward grabbed my hand. He pushed his chair back and pulled me into his lap. "I'm glad you got the job you want, but I am going to miss seeing you during lunch once a week."

I slipped my fingers in between his. "I said I will come to lunch with you on Fridays if that'll make you happy."

"What will make me happy is being with you all the time." His lips connected with my cheek and then my mouth. His kisses started off soft, but then his tongue pushed

its way in. Immediately, my body began to react. I felt warm all over, and the desire to straddle him right there was strong. I had to remember that Alec wasn't going to be gone forever.

"Edward," I moaned into his mouth as he kept up his assault.

He pulled on my bottom lip with his teeth and then kissed me one more time. "Stay with me tonight. I *need* you to stay with me tonight. I need to know *now* that you will stay with me tonight."

I closed my eyes, knowing that I couldn't look into his and answer rationally.

"I've been so good this week. You have to admit that I have been very good." He buried his head in my chest and sounded like a little boy trying to convince his parents to let him have a sleepover.

I ran my fingers through his hair. He had too much cut off when he got it cut last week. I liked when I could really grab it in the back. I hugged his head.

"You have been very good all week long. You can be very patient when you try hard enough."

"I can't be patient much longer," he murmured, tilting his head up and pressing his lips to my neck.

"Sometimes you are such a baby."

He dropped his head again. "My hand is getting tired of being my cock's best friend, Isabella. I'm going to have calluses soon. What self-respecting CEO had calluses? People might think I perform manual labor," he mumbled into my chest.

I giggled. "We wouldn't want people to think *that*," I said sarcastically. "Soft hands are a must in your line of work, I'm sure. I don't know what you're using as a lubricant, but a nice lotion should solve all your problems."

His head shot up, and he looked absolutely lethal. "Stop teasing me. I will take you right here and make you scream so loudly, Alec won't dare walk in."

My breathing hitched. He grabbed my face and kissed me hard and demandingly. His tongue pushed its way in my mouth again and rolled around mine. I pulled back, needing to stop before Alec really did walk in on us.

I pinched Edward's cheek playfully. "There's the bad boy I know and love."

"You love the bad boy, huh?" He smiled crookedly. "Here I've been trying to be good and sleeping alone, and you're all about getting in bed with the bad boy."

I laughed and tried to get off his lap, but he held me in place. His expression was serious as a heart attack.

"Spend the night with me. Don't make me take you home." His eyes were mesmerizing in their need.

"Fine," I relented, kissing him before jumping up. "But for the record, I love the good boy, too."

Edward smiled and pulled his seat back up to the table. It wasn't a complete declaration of my feelings. I knew I shouldn't be saying it until I was sure I was going to be able to stay in this relationship. The thought of walking away after everything that had happened in the last week made me sick, but I was scared - scared of him, scared of his secrets, scared of the people that wanted to hurt him. There was a good man in there. There was a good man, who wanted me to love him. There was also a lot of screwed up jerk in there, too. That was the part that could mess everything up.

Jasper spent the week at Alice's, who was not coping with last week's tragedy very well. He said she hadn't slept much. Whenever she did, she woke screaming from nightmares. He was struggling with what to do but finally called Carlisle, who prescribed a sedative for her to take at night. Jasper texted me this morning that she actually got six solid hours of sleep last night.

I was surprised to find them both sitting on the couch when I got home from running some errands after work. Edward had tried, with my prompting, to call his sister a couple times this week, but she refused to talk to him. I hoped she wouldn't stay mad at him forever, but I didn't know her well enough to know what she would do.

"Hi guys," I said sheepishly as I closed the door behind me. I didn't know why I felt guilty, but knowing that Alice was having such a hard time made it impossible not to.

"Hey, Bells." Jasper jumped up to greet me with a hug. He looked tired and in

need of a hug himself. I squeezed him back as hard as I could. We exchanged a look when we let go. I could tell there was a reason they were here at this time of day.

I decided to tackle it head on. "So, what are you guys doing here?"

Jasper sat back down next to Alice and rubbed her back gently.

"Did you tell him to call me, or did he do it on his own?" she asked, avoiding eye contact until the end of the question.

I slipped my messenger bag off and dropped it by the door. I was such a bad liar, I didn't even try. "I told him he should, but you know Edward, he doesn't do anything anyone tells him to do unless he wants to do it."

Alice huffed and rolled her eyes. I hoped that meant she agreed and thought it was nice of him to call.

I took a chance that she was feeling forgiving. "You should call him back. He'd love to hear from you."

"My brother doesn't love anything, Bella. The sooner you learn that the better," she snapped, taking me by complete surprise. Was this the same woman, who a week ago was bending over backwards to make sure I didn't spend any time with Riley because of the *possibility* I represented to Edward?

I pulled my hair out of its ponytail and shook it free. I plopped myself down on the oversized chair near them. His potential inability to love already made my heart heavy. I didn't want to believe it. He loved. It wasn't something he could control. It scared him to death, and he denied it all the time, but I believed he loved. I combed my fingers through my hair.

"I get why you were mad at him."

"Were?"

"Are," I clarified. "He was trying to save the horses. The fire marshal was all the way on the other side of the property. All of the horses could have died."

Alice looked at me in horror. "*He* could have died. Do you have any idea how lucky he is that we're not all standing around his grave right now? Do you? I put two people I love in the ground, Bella. I have no desire to do it again anytime soon."

"I know it was stupid. I'm not defending him; I'm just trying to explain. He couldn't bear it if they died that way. It kills him that he lost one."

Alice shook her head and closed her eyes. She was still so angry. "He doesn't care about anything."

"Alice, that's not true."

"It is!" Her eyes shot open. "If he cared about me or Esme or Carlisle or you even, he would never have run in there like that. I'm sure he hasn't told you anything about her, but our mother died in the fire that burned me. She ran back in, and she never came out. That moment changed my life forever. It changed Edward, too, and not in a way I would wish on anyone. Her decision destroyed our family. Then when my dad-" She stopped and let her head fall into her hands. Her long pause made me want to scream. There were so many damn secrets in this family.

"Edward will never be right. He'll always be broken. He walled up his heart and let it die, and there is nothing we can do to change that. I thought...I thought maybe you were getting through, but for him to run into that fire with me there - he knew I was there, and he ran in anyway," she said, choking back tears.

My heart broke for her. Jasper looked at me while trying his best to comfort her. I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. Edward had a ten-foot thick wall made out of titanium around his heart. I wasn't an idiot. He had a heart. It was in there, and he was trying to tear the walls down a little. I certainly wasn't going to be able to do it alone. I needed Alice and the other people who loved him to not give up on him.

"He's trying. He's trying to let me in."

Her head snapped up. "Really? How? What has he even told you?" she questioned harshly.

"Well, I figured out what happened to your mom, and he told me how you guys had to move here after your dad died."

"Did he tell you how our dad died?"

I sat back in the chair, feeling on the defensive all the sudden. "No, but that wasn't really what we were talking about."

"No, of course not. Did he tell you what our dad did to him?"

I felt my whole body tense. What the hell did their dad do to him? I wasn't sure I wanted to know based on the look on Alice's face.

"He didn't tell you anything, did he?"

"We've been talking about James Hunter and-"

"James? Oh, Bella. James Hunter is the fucking tip of Edward's iceberg." She wiped her eyes and stood up. "You can stop pestering him to call me. Eventually, I will talk to him, and he'll give me his excuses. He won't apologize because my brother *never* apologizes. I'll find a way to sleep through the night again without seeing him burning to death, and everything will go back to the way it was. He'll give me money when I ask for it because that's what he does. He gives me his money and hopes that will make up for the fact that he can barely stand to look at me or that he'll never be able to tell me he loves me."

She walked to the door, causing Jasper to jump up.

"Where are you going?" He followed her out.

I let my head fall back against the chair. What the hell was going on? How was it possible for this situation to get more screwed up?

Jasper came back in the apartment to grab his keys and say goodbye. They were going to Carlisle and Esme's for dinner, and Alice wanted to help Esme get ready. I decided to take a shower and try to forget about things for a little bit. It didn't really work. My head was whirling with horrible guesses as to what Edward's dad could have done to him or how his dad could have died. I couldn't decide if I should ask him about it or not. It would change the whole evening, I was sure of that.

Edward knocked on my door at six. I was still getting ready, so I had him come in and wait. I decided not to bring his dad up tonight, but Alice was another story.

"Your sister was here when I got home," I said from my bedroom.

"Should I be concerned?" he asked, coming down the hallway and leaning against the doorframe of my open door.

I finished putting in the earrings he gave me and turned to face him. "She's still pretty mad at you."

He took a deep breath and looked down at the floor, shifting his weight off the

doorframe. "She'll get over it. Alice is used to me disappointing her."

"Your sister thinks you don't care about her. I know that's not true, but she thinks you ran into the stables because you don't care about her," I explained, moving towards him.

He blew out another long breath and pulled me against him.

"I don't want to talk about my sister, Isabella."

Touching him made it harder to fight about not wanting to talk to me. Touching him made me want to forget dinner, forget Alice, forget James, forget everything. Edward picked up on my need, and his lips found mine. He pushed me back into the room and held me tighter. My hands ran up the lapel of his jacket and around his neck. I let my fingers dig into the hair on the back of his head. Forgetting was going to be so much easier than anything else we could possibly do tonight.

I let go of his hair and slipped my hands under his jacket, pushing it off his shoulders. He stopped kissing and looked at me, checking to see if I was doing what he thought I was doing. I stopped undressing him to lift my own shirt off. Edward groaned softly and let his suit jacket fall to the floor as well. His hand went to my neck and roamed across my chest, up to my bare shoulder. He kissed the opposite shoulder and planted another in the crook of my neck.

I started to work on loosening his tie. He took over and got himself naked while I did the same. I slipped out of the skirt I was wearing, revealing the garter belt and stockings he had bought me. Again, Edward moaned in anticipation.

"You are so beautiful. I missed seeing you like this. So perfect. So incredible." He started kissing me again as I unhooked my bra and let it fall to the floor with the rest of our clothes.

He lowered me onto the bed and climbed on top of me. There was nothing but me and him, his hands on my body, and his tongue in my mouth. It had been too long. We fell into our easy rhythm immediately. We knew exactly what to do, where to touch, how to move against one another. Once he made sure we were protected, he pulled off my panties and slid inside me with one controlled thrust of his hips. Nothing would ever compare to the feeling of having Edward inside me.

We made love slowly and patiently, both of us needing to feel good for as long as possible before the reality of our lives came crashing back down around us. Instead of closing my eyes, I kept them wide open, watching him above me and then below

me. I wanted to see him enjoying me, loving me in the only way he knew how. He seemed to be doing the same thing - watching, paying attention to every detail. When I came, our eyes were locked on one another. A few minutes later, he unravelled as I moved on top of him. He was beautiful when he let go. All our walls were down in those few minutes. Nothing could hurt us.

We lay in my bed, our bodies intertwined. Edward's fingers drifted up and down the line of my spine. My head rested on his chest, and I listened to his heart beating, smiling at the thought that it was proof that there was one in there.

"Brady and Tyler are probably wondering what's taking us so long," Edward said, making no move to get redressed.

"Great. I'm sure when they see us, they'll know exactly what took us so long." Bodyguards and drivers made it impossible to have any real sense of privacy.

Edward chuckled and kissed the top of my head, stroking my hair and holding me tighter. I didn't want to get out of this bed. Here, we could just be Edward and Bella. The second he put on his designer suit, he would be Edward Masen, billionaire CEO with a shitload of issues and someone out to get him.

"I care about my sister," he said quietly.

I shifted so I could see his face. "I know you do."

"I didn't think the place was going to go up that fast."

"I know you didn't."

His jaw tightened. "She's upset because our mother ran back in."

"I know," I whispered, hurting for him but so happy that he was letting me in.

He looked up at me in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"Alice told me."

"What else did my sister tell you?"

Landmine! Landmine! Landmine! I could tell that if I brought up what little she told me about their father, we were going to have an unpleasant evening.

"She wants to hear you say you love her," I said, figuring that was the safest of the topics covered.

Edward closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. He slipped out from under me.

"Edward." I wanted to yank him back in bed and make him forget what we were talking about.

He didn't look at me as he began to get dressed, becoming Edward "I-don't-love-anything" Masen once again.

"Let's get some dinner."

No explosion but no discussion either. If he couldn't say it to his sister, would he ever be able to say it to me? Only time would tell.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

I warned on my blog that Alice wasn't going to be happy with him. We finally get to see some of her emotional scars as well. Lots of other information given in the beginning of this chapter - hope it didn't weigh it down too much.

Thanks to momof4lurvntwisaga because she is just awesome. Thanks to all of you who read. Thanks to everyone who reviews. Thanks to those who have pimped this story out. Thanks to all the new people who have added this to their favorites or signed up for alerts. I used to get excited when 100 people read a chapter of my stories. FaN has over 3000 of you reading a chapter the day it's posted. That blows me away. Seriously, I will do my best to make this story worth it!

My ramblings can be found on the blog. Your theories and ideas can also be discussed on the Twilighted thread. Both links on my profile.

Awesome response to the EPOV - everyone wants more, more, more. I don't plan on re-doing the whole thing in his POV, just fun little bits here and there. => It's still a BPOV story!

Until next Friday...

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Friday, September 3rd at noon

The sun was beating down and causing a light sheen of sweat to cover my entire body. It was noon, the hottest time of the day. Of course, it wasn't noon in Seattle, but I wasn't in Seattle. I had been kidnapped. I was snatched Wednesday morning and carted away with nothing but the clothes on my back.

I used the back of my hand to wipe the perspiration from my forehead. What I wouldn't do for a breeze. It had to be in the upper eighties; it was so hot. It was like he was trying to kill me with this heat. After everything he did to me last night and this morning, I was pretty sure he was trying to kill me. My body was sore and ached in places I didn't know could hurt. I closed my eyes and covered them with my arm, trying to block out the brightness of the sun.

This could not be my life. I was a normal girl from a normal family. This stuff simply did not happen in my world.

Temporarily lost in my thoughts, I was rapidly brought back to reality by a cold spray of water. I screamed out in surprise, only to be greeted by his evil laughter. I opened my eyes to find him standing over me with a wolfish grin.

"You are such a jerk!" I sat up and rubbed the droplets of water into my warm skin. It actually felt kind of nice now that the initial shock had worn off.

"Be careful who you call names, Isabella. I might just toss you in the ocean if you keep that up."

"You don't scare me," I said defiantly.

Who was I kidding? I was defenseless. I was completely at his mercy, and he knew it.

"Really? Well, let's see what I can do about that." He accepted the challenge that I didn't intend to offer, lifting me up and carrying me towards the water.

I wriggled in his arms. "Don't! Put me down! Please! Don't throw me in there. I'm

sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Please-" Before I could finish my plea, I was tossed into the saltwater. I set my feet down in the sand and stood up, wiping the water from my eyes.

He was laughing hysterically. I must have looked like a drowned rat.

"I hate you." I was seething.

He laughed harder and took a couple steps towards me. I put up my hand to keep him away, but he kept coming, grabbing my wrists and wrapping both my arms around his waist.

"You don't hate me. You could never hate me," he stated confidently.

His wet nose skimmed the side of my wet nose before his lips pressed gently against my cheek. He pulled back a bit and regarded me with those gorgeous green eyes. Edward looked like some sort of water god. Wearing nothing but his red swim trunks, his body was covered in tiny droplets of water that reflected the sunlight. He almost looked like he was sparkling. His hair was darker when it was wet and stuck up funny from shaking it over me a few minutes ago.

"Fine, I don't hate you, but I strongly dislike you," I replied indignantly.

"You love me. You said so in your sleep this morning." He grabbed my ass playfully with both hands.

Damn him.

I pushed away and tried to make it back to the beach, but he roped his arms around my waist before I got very far. I could kill my stupid subconscious mind and my idiotic mouth for not giving itself a rest when I was unconscious. Edward kissed my neck as he held me against him, my back to his front.

"I'm kidding. You didn't say that in your sleep. I swear." He kissed my shoulder, and I could feel him getting excited. His hardness pressed against my lower back. "You were definitely reliving something we did last night. You were all, 'Right there! Yes! Yes! Harder, harder!'"

I was going to show him harder. I elbowed him in the gut, and he let me go as he burst into another fit of laughter. I walked back up to the beach, grabbed one of our giant beach towels, and began drying myself off. He was absolutely trying to kill me.

I adjusted the tiny scraps of fabric that Edward considered a bathing suit and sat down on the lounge. I might as well be naked for all the good this thing was doing me. Something told me that was the reason he bought it.

Wednesday morning, I was awoken by Edward's mouth doing delicious things to my body. When I made it known that I was awake by dragging my fingernails through his hair, he slid his already condom-covered erection between my legs and made love to me. I wasn't particularly awake enough to thoroughly enjoy our encounter, but he seemed quite satisfied. When he finished, he mumbled something about how I had told him once to never feel bad about waking me up. I didn't remember saying that but quickly realized how his perfect memory could get me in trouble if I wasn't careful.

Instead of letting me go back to sleep, he insisted I get up and shower. Because he was a persistent ass, I did and was ready to go before eight. I had nowhere to go and nothing to do, however. I had the next six days off. I had orientation at University Prep Monday and Tuesday, and classes didn't start until the Tuesday after Labor Day. My only concern for the rest of the week was to put my lesson plans together and work on getting my classroom in better order. I found it curious that Edward, who did have to go to work, wasn't ready but figured certain needs simply took precedent that morning. I couldn't lie; it made me happy to think being with me might have been a higher priority than work.

I sat at the kitchen island, drinking the coffee Charlotte had ready and waiting for us. She had been smiling at me funny as she moved around the kitchen, making Edward breakfast. I should have known something was up. I should have known something was up a couple days before that when he asked me if I had a passport. I knew for a fact something was up when Edward walked into the kitchen, wearing a new pair of button-fly 501s, a white T-shirt, and a light blue dress shirt unbuttoned.

"Okay, what's going on?" I questioned him as he thanked Charlotte for the coffee and sat at the table to eat his French toast.

He looked at me curiously, rolling up his sleeves a bit. "Didn't Charlotte offer you some French toast?"

I slid off the island stool and moved over to the table. I took the seat across from him. "She did, but that's not what I'm talking about. Why are you dressed like that? Don't you have to go to work?"

"I have a long flight ahead of me. I figured I would dress comfortably," he answered nonchalantly before busying himself with his breakfast and the

newspaper.

I tried not to look disappointed, but I was. Another trip, another separation.

"How long will you be gone?"

He took a sip of his coffee. "Until Monday night."

My frustration skyrocketed. Had I known our lovemaking that morning was all I was going to get for almost a week, I would have put a little more effort into it. Since he had known, I was kind of pissed that he only thought to get himself off before he left. My other concern was that Esme and Carlisle had invited us over for a Labor Day lunch. It was also going to be the first time Edward and Alice were going to see each other since the fire. Part of me wondered if he planned this last minute trip to get out of seeing his family.

"Why are you only telling me now? You're leaving on business for almost a week, and you waited until now to tell me?" I complained. If I pulled that kind of crap on him, he would have screamed landmine with smoke shooting out of his ears.

"It's not a business trip," he said, shaking his head. I watched him wave his fork around before stabbing another bite of French toast. "It's a vacation. Well, mostly vacation. A friend is thinking about selling his private island in Fiji. I decided to go check it out, see if it's worth the investment."

He was taking a vacation to a private island in Fiji?

"That's great. Really great. Super." I stood up and pushed my chair in roughly. Frustration transformed into anger in the blink of an eye. Not only did he not tell me, but he was acting like it was no big deal. I stormed out of the room, throwing my final thoughts over my shoulder. "I hope your plane crashes."

Edward grabbed me before I made it to the door. He was laughing and smelled like the fresh strawberries Charlotte had cut up and placed on top of his French toast.

"Now, why would you want to ruin our vacation like that?"

"Our vacation?"

He smirked and let me go. "I'm certainly not going to buy a whole island without making sure you like it, too."

Damn him.

"We leave for the airport in about fifteen minutes," he informed me after checking his watch.

"But I have nothing packed," I argued, feeling totally flummoxed.

"Everything's been taken care of."

"But I have lesson plans to write."

"It's a long flight. You'll have lots of time to do whatever you need to do."

"But we're expected at your aunt and uncle's on Monday."

"I let them know we weren't going to make it."

"But Alice-"

He put his finger on my lips to silence me. "No buts. I bought you what you need, my family will live without us, and I don't want to hear any complaining. I am kidnapping you for the weekend, and that's final."

When Edward said, "...and that's final" - it was usually final.

It was almost a twelve hour flight, and the time difference caused us to lose a whole day. Right now, it was still Thursday afternoon in Seattle. We were in Fiji, staying in some ridiculous two-bedroom house that looked like it was floating over an emerald green lagoon on a Friday at noon. The house was multileveled and had the most breathtaking view of the South Pacific. We had our own beach and complete privacy. There were people on the island to make sure we had food and drink, but I never really saw them. It was like we were on the most luxurious deserted island ever.

Edward fell into the lounge next to me and snatched his sunglasses off the little table in between us. He rubbed his wet head with his hand, trying and failing at taming those tresses.

"You look really sexy when you're all wet and pissed off," he said, sliding his sunglasses on his face.

I wrinkled my nose at him. "Too bad I'm never having sex with you again."

My ability to lie was much improved when I was mad.

"Come on. You looked hot, in both senses of the word. I was doing you a favor. It felt good, didn't it?" He reached over and ran the back of his hand along the side of my thigh, leaving goosebumps.

I hated that he was right; I did feel much cooler than a few minutes ago. I swatted his hand away and refused to look at him, though. "I'm never talking to you again, either."

I picked up the book he bought me for the trip and flipped to where I had left off. Edward chuckled in the seat next to me, amused at my expense. I pretended to read, while in reality, I was pouting. He snatched the book from my hands and tossed it on his now vacant lounge. He hoisted me over his shoulder.

"Stop it! Put me down!" I smacked his ass as I hung upside down over his back.

He started for the house. "There will be no fighting on this trip. You are going to make up with me whether you like it or not."

He took me to one of the three verandas. There were two plush ivory couches, and Edward dumped me on one. Climbing on top of me, he placed his hand behind my neck and pulled my mouth to his. His kiss made me immediately forget what we were fighting about.

"Talking to you and having sex with you are my two favorite things in the entire world. Taking them off the table is unacceptable," he said, pulling back.

"Talking and sex are your favorite things, huh?" I propped myself up in my elbows. He was funny. The sex was believable. Talking was questionable.

He kissed me again. "With you, yes."

I wiggled out from under him and stood up. "Fine, I won't stop talking to you, but you will not have your wicked way with me whenever you want."

Edward sat up and grinned. "Withholding sex is such a typical chick move, Isabella. You usually aren't so predictable. Your nipple's showing by the way." He pointed at my chest.

Damn him.

I promptly covered myself up. "If I had been allowed to pack my own clothes for this trip, I wouldn't be flashing you all the time."

"Exactly," he replied with a wink. He was incorrigible. He got up and came over to me, placing his hands on my waist. "As much as I enjoy being with you without your clothes on, I do want you to know that being with you is the most important thing. It doesn't really matter what we're doing. Even fighting with you is fun... sometimes."

I was disarmed once again. I felt the same way. Although, I did not find the fighting as fun as he might. The rest of it was true. Being with Edward could be fantastic. He was smart and funny. He liked to read almost as much as I did; but unlike me, he had experienced so much more of the world. He could speak firsthand about things and places I had only read or dreamt about.

I rested my forehead against his chest and snaked my arms around his torso. "I like being with you, too," I acknowledged against his sun-kissed skin.

"Does this mean I get to have my wicked way with you now?" He pulled me flush against him. I lifted my head and arched an eyebrow. He kissed me on the cheek and laughed. "Fine. What would you like to do, Miss Swan? You did not seem to be having fun in the sun and getting wet is obviously not your thing. We'll do whatever you want. We could take a boat out. You could teach me to fish."

Truthfully, I could've used the distraction of copulating, but I had been trying to come up with the best possible time to have a serious conversation with him since we arrived in Fiji. It wasn't something we could talk about after sex, however, and having lots and lots of the greatest sex of my life was all we had really done so far. I needed to tell Edward that I was in love with him but make it clear that he did not have to return those feelings. I knew this was a potential landmine. That was the main reason I hadn't broached it yet, except possibly in my sleep. I knew he was not ready to identify love as the feeling he was experiencing, no matter how much his other words and actions pointed in that direction with brightly flashing lights and colorful arrows.

It had taken me all week to come to the conclusion that I should go first. After the reaction, or should I say lack of reaction, I got out of him when I told him his sister wanted to know he loved her, I seriously questioned what my next move should be in this relationship. Part of me thought I should hold back and wait for him to tell me everything and admit his feelings before I put mine out there. That was the safest route, I figured. But another part of me hoped that if I could be honest with him about my feelings, I could help him come to terms with his. It was a risk. It could easily backfire and cause him to freak out. We could be on a plane back to Seattle

before the dust settled. Or he could begin to see that it was okay to love someone. Love didn't have to be a bad thing. It could be the thing that got him through the bad things.

"Let's play chess," I suggested.

He didn't hide his disappointment well. "Really?"

I rolled my eyes and pushed away from him. The room had a little table in the corner with a chess board and two oversized, cushioned stools.

"Come on. I think I'll do better than the last time you played me. I bet I can last longer than five moves."

Edward "the Genius" Masen pretty much kicked my ass every time we played back home. The last time I got him to take me on, he quit after five minutes because he said he tried to not win, but I was so bad that I made it impossible.

We took our seats, and he sighed once more before making his first move. He had tried to teach me a few things, but I didn't get the whole strategy behind the game. I could only think one move at a time. We took turns moving our pieces. When I reached for my rook and started sliding it a few squares over, Edward shook his head, hinting to me that I was making a bad move. I slid the rook back and put my hand on my knight. He shook his head again. I reached for my queen and moved it forward. He didn't do anything, so I took that as a good sign.

"You know what I love about this game?" I asked as he made his move, taking out one of my pawns.

"I truly cannot imagine." His tone was so petulant as he put his elbow on the table and propped his head up on his hand.

I tried to fight a smile. How quickly the tables had turned. I was the crabby one a few minutes ago; and now, in his attempt to cheer me up, he had become so very annoyed. It was kind of cute. This was how I knew my feelings were real. I loved him even when he was being a little cantankerous.

"I love that the queen is the most powerful player on the board. I like that she gets to protect the king. You would think it would be the other way around, seeing as how this game was created a million years ago by men."

Edward sat up and crossed his arms. "Well, actually it's believed that the game

originated in India during the sixth century, not a million years ago. In that version, it was all military-related. There was no queen until the Europeans got their hands on it. The queen replaced the vizier, which is basically a high-ranking government official."

He was spoiling my little metaphor with his extensive knowledge of things I would classify as "Shit No One Should Know".

"Whatever," I said dismissively. "The queen is still the most powerful player in today's version of the game."

"Actually, it's the king who has the power. The king is the most important piece on the board. Everyone else is willing to be captured to keep him alive. When he's captured, the game's over. Trust me, it's very patriarchal."

Seriously, he was ruining my big revelation. "Well, I guess that's true, but in my mind, the queen is cool because she protects him for different reasons than the other guys do."

Edward narrowed his eyes at me. "How's that?"

"She protects him because she loves him. She's his queen. She'd do anything for him because she's working from a place of love and not just loyalty like everyone else. That's what makes her different, special. Love is powerful." I cautiously looked at him for a reaction. I hoped he got where I was going with this.

He frowned. "That's it, no more sun for you."

"What? Why?"

"You're reading into this a bit too much, don't you think?"

It was now or never. There was never going to be a perfect time. I needed to woman up and do this. I slipped off the stool and knelt in front of him. His eyes widened in surprise as I took his hand in mine.

"I need to tell you something, and I don't want you to freak out."

"Too late, Isabella." He shifted in his seat, looking very uncomfortable.

"Well, try not to. I know this might be stepping on a landmine, but I need to tell you something. I need you to hear me out and understand that I am not asking you

for anything. Can you do that?"

He swallowed hard and nodded.

"I love you." I paused to give him a moment to process those three words. His eyes darkened a little, and I could see his jaw tense. "Please listen, I know it's not an emotion that you're particularly comfortable with, and I am not asking you for anything in return. I'm not telling you so you'll say it back or because I want anything to change between us. I'm telling you because it's how I feel."

Edward stared at me with that look. *Landmine. Big, blow-both-of-us-to-bits landmine.* He was breathing harder than he was a few seconds ago.

"Edward, relax. Please."

He pulled his hand out of my grasp and stood up. Stepping around me, he put a distance between us that made my heart ache. He whirled around and shook his head.

"How can you say that and not want something in return?"

"Because I don't." I got up and closed the distance between us. "I'm not going to pretend it's not true because of how you feel. I'm in love with you. I know I am."

"I can't..." he said, shaking his head and stepping back.

I knew he was going to say that. I placed my hands on his chest. His heart was beating fast and furious.

"It's okay. You don't have to. You aren't ready, and that's fine."

"What if I'm never ready?" He ran his hand through his hair. His eyes began darting around, looking for an escape. I grabbed his hand to anchor him to me.

"Never say never," I pleaded, pressing his hand over my heart. He was always so extreme. He *never* apologized, he didn't love *anything*, and love destroyed *everything*. I was still trying to figure out if it was his mother's death or the mysterious thing his father did to him that made him this way. It was probably both, but I still didn't get it.

"This is a gift, Edward. My love is a gift, and I won't let you refuse it. I won't. You complain when I don't want to take the things you give me. This is the only valuable

thing someone like me can give someone like you. You have to accept it."

He pulled his hand away and rubbed his face. Closing his eyes, he effectively cut me off from how he was feeling.

I continued on. "I want to show you that it doesn't have to hurt. It doesn't have to destroy anything. I need to show you that I can protect you from whatever it is that makes you so afraid, whatever hurt you before."

Edward opened his eyes, and I saw it. Fear. Complete and utter fear. He immediately retreated from me, putting as much space between us as possible. He held his arm out as a sign not to come near him.

"Don't try to protect me, Isabella. Do you hear me?" He pointed a finger at me as his face flushed red. "You are not my queen. There is no reason to risk anything for me. Do you understand?"

His words were biting. *I was not his queen.* I tried not to focus on those words in particular but on the ones that made me think he was afraid for me, not just of me. Unfortunately, he was scaring the hell out of me, and I wasn't hiding it very well. He pulled on his hair with both hands.

"Why do you do this to me?" He winced as if in pain and then took off, leaving me standing on the veranda stunned and alone.

That hadn't gone exactly the way I had hoped. I knew he would say he couldn't say it back. I knew he was going to be uncomfortable. I never thought he would run away.

I looked down at the beach and saw Edward walking along the water, away from the house. I watched him until he disappeared beyond some rocks. I stood on the veranda, looking out, and waiting for him to reappear for at least a half hour. I decided a watched pot never boils, so I headed inside the house. Nothing I did to distract myself from his absence was effective.

I showered and got dressed. Edward had bought and packed me beautiful sarongs to wear with each of the five itty bitty bikinis he picked out for me. He also packed one sarong dress, two sundresses, and two skirts and tops. I had laughed yesterday when I noticed he only packed me three pairs of underwear, and the only bra I had was the one I wore on Thursday. His intentions for this weekend were all too clear. Now, I wondered what the remaining days would hold for us.

I crisscrossed the ends of the sarong dress and tied them around my neck. Standing in front of the vanity mirror, I brushed my wet hair. I wondered if Edward hadn't walked all the way to the small airfield to arrange our immediate departure. I had no idea declaring my feelings would send him this far over the edge. I knew he would struggle a little bit because he was going to worry I wanted to hear it back from him, but I figured once he understood that wasn't why I was saying it, he would be okay.

You are not my queen. His words still stung. He was mad that I had made the comparison. Was he angry that I assumed he wanted me to be? I pulled my hair up and wrapped it in a bun, pinning it in place.

I padded barefoot down to the kitchen. I grabbed a banana off the island and peeled it as I made my way to the veranda to check for Edward. I was just about to take a bite when I noticed him sitting on one of the couches.

I sighed in relief, dropping the banana to my side. "You're back." I didn't approach him even though touching him was all I wanted to do.

Edward was hunched over, his elbows rested on his knees. He looked up at me with sad eyes. He straightened up and patted the spot next to him on the couch. I set the banana down on the coffee table and sat beside him.

"I need to tell you something," he began. I tried to steel myself for what he was going to say, but I could feel the stupid tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. "My mother was one of those women who was born to be a mother." His words quickly put an end to my ridiculous crying. He wasn't here to tell me that we were leaving. He was here to tell me what I hoped were the last of the secrets.

"I'm pretty sure she dreamed about it as a child," he continued. "Esme has told me that when they were little, my mother always wanted to play house and always made Esme be the baby or the sister, which I think still pisses her off sometimes."

He laughed for a second before his face darkened again.

"My father was completely enchanted by her, which was a first supposedly. Edward Masen, Sr. was pretty conceited and typically didn't care much for anyone but himself. My mother saw something in him, however, and for whatever reason chose to spend her life with him. My father would have been happy spending the rest of his life with her and only her, but like I said, my mom wanted to be a mom. She wanted a family. She would have had as many children as humanly possible, according to Esme. She learned fast, though, that my father was not too keen on

sharing her with anyone."

He seemed to be purposely not touching me, so I respected his boundaries even though part of me desperately wanted to wrap my arms around him.

"He could never deny her anything she wanted, so he gave her children but found us to be quite bothersome most of the time. We made noise and messes, and most egregiously, we demanded our mother's attention." He rubbed his hands on his thighs, and I could see the knuckles on his right hand were cut and bleeding.

I didn't mean to interrupt, but I couldn't help myself. "What did you do?" I reached out and took his hand in mine. "We need to clean these cuts."

"It's nothing. I'm fine." He pulled his hand away.

I was relentless. "It's not fine. Come on. You can talk to me while we clean this up." I tugged him off the couch with me, and we walked back into the house. Once in the bathroom, I wet one of the white washcloths while he washed his hands with soap and water.

"You don't have to take care of me."

"I want to take care of you," I asserted, giving him a *don't mess with me* look. I pressed gently on his wounds with the damp cloth.

Edward sighed and avoided eye contact. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. I wanted to know why he was telling me about his mom and dad. I needed him to explain how they had anything to do with why he wouldn't let me love him or accept that maybe he loved me, too.

I leaned against the large stone sink. "So, your dad wasn't a kid person. Did it get better as you got older?"

His face twisted with an emotion I couldn't begin to label.

"Not really. He tolerated us a bit more, I suppose. Once we were old enough, he wanted to send us to boarding school, but Mom wouldn't hear of it. He worked a lot and wasn't really involved. She tried to find a balance, a way to keep him and herself happy, but it was a difficult task, seeing as how her desires directly interfered with his and vice versa."

"That must have been really hard on her, to constantly feel like she had to choose

between her husband and her children." I began to wrap a clean, dry hand towel around his hand. "We should ice your hand."

"That's the last time I pick a fight with a rock wall," he said with a half-smile.

I placed a hand on his cheek, and he leaned into my touch.

"What's going on, Edward? Why did you run away? Why did you punch a rock wall? Why are you telling me about your mom and dad? I'm trying to figure out how this is all connected, but I can't."

Edward hung his head like a reprimanded child. My intent was not to come off frustrated with him. My need to get this all out in the open once and for all was at an all time high.

"The night of the fire," he began, taking a step back from me and breaking our connection. "I was grounded because my mother had to cancel lunch with my father to come to the school to deal with an issue. I had hacked into the computer system and changed all the home phone numbers in the student records. There was no way they had any proof it was me, but because of my talents, they blamed me anyway. It was such bullshit that they punished me without any solid evidence."

His eyes lifted to mine, and I gave him a small smile, encouraging him to go on. Only Edward would think it was unfair to be punished for something he did only because they hadn't caught him red-handed.

"Of course, my father was more pissed that I had made my mother miss their lunch date than he was that I hacked into the school's computer system. I couldn't have cared less what my father was pissed off about. He was always pissed off, and his punishments were a joke. I decided I was going out, whether he wanted me to or not. It really wasn't that hard to sneak out. My mom was good about giving me my privacy, and as long as I was out of sight, I was out of mind for dear old Dad."

I was starting to see where he was headed with this. "So you weren't home when the fire started?"

He shook his head. "When I got home, the fire was out, and Alice was already on her way to the hospital."

"Thank God you weren't there." I was relieved that he hadn't witnessed any of it.

Edward's whole body tensed at my words as he threw the hand towel on the

ground. "How can you say that?" he shouted. "Don't you understand? I killed her, Isabella. I am the reason my mother is dead!"

"But you weren't even there."

His hand raked through his hair as he paced in front of me. "No, but I was supposed to be. She ran back in. She ran back in to get *me*. My father tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. My mom loved her children more than anything. Alice was hurt so badly, and she thought I was still inside. She ran into a burning house to save someone who wasn't there. She died, and it was entirely my fault."

"Oh, Edward." I sighed sadly. Certainly everyone had told him it wasn't his fault, and yet he carried this horrible guilt all this time. I tried to stop his furious pacing, standing in his way and placing a hand on his chest. "It wasn't your fault. No one could possibly blame you."

His eyes glowed with emotion. "Trust me, I was blamed. My father blamed me. He didn't go to the hospital with Alice. He didn't care about what happened to her," he spat. "He waited at the house for them to bring my mother's body out. You can imagine his surprise when I came up beside him, asking what the hell happened."

I didn't think it was possible to dislike Edward and Alice's father more, but he was making it very easy.

"He attempted to beat the shit out of me until the firefighters pulled him off. He didn't speak to me or even acknowledge my existence again until the afternoon he-" Edward stopped and squeezed his eyes shut. He backed away from me until he reached the wall. He pressed the heels of his hands against his forehead.

I officially loathed the elder Edward Masen. I went to my Edward, needing to put my arms around him.

"Until he what?"

He let his arms fall around me and shook his head. "It doesn't matter. The reason I'm telling you any of this is because I want you to understand that I'm not worth protecting, Isabella. I got my mother killed." He cradled my face in his hands, looking me in the eye. "My mother was like you - sweet, loving, compassionate. She should be alive, making this world a better place. It's only because she foolishly put me and my well-being above her own that she's not. I will not allow that to happen to you. Do you understand that? No one can save me. You shouldn't try."

Love destroys everything. Edward thought that his mother died because she loved him. Everything was beginning to make so much more sense. The reasons why he was so against having emotional attachments were clear. He didn't want to care about someone and be hurt by them, but he also didn't want anyone to care about him and get hurt *because* of him.

I put my hands on his. "Baby, your mom isn't dead because of you. She's dead because she didn't wait for the firemen. Yes, she loved you, but she must have thought she was invincible if she believed she could run into a burning house and come out alive." This was the best argument I could come up with.

I wished I could go back in time and shake Elizabeth Masen. I was glad she wanted to save him. I would have wanted to save him, but she was reckless. That recklessness cost them everything. Edward was saddled with this guilt with which no child should be burdened.

"If I had stayed home, she'd still be here."

"If you had stayed home, you could have died. You could have been burned. She could have died anyway. Who knows what would have happened."

He shook his head and let go of my face. "I would have gotten out. I would have been fine."

"You don't know that," I challenged. "It doesn't matter, though, because a million different things could have changed the outcome. You were one part of a giant chain of events that led to what happened that night. It wasn't your fault."

Both of his hands pulled at his hair again.

"I'm not going to do anything stupid because I love you," I said, refusing to give up. "We're back to trust. You have to trust me. I don't have a death wish, but I will fight for you. You are worth fighting for. You are worth loving."

Edward eyes searched mine, trying to find some flicker of doubt, some shred of untruth, but he found none. His hands were back on my face, and he kissed me hard. It took me by surprise and almost pulled me off balance. I held onto his shoulders and then wrapping myself around him completely. He lifted me up and carried me out of the bathroom. We didn't have to go very far. He brought me to the bedroom and set me on top of the humongous four poster king-size bed that was ours for the weekend.

His need for me, to be connected to me, was radiating from his very being. Edward's hands went up my dress, and before I could lift myself up so he could remove my panties, he ripped them off me. He shed himself of his swim trunks and was on top of me in an instant. His mouth assaulted mine. His hands seemed to be trying to touch every part of me they could reach.

Edward pushed my dress up and then plunged himself into me. No condom, no protection. The idea that nothing was separating us made the sex even more intense, but I needed to show him that I wasn't reckless. I pushed on his shoulders, trying to get his attention. He was slamming into me with such determination, I wasn't sure I would be able to get him to stop before he came inside me.

I turned my head. "Edward," I managed to say while catching my breath. "Stop. We need to use protection."

God, he felt so good. I was asking him to stop, but my legs were still wrapped around his waist, holding him in place. His movements slowed and then stopped.

"You have to let go of me," he whispered. He tugged on one of my legs, and I released him. He pulled out of me and rolled on his back, covering his face with his hands. He made no move to the nightstand and our enormous stash of condoms.

I sat up and pulled the pins out of my hair, letting it fall down over my shoulders. Edward didn't move, so I got up and grabbed a condom. I untied my dress and let it fall to the floor before ripping open the wrapper.

"Don't, Isabella," Edward said from under his hands. He was mad at himself for almost doing this unprotected. He was feeling out of control, and I knew it was killing him.

He needed to let it go. He needed to stop being so damn afraid. He needed to stop trying so hard to rise above being human, to never err. He was just a man. A man who made mistakes but tried to correct them. A man who was learning it was okay to say he was sorry. A man who was trying to trust someone for the first time in his life. A perfectly imperfect man. The man I loved.

"I love you, Edward," I said surely as I gripped him and rolled the condom down. He groaned like I was torturing him.

"I love you," I repeated. I straddled him and tried to pry his hands from his face. "I love you."

He dropped his hands but kept his eyes shut. I peppered his face with little kisses.

"I love you," I whispered into his ear. My lips enveloped his earlobe, and I pulled on it gently with my teeth. I kissed down his tense jaw and placed one more on his lips before sitting up.

Reaching down, I guided him back inside me. "I love you, and it's going to be all right."

Edward's eyes opened at those words. He was always so sure of himself, overconfident really. He knew what he wanted and took it when the opportunity presented itself. Hell, sometimes he took things even when they weren't for the taking. Now, this trepidation was all I saw. He was so afraid of what would get destroyed, he never considered what wonderful things could come from us being in love with one another.

"We aren't your parents. We're different. I'm different, you said so yourself. I love you." I moved up and down him. He struggled to focus on both my words and what I was doing to his body.

Edward sat up and wrapped his arms around me, smashing his body against mine. With his cheek pressed to my chest, he implored me, "Promise me. Promise me it will be okay."

I rubbed his bronze hair with both hands and then made him tilt his head up. "I promise," I said solemnly. I dipped my head to kiss his lips.

He seemed to need a few seconds to think about it. Finally, one side of his mouth shot up, creating that crooked grin I adored. "You know, if I had a nickel for every time someone made me a promise and then didn't follow through..."

I let out a gufaw. "Well, you have all my nickels, Mr. Masen. I guess I'll have to make sure I keep my promise."

He wanted to believe me. I could see it in his eyes. Without notice, he flipped us over so he was on top of me. He pinned my arms above my head with one of his hands and kissed my neck, nipping lightly as he moved down to my shoulder. With his other hand, he hitched my leg over his hip, allowing him better access to me. I thought he might resume his fast and frantic pace, but instead, he pushed in and pulled out of me with slow, controlled thrusts. He made love to me even though he couldn't say the words yet.

We lay tangled in one another, tired from the emotional and physical release. Edward's fingers danced across my skin as I began to drift to sleep. Before I was completely gone, I heard him whisper two words that made my heart soar.

"My queen."

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

I would give anything for my hubby to be able to whisk me away to a private island in Fiji. Why do we have to be middle class nobodies? I wrote this chapter after all the Breaking Dawn pics from they honeymoon came out. They were quite inspiring as you can see! The island in this story is based on a real one owned by the guy who owns Red Bull. Pics on my blog!

Thanks to momof4lultwisaga for her undying support and help in keeping this thing on track. Thanks to all of you. I am trying my best to respond to reviews. If I didn't get to yours, I apologize. I read them all and I appreciate them all but sometimes I lose track of what I did and didn't respond to!

Everybody wants to know what Edward's dad did to him. Sorry, that's a doozy he isn't ready to deal with yet. We know Momma Masen ran in to save Edward - so I gave you something! This weekend away is a huge step in their relationship. She is going to feel much more confident about her place in his life now and he is ready to really present her to the world as his. You'll have to come back to see what that means for them!

In other news, I was nominated in the Walk of Fame Awards as a Rising Starlet. Thanks to whoever nominated me! These awards are hosted by The Twinklins. You can go here: www.thetwinklins.com to vote for your favorite story, author, and whatever they got going on over there! Voting starts Jan. 15th.

Lastly, send me some love or tell me where you'd like to go on your dream vacation! Fiji is looking pretty nice to me!

Chapter 13

Chapter 13

Friday, September 10th at noon

I was late. I was really, really late. I knew I shouldn't have promised to have lunch with him this Friday. I was so worried about making a good impression, it didn't take much for me to get caught up doing something for another teacher when I should have been in my truck and on my way to Eclipse.

I was trying to be nice, though. Most of the teachers at University Prep had been very welcoming. Some, however, had not. There seemed to be a few who disliked me before they even met me. I couldn't figure out why. Instead of worrying about why, I decided to do everything I could to change their opinion. Since I only taught three classes, I offered to make copies, grab supplies, whatever people needed. Jane Nelson, who I decided deserved to be called Jane the Pain, took full advantage, even though I don't think I was winning her over very much for all my efforts.

"Here's the only extra box of dry erase markers in all black I could find. They have lots of boxes of multi-colored ones."

"If I wanted multi-colored ones, I wouldn't have asked for all black. Now, would I?"

And I thought I would never miss Rosalie. Jane made working for Rosalie seem like a walk in the park. Jane wasn't my boss, but she was the head of the English Department. I'm not sure why she hated me, but from the moment I stepped into the building on Tuesday, I got the distinct feeling she was not advised on my hiring. Aro made me feel very welcome, almost overdoing it. He reminded me several times that contractually I did not have to stay the whole day and made it clear that I was welcome to leave for lunch, even if I wanted to come back later to work with students.

Of course, I had nowhere special to go for lunch all week except for today.

"Have a great weekend, Jane. I'll see you on Monday." I started to leave her classroom, eager to get to lunch.

"Must be nice, being done at noon. Wish I had those kind of connections."

Her comment made no sense. I worked part-time. That had nothing to do with connections. I needed some connections to get me here full-time. I stopped and turned around. "What?"

Jane shook her head and gave me an insincere smile. "Nothing. I'm just rambling. Have a good weekend, Bella." My name rolled off her tongue with such distaste.

I shook it off and headed out of the building. I passed by Ben Cheney, one of the math teachers, who had been very nice to me all week.

He gave me a friendly smile. "You heading out?"

"I am. Have a good weekend, Ben."

"You, too, Bella. I hope your first week went all right. We want you to like it here."

I nodded. "It was great. Trust me, I am so grateful for this job. No one has to worry about me liking it."

"That's good." He lowered his voice. "You have to deal with Jane the Pain, so I wanted to make sure she doesn't scare you away."

"That's really her nickname?" I couldn't help but laugh.

"Well, some of us call her that but not to her face. Please don't tell," he begged.

"Your secret is safe with me," I assured him. "See you on Monday, Ben."

I ran out into the parking lot and jumped in my truck. My phone buzzed, and I started the engine before checking the message that I knew was from my very impatient boyfriend.

12:15 - you are not here. I'm having your truck towed and demolished.

I rolled my eyes and punched in a reply.

Sorry. On my way now. Leave my truck alone, or I'll be dependent on public transportation and always late.

Edward was still a little pissed that I was driving my truck and not the car he bought that was still sitting in his garage. I was not completely against driving it; I was being stubborn. I didn't want to accept it as a gift, but he had certainly bought

it for much more than I could pay him. Not to mention he would only take the money I gave him and find a way to spend it back on me. I was being ridiculous, but it was so hard getting used to having a boyfriend who had more money than I would ever know what to do with.

What does a man have to do to be allowed to care for you?

Poor Edward. I knew I frustrated him with my need for independence. I spent all of last weekend telling him I loved him and wanted to take care of him, but I wasn't very good at letting him do the same in return.

I pulled up in front of Eclipse and handed the keys to the valet. He looked at me funny when he handed me a valet ticket. I was sure no one else who ate at Eclipse drove a car like mine. Maybe driving the new car wasn't a bad idea. I walked in and was immediately greeted by Angela.

"Bella!" She got out from behind the host stand and gave me a big hug.

"Hi, Ang." It had only been a couple weeks since I was here last, but it felt longer.

She released me and took a good look. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm a customer today. Edward and I are having lunch."

"So, it's true. You and Masen. For real?"

"For real." I nodded.

"Well, you look great. You look tan. How did you manage to get a tan while teaching the young minds of Seattle?"

"We went away for Labor Day. I spent some time in the sun." Edward and I enjoyed most of our time in the bedroom, but we were on the beach enough to get some color.

"Where'd you go?"

I knew she was going to ask. I hated that I was so uncomfortable with Edward's wealth. Telling people I went to a private island in Fiji made me cringe.

"I don't want to be rude, but I really need to get upstairs. I am so late. Can we catch up when I'm done?"

"Yeah, sure. He's been here for a while. I didn't realize he was waiting for you."

I headed back to the private room. The thought of him waiting for me made me smile. Edward waited for no one - except me. Tyler, who was posted at the bottom of the stairs, gave me "the look", signaling I was in big trouble. I patted him on the shoulder as I walked past him and up the stairs. I pushed open the door to find Edward ordering our meals.

Well, he kind of waited for me.

He glanced up at me and gave me a sour look. I smiled, knowing he could only stay mad at me for so long. How far we had come. I was no longer intimidated by him, if anything, I knew he was much more scared of me than I was of him.

"If she doesn't like it, she'll just have to starve," he said to Emmett.

"Nice," I interjected as I lifted my messenger bag off.

Edward looked up at me, his lips twitched in his attempt to keep from smiling.

Emmett turned around. "Bells!" It didn't take Emmett very long to cross a room. He gave me a giant bear hug. "He ordered for you, do you want to look at the menu instead?"

"Mr. Masen has excellent taste. I'm sure whatever he ordered for me will be fine, Em. It's good to see you. I miss you guys."

"Back at you, beautiful."

Edward cleared his throat loudly. "If you're finished flirting with my girlfriend, perhaps you could go get us our wine?"

Emmett looked petrified. "Yes, sir. I wasn't...I didn't...I-"

I patted the big guy on the arm. "Don't worry about it. He's mad at me for being late." I turned my attention to Edward. "I apologize, by the way. I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

"You're forgiven, only because you're a sight for sore eyes." He turned his glare on Emmett, who was still standing in the room. "Are you still here?" he snapped.

Emmett made a beeline for the door. I shook my head before leaning over to give

Mr. Crabby-Pants Masen a kiss. I took my seat beside him and grabbed the napkin off the table.

"If you're trying to make me remember all the reasons I'm glad I don't work here anymore, you're doing a good job. Emmett is a good waiter. Be nice."

"I was very nice. I could have Tyler break every bone in his body for touching you, but I won't because I'm *nice*."

Lord help me if he ever had Tyler hurt one of my friends for touching me. "I'm not even going to go there. You have serious issues."

Edward laughed. "Sweetheart, you know more about my issues than anyone. Don't act so surprised."

Emmett returned with our wine. Rosalie joined him, looking a little shocked to see me sitting at the table.

"Bella," she said in an almost a friendly tone - *almost*. "How lovely to see you again." It had to be killing her to treat me kindly.

"It's good to see again, too, Rosalie."

"I just wanted to make sure everything was to your liking thus far, Mr. Masen. We missed you last week."

"Isabella and I went on holiday. I'm surprised your brother didn't tell you."

Rosalie tucked some hair behind her ear. "Jasper must have left that detail out the last time we spoke."

I could tell she so badly wanted to say she has no reason to talk to Jasper about me and my vacation schedule, but she held back to appease Edward. How interesting it was to witness people treat me differently because of him, because of his money and power. I was beginning to see why he was so skeptical of people and their intentions.

"Well, come back when the food is here, and Isabella will give you a proper review. Right now we have nothing to report except that Isabella has been welcomed back with open arms that like to close around her, squeeze her, and hold her tightly."

I really tried to not laugh, but a small snort escaped. I had no reason to fear Rosalie anymore. She had nothing over me, but poor Emmett would suffer if she knew he had his arms around me earlier. I could see Emmett blanch at Edward's comment as he set my glass of wine in front of me. Edward was pushing buttons. Luckily, Rosalie had no clue what he was implying.

"Great. Well, I'll come back and check on things in a little bit. I can't wait to hear what Isabella has to say about things." She smiled brightly and saw herself out with Emmett hot on her heels.

"You have no idea what kind of trouble you could get that poor man in. They're together, you know. Rose and Emmett. Don't start anything."

Edward took a drink from his glass, eyeing me the entire time. He set the glass down and licked his lips slowly. I might have let out a very quiet whimper.

"I have no plans to start anything with the waiter. I promise. I think all the waiting I had to do this afternoon made me a bit cranky. Tell me about your day. Perhaps you can help me understand why you couldn't make it here on time."

I tried hard not to roll my eyes. "I told you I'm sorry for making you wait. I was working."

"Your last class ends at eleven. I believe that gives you more than enough time to drive across town and get here by noon."

"Sometimes I have to do things after the children leave the room, Edward. Teachers do work when children are not present."

He ignored my excuses and moved on. "Are you being treated properly? The staff has been more than welcoming, I assume?"

He acted like I had a position of importance. I was a part-time teacher. It was a far cry from someone who would receive any kind of special treatment.

"Most everyone has been very nice. I told you that the other day."

His eyes narrowed. "Who's not been?"

"Why? Are you going to have Tyler beat them up?"

"Maybe," he said, his mouth curving upward in a real smile.

"Everything is fine. I am very happy to be teaching. The kids are great. They all seem really motivated. I guess when their parents are putting out that kind of money to send them to private school, they better be motivated."

"U. Prep is quick to remove the undesirables." Edward snatched up his wine glass and took another drink.

"How would you know what they do to *undesirables*?"

Edward ran a hand through his hair. "I don't claim to know anything. I assume they don't keep around students who blemish their test scores. Private schools like that have to kick out people who don't make the cut."

I twisted my mouth and looked at him suspiciously. He stared back, daring me to question his thinking. I let it go. He was probably right. University Prep certainly had very high standards. The kids I met so far were amazingly smart. Many were kind of super freaky geniuses, like Edward. The challenge for me was going to be challenging them all year.

Emmett brought us our food, and we ate while we talked about our plans for the weekend. We were supposed to get together with Carlisle and Esme for dinner tomorrow night. I was waiting for Edward to back out, but he still seemed willing.

"At some point this weekend, you will need to go to Bellevue and pick out a dress at Neiman Marcus. I chose a personal shopper to help you, but you'll need to call and set up a time to meet with her." He reached inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a card, setting it between us on the table.

I picked up the card. *Chelsea Kramer, Personal Shopper.*

"Why do I need to do this?"

"Denali launches next Friday. After my press conference Friday morning, there will be a formal event scheduled that evening. Not only will I be unveiling Denali, but I will be presenting you to the public as my girlfriend. There will be a lot of press there, it's a very important night."

I set my fork down. He loved to do this, spring things on me last minute. "You're presenting me to the public next Friday?" I suddenly felt like a dog at the dog show.

"That was the plan," he answered warily.

"How come I'm only finding out about this now?"

"It slipped my mind when we were in Fiji, and the rest of the week has been so busy, I forgot."

"You forgot?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "You can choose not to come. I mean, it's only the launch of next greatest internet security tool since Masen Security. It will become the program every business on the web will proudly proclaim they use so the general public will feel safe and secure about handing over their personal information. But if you and Jasper have a pizza and movie night or something, I'd hate to ask you to cancel."

I cocked my head at him. "I have no other plans. It's just a little bit intimidating to be *presented to the public*. I know you're used to this kind of stuff, but I've never been in the press until I met you."

He smirked that irresistible smirk of his. "What can I say? I'm kind of a big deal."

I smiled and reached a hand under the table, touching his knee. "Oh, I know exactly how much of a big deal you are, Mr. Masen."

He leaned forward and put his hand on mine. "Now see, I'm not certain you fully grasp how big I am. I think I might need to spend all evening showing you."

I pulled my hand back, knowing that if I kept touching him, I was going to get myself in trouble. "I'm looking forward to the lesson."

"So, you'll call Chelsea and set up an appointment to pick out a dress?" He changed the subject quickly. If we weren't careful, we could both get in trouble. There was no one guarding the door today, Tyler was at the bottom of the stairs.

"I will call Chelsea today."

He looked at me in disbelief. "That's it? You're agreeing? You know that I'm also paying for the dress, right?"

"I hope so. I can't afford anything from Neiman Marcus."

"Really?" Edward was completely shocked at how easily I was giving in.

"Really," I said with mocking eyes.

It was time for me to enjoy the benefits of a wealthy boyfriend. Letting him buy me a dress wasn't going to kill me or make me less of an independent woman. It was just going to get me a killer dress from a store I'd never shop at otherwise.

A huge smile spread across Edward's face and made my acquiescence completely worth it. His smile was short lived, however. Tyler came storming into the room, looking extremely uptight. Too uptight.

"He's here," he said to Edward, who tensed immediately.

"Did he see you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you think he knows Isabella is here?"

"I noticed him as he was being led to his table. I heard the hostess say Miss Swan didn't work here any longer but was here as a customer. I didn't think she would divulge the information so easily. I should have stopped her. I apologize, sir." Tyler gave me an apologetic look as well.

"James?" I asked, even though there was no one else it could be. No one else would cause Tyler to be so alarmed.

Edward didn't even bother to answer me. "He must still be following her. I don't think he's here for me. Did he seem surprised to see you?"

"No, sir, but that doesn't mean he knew you'd be here with her."

"Isabella, is there a back exit that leads somewhere Brady can pick us up?"

I tried to think clearly. They were making me so nervous. What did they think James was going to do to us in the middle of a crowded restaurant?

"There's the kitchen door. It exits to the alley. It's where they unload supplies and stuff," I said shakily.

Edward stood up and pulled out his phone. "Have Brady meet us in the alley."

"Yes, sir." Tyler pulled out his phone as well.

I stood up, feeling confused and anxious. "Why are you guys so worked up? What can he possibly do to us here?"

Edward was punching something into his phone. He didn't look up but did answer. "He isn't going to do anything. He's here to deliver a message, I'm sure. He won't be getting anywhere near you, however."

"Brady will be there," Tyler said, slipping his phone back in his pocket. "I'll go secure the area. I'll text you."

"Send the waiter up. I need to settle the bill."

"Edward," I interrupted. I felt like he was stressing out over nothing. I had friends here. Friends who wanted to talk to me. Friends who were going to think it was a little strange that I needed to be whisked out the back door. "So what if he sees me? He can't hurt us here."

"This is not the time to question me, Isabella!" His face was flush and his eyes were a little wild.

Trust was a two-way street. This was one of those times I needed to shut up and trust him. He knew James much better than I did. I might not understand what the threat was, but if Edward felt threatened, I did not need to add to his worry.

Tyler left, and Edward paced around the room, checking his phone every couple seconds.

"I love you," I said. I sat back down since we were going to be here a little bit longer, waiting for Emmett and the bill.

Edward pulled at his hair. My feelings for him only increased his worry about my well-being. "That's not what I need to hear right now."

"Well, it's true, and I'm going to do whatever you say. So stop worrying. Brady will pick us up and everything is going to be fine."

"Where did you park your truck? Someone will have to check it before you can drive it again."

"I used the valet."

"Give me the ticket," he said, coming over to me and holding out his hand.

I grabbed my bag and pulled out the valet ticket. "Maybe we should get rid of it." He shot me a curious look. "The truck," I said, placing the ticket in his waiting hand. "Maybe we should get rid of it. I was going to talk to you about the car you bought me."

"First no argument over the dress, then a promise to do whatever I say, and now you're willing to get rid of your truck. Is this what happens when you feel guilty about making me wait?"

"You aren't the only one who needs to make concessions. I ask things from you and you're trying. I need to reciprocate." I stood up, feeling confident that he'd let me wrap myself up in him.

I slid my arms under his suit coat and around his waist. He put his arms around me and kissed the top of my head.

"When I figure out what I've done to deserve you, I'm going to do it again. Repeatedly."

Emmett entered the room, killing our moment.

"I hope everything was all right. I meant to come up and check again. I thought Rosalie was on her way up."

"Everything was wonderful, Em. We have to get going, but we will be back next week. No worries." I felt bad that he thought our sudden need to leave had something to do with his service. I knew exactly how he felt.

"How much was it?" Edward asked, pulling his money out.

"Um, here." Emmett handed him the bill folder.

Edward impatiently flipped it open and then threw down several hundred dollar bills. Hopefully he tipped Emmett generously.

"You're sure there's nothing else I can get you?"

Edward shook his head, but I answered, "You know, there is one thing. We need to meet Edward's driver out back. Would it be okay if we snuck through the kitchen instead of going out the front door?"

Emmett's brow furrowed. "Sure. I don't see why not. Everything okay? That big

guy of yours is having some kind of standoff with some other guy down there. You need some help?"

Edward pulled out his phone again. James wasn't going to let us get away easily.

"What's happening?" he snapped at Tyler, I assumed. "I'm still waiting for Garrett and Liam to get back to me. Once they finish sweeping outside, I'll have them come in, and we'll have to exit with her surrounded by the four of us. I take it he's not here for me." He paused. "That's what I thought. Tell him it will be a cold day in hell when he gets anywhere near her...of course you did. Thank you, Tyler."

Edward hung up, and Emmett stood frozen in his spot. "What the hell is going on?"

I didn't know how to answer, because I didn't have a clue what was going on. There were guys sweeping the outside. What the hell did that mean? I was going to be escorted out of here by an entourage. When did this become my life?

"We're having an issue with an individual who had taken an unhealthy interest in Isabella due to her involvement with me. It's best if we keep her as far away from him as possible, but it seems he's found her here and doesn't want to leave until he sees her." Edward was speaking calmly, but his eyes were blazing a fiery green. He was a man on the edge. "I've arranged for some more security to help us get her out of here safely."

"Shouldn't we call the police or something? Maybe I should go get Rosalie. She can have the guy removed." Emmett cracked his knuckles. "Hell, I'll be happy to remove him for you, Bells."

"We don't need to cause a bigger scene. He isn't breaking any laws by being here. Let's just wait for the rest of your security guys to come and then go." I was going to do this Edward's way, but I was beginning to think it was so silly that we couldn't just walk past the man. I could ignore him. I was quite capable of ignoring people.

The door opened. Two men who looked vaguely familiar as part of Edward's security team walked in.

"All clear outside, Mr. Masen. He appears to be here alone," a large bearded man said.

"Thank you, Liam. Isabella, let's go. Emmett, perhaps you can lead the way, and be sure the other guests of the restaurant keep out of employee only areas?"

Emmett nodded knowingly. "Not a problem, Mr. Masen."

"Isabella, you will stay as far from James as possible. You need to stay behind Liam and at my side. Garrett will be behind you. Tyler will keep himself firmly planted between James and all of us. I ask you to keep your head down and not make eye contact with him. It will only encourage him. He is going to try to tell you things. I don't know what he's up to, but I know it's not good. I need you to ignore him. Can you do that?"

I nodded, feeling completely overwhelmed. I slung my messenger bag around me and grasped onto the strap tightly.

Edward put his hand on my cheek. "Do not defend me. Do you hear me? He's most likely going to make derogatory comments about me. Give him nothing. Okay?"

I nodded again. My mouth was suddenly dry. Edward kissed me firmly on the lips. He rested his forehead on mine for a few seconds.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. This makes it clear to him how very important you are to me, and that means he's going to stop at nothing to get to you. I can't think of another way to handle this, however." Edward pulled back and took my hand. His uncertainty made my heart clench. Edward always had an answer for things, for him to admit that he was at a loss made me even more nervous.

Edward nodded to Emmett, who opened the door and led the way. I cast my eyes down, focusing only on Emmett. Edward held onto my hand tightly as I pushed some hair behind my ear with the other.

"He emerges from his secret hideaway! How you love your secrets, Edward."

We continued down the stairs without responding to James' provocation.

"Isabella, why in the world would he need all of these grown men to escort you out of a restaurant? You must realize you have no idea what you're getting yourself into with a man like Edward Masen. How would your father, the police officer, feel about his daughter's boyfriend surrounding her with armed guards?"

My head flew up. I did exactly what Edward told me not to do. I made eye contact. He knew who my dad was, I couldn't help but react.

"Charlie wouldn't like that would he?" James said, seizing the moment. "What about your mom in Florida? So far away. Renee would probably beg you to come see

her, hoping she could talk some sense into you."

Edward was squeezing my hand so tightly, my fingers were going to go numb soon. "Keep your head down," he said under his breath.

We reached the bottom of the stairs. Liam and Tyler made a human wall between us and James until we turned away from him and headed towards the kitchen.

"He preys on women like you all the time, Isabella. It's what he does. He has no soul; I can promise you that. You seem like such a good girl. He's going to break you."

It was taking every bit of self-control I possessed not to tell him to shut the hell up. Edward had told me not to defend him, however. So, I bit my lip in an attempt to stay quiet. Emmett stood in the way, telling James he was getting a little too close to an employee-only area.

"Did he tell you about Bree, Isabella? Ask him about Bree Tanner," James shouted over Emmett's head.

Edward let go of my hand and spun around, leaving our little cluster and storming back towards James.

"I swear to God, I will see you dead! Do you hear me? Do you?" Edward pointed his finger in James face.

Tyler followed Edward, quickly getting in between the two men and encouraging Edward to catch back up with me.

I could hear James' taunting laughter as we walked into the kitchen. Garrett and Liam led me to the back door and outside. Brady was waiting with the car door open. I slipped inside. A few seconds later, Edward came out, followed by Tyler. Edward jumped in the backseat with me. Tyler slammed the door shut and got in the passenger seat. Brady took off.

Edward held a clenched fist against his lips. I could see his chest heaving like he had run a mile. He closed his eyes and said nothing as he tried to slow his breathing. I put a hand on his leg.

I wanted to ask who Bree Tanner was, but thought better of it. That was exactly what James wanted. Whoever she was, she made Edward want to kill James. That couldn't be good.

"Miss Swan shouldn't go back to her apartment until someone can check it," Tyler said, from the front seat.

Edward opened his eyes and placed his hand gently on the one I had on his leg. "Take us both to the condo. I'll work from home the rest of the day."

"That's a good idea, sir," Tyler said with a nod.

We drove the rest of the way to Edward's condo in silence. He stroked the back of my hand with his thumb, comforting himself perhaps more than me. I knew James was dangerous, but I had let myself believe he wasn't a danger to me. Edward had been so relaxed the last couple weeks. There had been no new discussions on setting up security for me. I had a sinking feeling that was all about to change.

Liam and Garrett had followed us and escorted us into the building with Tyler. It was awkward riding in the elevator with four of the most intimidating men I'd ever met. Once inside the condo, Edward let go of my hand.

"I need to talk to Tyler. You should call Jasper and ask him to go to Alice's after work. No one should enter your apartment until it's been properly secured."

"And when he asks me what the hell is going on, what should I tell him?"

Edward pushed his hair up in front. "You can tell him whatever you think you need to tell him to get him to comply." I could tell he was feeling nervous about me talking to Jasper. He knew Jasper had strong opinions on our relationship and this was not going to make Jaz happy at all.

Edward and his security team locked themselves in Edward's office. I pulled my phone out of my bag and dialed Jasper. He was going to have a fit.

"Bella, Bella, Bella. What is going on, my friend?"

"It's been an interesting afternoon to say the least. Listen, I need you to stay away from the apartment this evening."

"Why's that? Your billionaire wants to slum it at our place tonight?"

"Not exactly," I said, squeezing my eyes shut. I needed to tell him the truth, but the truth was so unbelievable. "There's some drama."

"Drama? Did he do something again?" I could hear his annoyance with Edward

immediately.

"No, not that kind of drama. Edward and I are fine. There's a...security issue." My explanation sounded weird, even to me.

"A security issue? What the hell does that mean?"

"Somebody who hates Edward is kind of after me or something." Now I really sounded ridiculous. I dropped my head onto my hand.

I could tell Jasper didn't find this the least bit amusing. "What does that mean, *after you*? Why in the world would someone be after you, Bella?"

"I don't really understand it myself. All I can tell you is that there's this guy, James Hunter, who hates Edward. He showed up at Eclipse today, where Edward and I were having lunch. He wanted to talk to me," I lowered my voice, "Edward kind of freaked out. He had extra security show up and escort me out of there. This is the same guy who was following me around a few weeks back. He proved today that he's been stalking me. He knew my dad's name and that he was a police officer. He knew my mom's name and that she lives in Florida. Edward's talking to his security guys right now, but they all agree that no one should go in our apartment until they check it out. Just to be safe. I don't know what they're worried about, but I get the sense we need to do what they say. I'm really sorry, Jaz."

"I wish you were fucking with me right now, but you're not, are you?"

"Not this time. This is for real."

Jasper sighed into the phone. "Bella, you really need to think about what you're doing. Edward's security is kicking us out of our apartment so it can be checked? Checked for what exactly?"

His question caused a huge lump to form in my throat, making it next to impossible to respond. I swallowed it down.

"This is not a normal relationship, Bella. This is crazy. I know you just got back together with him, but maybe that was the wrong decision. Maybe you need to consider that this might be something you need to run away from. Run away from fast."

I shifted in my seat on the black leather sectional and pulled my legs up. I glanced over at the hallway that led to Edward's office, checking to make sure no one was

coming out.

I kept my voice down. "I'm not leaving him, Jaz. I'm in love with him."

"Well, sometimes love isn't enough, Bella. Sometimes you have to think about what's good for you," he said, sounding awfully parental. That was not what I needed to hear right now.

"I'm not leaving him. So, just drop it."

"I can't just drop it. I don't want to fight with you, but you're telling me some psycho has been digging into your life, wants to hurt your boyfriend, and has decided you might be the perfect weapon. I can't pretend that doesn't scare the shit out of me. It should scare the shit out of you, too."

I heard the door of Edward's office open and the three security men walked out. Garrett and Liam walked towards the door, while Tyler stayed in the living room with me. Edward followed behind them.

"I have to go," I said to Jasper. "I'll call you when we get the okay to go back to the apartment."

"You're mad at me, but I'm right. You know I am."

I ended the call as Edward sat beside me. He had taken off his suit coat and loosened his tie. He looked at me warily, like he knew exactly what Jasper had to say about all of this.

"Everything okay?"

I put my hand on his cheek and tried to smile. "Everything's fine. How are you?"

"Liam and Garrett are going to go get your truck and then will meet Tyler over at your apartment. Do you need him to get anything for you while he's there?"

I dropped my hand. The thought of Tyler going through my things was terribly embarrassing.

"Won't I be able to go back there once they've check it out?"

"You will but..." Edward inhaled deeply.

"But what?" I tilted my head. He had to tell me something that I sensed he didn't exactly *want* to tell me.

Edward glanced at Tyler, who immediately left the room.

Oh geez. I'm not going to like this.

"I'm guessing you don't want a guard stationed outside your apartment all the time," he said, throwing an arm behind me along the back of the couch.

My shoulders sagged, answering his question without words.

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable, so I have a compromise." He began to play with my hair, fingering the loose curls that fell down my back. "There is a way we could avoid having to hire someone to watch your apartment." He swallowed hard, avoiding the part I was not going to like.

"Just tell me, Edward."

"If you lived here, no one would have to be posted outside. The security here is excellent, no one would be able to get close to you while you were in the building. It would make things so much easier and ease my mind immensely."

I tensed, unable to hide my hesitancy from him.

"Would it help make you more agreeable if I remind you that you were very late for lunch this afternoon?"

He was killing me. It had been a little over a month since the last time we had this conversation. So much had happened since then - good and bad. The last three weeks had been great. Edward had come so far in letting me into his head and further into his heart. Was I ready to live with him? After everything Jasper pointed out a few minutes ago, I didn't think so.

"Edward," I said with a sigh.

"You say you love me. You say you want to take care of me."

"Edward-"

"This is what I need from you. I need to know you're safe. I need to know that James cannot get anywhere near you." His words were becoming less and less

controlled.

"Well, I need to know why I'm in danger. What's he going to do to me? Hurt me?"

Edward's jaw tightened at the mention of me being hurt. "I don't know," he admitted.

"Why would he risk his career to do something to me?"

"Because he despises me."

"Maybe he just wants to try to scare me away, tell me bad things about you so I'll leave. I'm not going to believe him. I don't understand why it matters. I mean, can't we go get a restraining order?"

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. "It's not that simple. We can get a restraining order, but he can hire other people to do his dirty work."

"What kind of threat is he exactly?"

"I don't know what kind of threat he poses!" Edward dropped his hand and looked at me with those fiery eyes again. "That's what bothers me the most. I don't know what he'll do, but I can guarantee that now that he knows you mean something to me, he will want to take you from me. I will not let that happen," he practically growled.

"Who is Bree Tanner?" I knew it was a risk, but I had to ask.

"Landm-"

"No landmines!" I roared, causing him to flinch. He didn't expect me to shout but my patience was thin. "If you want me to move in with you, there are no more landmines!"

He stared me down for a minute. Perhaps he thought he could intimidate me out of this conversation, but that was not going to happen.

"Fine," he relented. "But can we not talk about her right now?"

"That's not the way this works, Edward. You don't get to throw the fact that I love you in my face as a way to coerce me to live with you, only to shut me out when I ask for something in return. James brought her up on purpose. He wants to scare me

away, but if you tell me who she is, then we move forward because there will be no secret for him to unleash on me someday." Edward didn't appear swayed by my argument. "I can't give myself away to someone who's only willing to give me a tiny piece of himself back."

"Damn it, Isabella," he snapped. "You lulled me into thinking you were going to be much less difficult today, and now we're right back to where we always are!"

"I am not being difficult! I'm being cautious. You wanted me to put myself first. Well, that's what I'm doing, looking out for my well-being over yours."

Edward rubbed his chin, eyeing me carefully. "You're going to throw my words back at me? Well, two can play that game. All you do is talk about trust. Yet, when I need you to trust me, I get a million questions. It's not fair."

"Well, I'm sorry that you have a shitload of skeletons in the closet! Anytime you want to know about me and my skeletons, feel free to ask, but I don't have any. I don't have secrets and demons. Excuse me for being a little nervous about yours!" I got up off the couch, needing to put a little distance between us.

Edward let his body fall onto the now empty seat next to him like he had been defeated in a battle. It was kind of comical.

"I will donate a million dollars to any charity you want if we can stop arguing and you could just give me what I want. Please."

"You would rather give away a million dollars than talk to me about Bree Tanner?" I tried not to laugh. It was laugh or cry, though, and I didn't want to cry about this.

"Yes," he groaned from his spot on the couch.

I shook my head and rejoined him on the sectional. I ran my fingers through his unruly hair. He closed his eyes as he lay there like a stubborn child.

"Welcome to the world of emotional maturity, sweetheart. I'm asking you to join me in this wondrous place where two adults who care about each other talk about things that sometimes make us uncomfortable but make us a stronger couple in the end. What are you so worried about?"

"One of these days, I'm going to tell you something that's going to make you run," he replied, his eyes still shut.

My fingers stopped moving for a moment as my heart clenched. It was one thing to be afraid of the secrets he was hiding, but I never thought about how scary it would be to be the one with the secrets to reveal. My thoughts drifted back to Jasper and his plea to think about running. I made promises to Edward and I wasn't going to break them.

"I'm not going to run, Edward. I love you. I can't prove it to you unless you let me."

He sat up, looking me squarely in the eye. "You think I'm good. I'm not so sure. What if I'm right and you're wrong?"

"What if I'm right?"

"What if you're wrong?" His eyes were full of such fear and uncertainty; two feelings that seemed to be his constant companion lately. I hated that I did that to him, made him question himself. I wanted him to be empowered by my feelings for him, not afraid that I was going to be let down all the time.

"I'm not," I assured him. "Being good doesn't mean you have to be perfect. I don't expect you to be perfect. I'm sure you've done things that I might not agree with or like. That doesn't mean I don't love who you are right now. Right now, the man sitting in front of me is trying very hard to do good things. That's what matters to me."

Edward let his head fall back. He scrubbed his face with his hands. "Bree Tanner was James' girlfriend when he worked for Masen Corporation. I think they were actually engaged. I didn't pay much attention to stuff like that."

I settled into my seat and put a hand on his thigh. I braced myself for whatever he was going to tell me.

"Bree was kind of naive. James was always real flashy, tried to impress her with his money and supposed status. She fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Unfortunately for James, she became more enamored with money and status than with James himself."

Edward turned his head so he could see me and put his hand on top of mine.

"Long story short, she found my money and status a bit more appealing than his. So much so that she found her way into my bed on several occasions." He paused, waiting for my reaction. When I said nothing, he continued. "This was all around the

same time I found out James was stealing from the company. Given the circumstances, I didn't feel much remorse for taking something that belonged to him. The affair ended when he left to start his company back in Chicago."

So, he had an affair with a woman who was engaged. Not the most honorable thing he could have done, but not a run-for-the-hills indiscretion.

"When I found out he had planted a spy in my company, I wanted to hurt him. I found out they were in New York to attend the same party I was attending, and it offered me the chance to do just that." He swallowed hard. "I used Bree to do it. I got to her. I slept with her and taped it, leaving the tape for James. That was why we had such a huge confrontation. Bree was so foolish, so clueless. She thought I was going to, I don't know, marry her or at least care for her if she left James."

"Had you promised her those things?" I had to believe there was no way in hell that the Edward Masen I knew made any promises of love and marriage to any woman.

"No!" he insisted. "I promised her nothing. I had sex with her and spent some money on her so she'd do whatever I wanted her to do, whenever I wanted her to do it."

His admission made my stomach turn. He used her to get under someone else's skin. Just like he used that Lauren woman when we first met. *He preys on women like you all the time, Isabella. It's what he does.* It was what he did. He didn't think about their feelings. He didn't care about them at all. He gave them things and spent money on them, thinking that gave him free rein to do anything he wanted to them. How many others had he treated so horribly? I thought about all the times I felt like he tried to play games with me. I tried to remind myself that wasn't the kind of relationship we had, though. He knew he couldn't buy me. He didn't want to simply buy me anymore.

"I used her. I won't apologize, it was the way I did things...before." He looked away and then back at me with those smoldering, green eyes. "Before you."

We had something different. I had to believe that. I didn't use him for is money, and he loved me, even if he couldn't say it.

"Anyway, the fight with James was ugly, to say the least. Everything out of my mouth was said with the intent to do as much damage as possible." His hand was back in his hair. We were getting close to something that made him very uncomfortable. "You know how James responded, he's been coming after me ever

since. Bree, on the other hand, thought she was in love with me. She thought she was going to leave James for me. When I made it clear that her purpose had been served, she sort of self-destructed."

"What happened?"

"The next morning, her body was found in the Hudson. Her death was ruled a suicide."

I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand. "Oh, shit."

He lowered his voice, like suddenly we might be overheard. "I don't know that she killed herself, Isabella. I know that she was crushed when she realized I had no further use for her. You know about my concerns about people letting love weaken them. I also know that it is possible for a person to kill themselves over a love lost."

For just a moment, he drifted into a seemingly haunted memory that I didn't think was related to Bree Tanner but was significant to Edward all the same. With a quick shake of his head, he stopped himself from being pulled in that direction.

"But I saw the switch flip inside James that night. She had betrayed him. She humiliated him. After James took a few swings at me, I left, leaving a devastated Bree alone with him. I would not put it past him to have had a hand in her death. He knows I think that, too. He brought up her name as a warning to me. I know it. I have to take it seriously. You are too important to me not to."

That was not where I thought this story was going to lead us. It was one thing for him to break a poor girl's heart. It was another that she was not only dead but possibly killed because of her relationship with Edward. If Jasper knew about this, he would kidnap me and drive me to Forks so my father could lock me in my old bedroom indefinitely.

"You're afraid he might try to kill me, to punish you for seducing Bree?"

"Anything is possible with a monster like James. His mentioning of her makes me think he wants me to think it's a possibility. Maybe he thinks I will give you up to prevent that from happening."

Hearing him say that caused my breathing to hitch. I couldn't imagine what I would do if Edward left me, even if he did so because he thought he was protecting me.

"Y-y-you can't leave me," I stuttered. I grasped onto his arm as if he might jump up and leave me this second.

Edward put a gentle hand on my cheek. "Isabella. I think I've made it clear I am much too selfish to do something like that. I would kill him before I would leave you." His expression made it clear that he meant it wholeheartedly. It was chilling and reassuring all at the same time.

"I'll move in," I said. James Hunter was not going to come between us, no matter how he tried.

Edward considered my sudden change of heart. "Are you sure?"

"I give in and you still want to argue?"

He smiled briefly, but then his lips fell back in a straight line. "I want you to live with me more than anything, but I don't want you to do it because you're afraid for your life. No matter what you decide, I will protect you. You know that, right?"

I nodded. "I know. You're right, though. It'll be easier. I sleep here or at the estate whenever you're in town. The only thing that would change is I would come here after work instead of going to my apartment in between." I gave him a tiny smile. "You'll also need to make a tiny bit of room in the closet, I guess."

Edward sighed and closed his eyes. He pressed his forehead to mine. "I think I can handle that."

He kissed me softly and held my face like I was something precious, fragile even. I was moving in with Edward. Jasper was going to love this.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

A big thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for not having a heart attack during the pre-reading of this chapter because I need her help for the rest of this story! I also need her alive so she finishes the story she is writing. Everyone go check out All I Want by momof4luvntwisaga. She is letting me help her out like she helps me, so I've been privy to a few chapters and love this story so far. The woman writes some good lemons. This is her first story, so go check it out and show her some love.

Since I'm in a rec'ing mood, I also want you all to go read Beautiful Nightmare by Simone and Marie. This is a Jasper and Alice story, but it is one of my favs. I love the Edward and Jasper friendship so much and they hinted that they are going to write an Edward-centered story with these characters after BN is done. So go check it out and tell them I sent you.

Well, this chapter was a little tense there for a bit, wasn't it? I wish I could say she's confident in her decision, but her emotions are all in a twist right now. I will ramble on about this over at the blog.

I love you all. I love your comments. I love that you love this story. I hope it continues to keep you guessing!

Outtake Saturday at Six

Chapter 13 EPOV Outtake

Saturday, September 11th at Six

"Can I get you something to drink, Bella? A glass of wine, perhaps?" My aunt and uncle had always been very gracious hosts. Today, Esme was beside herself at the thought of both Alice and I having dates for dinner. I had never in my life brought a date to a family dinner. This was a real first.

"Maybe just some ice water," Isabella replied, her anxiety evident in her every move, word, and breath.

I squeezed her hand, causing her to jump as if she forgot I was holding it.

I leaned close, taking in her delicious scent; the combination of freesia and jasmine intoxicated me. It was probably her perfume, but part of me thought it was simply *her*. I never thought I could be so drawn to a woman in such a variety of ways. Of course, when it came to Isabella, all my old ways of thinking had been thrown out the window. Isabella was the exception to every rule I had ever put in place for myself. There was always something making me wish I could find a way to be on her, in her, *shit*, just with her every minute of every day. Sometimes it was the way she smelled, like tonight. Other times, it was that arched brow she gave me when she was about to challenge something I said. Her laugh definitely got me every time. I even loved the quiet rambling she did in her sleep. I wasn't much of a sleeper to begin with, and now she gave me a reason to stay up. It also didn't hurt that she was an absolute vision while she slept.

"Is everything okay?" I whispered, knowing she was worried about my sister's and her roommate's arrival. Former roommate, I should say. *I* was Isabella's roommate.

I could see her swallow nervously before nodding.

I tried to reassure her again, "My sister does not like to upset Aunt Esme. I promise you, Alice and Jasper will be on their best behavior. That is, if Jasper wants to keep my sister happy."

Isabella nodded again, giving my hand a little squeeze. It was her way of trying to ease my worry as well.

I wasn't worried about my sister. I knew what to expect from Alice. She was going to make a bunch of snarky remarks and attempt to make me feel guilty, knowing that I wouldn't. She also knew I wouldn't apologize but that I would give her the moon and the stars if she asked for them. She never asked for anything like that, however. Alice never asked for anything remotely selfish. Alice only came to me when she wanted to do for others.

No, I wasn't worried about my sister. I wasn't even worried about Isabella's former roommate. Jasper was not happy with the new living arrangements. He made that all too clear this morning when I accompanied Isabella to her apartment to pack up her things. Well, Isabella packed, Tyler carried the things to the car, and I dealt with some business on my phone and exercised amazing self-control while Jasper tried to bait me into a fight. I respected that the man cared about his friend. I respected that he only had her well-being and best interest in mind. But she was coming to live with me whether he liked it or not. That was something he was just going to have to deal with.

I was worried, however. I was worried that all this craziness, my craziness, was eventually going to become too much for the lovely Isabella. I was worried that she was going to see the error of her ways. I wasn't going to give her up, but being with me was so foolish. I was wrong for her on so many levels. It wasn't only the physical risk she was taking, considering James was a psychopath who wanted nothing more than to watch me suffer. It was also the fact that she still had no idea what a fucked up mess I really was. She knew a lot. She knew more than I had ever let anyone in on before, but she still didn't know everything.

I was just like *him*. As much as I tried not to be, I was fighting D-fucking-NA. Unless I could figure out a way to get a gene transplant, I was destined to have my father's fatal flaws. I was already fighting the obsessive feelings, the constant need, the jealousy. Carlisle suggested I talk to someone, a professional, but I didn't believe in that psychological bullshit. I didn't think someone could talk me out of being this way. Research showed personality was set by the age of three. Throw in all the Post Traumatic Stress bullshit from my teens, and I was fucked.

What this beautiful girl saw in me, I would never know. It certainly wasn't the things that kept every other woman around. My money made her absolutely uncomfortable. She seemed to like the way I looked but not enough to put up with all my shenanigans. I tested her patience constantly. But she loved me. She said so herself. It was exhilarating and fucking frightening at the same time.

"Good thing Edward brought his security to guard the house during dinner. You never know when someone might try to mug us while we're eating Cornish hens in

the dining room," Alice said sarcastically as she entered the great room carrying a homemade apple pie. She made one every time we had dinner as a family. It was one of Carlisle's favorites. Jasper followed behind her with quite a scowl on his face.

Esme reentered the room with Isabella's glass of water. After handing her the refreshment, she greeted Alice and Jasper with a hello and a hug. Carlisle appeared at the same time with our drinks from the bar in his study.

Isabella's anxiety increased significantly with the arrival of her friend. She was biting down on her lip while her eyes stayed fixed on him. Jasper was purposely not making eye contact with her. He was beginning to test my patience.

"I do feel bad that those poor men have to sit outside while we're in here, enjoying a nice meal. You know, I could fix them something to eat. They could sit in the kitchen," Esme offered, almost begging me with her eyes.

I nearly rolled mine. "They are paid extraordinarily well to do what they do. Don't worry about them."

"It's amazing what money will get people to do," Jasper said, his eyes meeting Isabella's for a moment and then quickly looking away.

She stiffened at the implication of his words. Her relationship with me had nothing to do with my money. It never had and I couldn't imagine it ever would. She certainly didn't agree to move in with me because of it.

She regained her footing almost immediately. "I've come to find that those in Edward's most inner circle do much of what they do for him out of a deep loyalty to someone who treats them well. It has nothing to do with money at all." She stared at Jasper, who cowardly would not look back.

I raised her hand to my lips and gave her knuckles a gentle kiss. I loved her spunk when she was mad, especially when her anger was not directed at me. I also appreciated that she continued to defend me, no matter what angle Jasper took to bring me down.

"Loyalty has its price, just like everything else in this world," he replied smugly.

He was going to be difficult. I didn't like it. Alice needed to get him under control, or he would have to deal with me.

Alice handed Esme the pie and pulled Jasper further into the room. She

approached us and gave Isabella a quick hug. She glanced at my forearms, which were exposed since I had the sleeves of my lightweight cashmere sweater pushed up. The burns were almost healed after three weeks. I had been very diligent about following my aftercare plan and used sunblock like it was going out of style when we were in Fiji.

"I half-expected you to cancel on us again," she said, giving me a light punch on the shoulder.

I chuckled. "And miss what I am sure is bound to be an exciting evening?"

Alice narrowed her eyes at me. "Let's hope not too exciting for Esme's sake."

"I absolutely agree," I replied with a nod.

At least I knew Alice planned to behave herself. Now, it was up to Jasper to cooperate.

"I think I accidentally took something that belongs to you this morning. Come outside and tell me if it's yours," Isabella said, dropping my hand to grab his. She handed me her water and began to drag him out of the room. She smiled over my shoulder at the rest of us. "We'll be right back."

She was trying to reassure me, but it didn't work. My jaw tensed, but I said nothing. I could not tell her who she could and could not talk to, even though I really wanted to. As much as I wanted to stamp her with the word MINE in big, bold letters, she was not something I could possess. She was too strong. She was not my mother and I was not my father. I had to keep telling myself that.

"So, Denali launches Friday. We're looking forward to the big party," Carlisle said in an attempt to distract me.

My eyes were still focused on the last place they saw Isabella. I nodded my head and set her water on a coaster on the coffee table.

"It should be a good time. It'll be a relief when it is all over, though."

"How come you're having the party at the Four Seasons? What's wrong with your ballroom?" Alice asked.

I smiled at how effortless it was to get her to talk to me again. I didn't have to do anything; she could only stay quiet for so long.

"Well, I think we all know there were some security issues at the last party we held at the estate."

Alice frowned.

I pulled a hand through my hair and said, "My home is too much of a target. The Four Seasons offers a safer setting. I don't believe he'll blow up an entire hotel in an attempt to get rid of me."

Esme gasped at my attempt at being funny. I took a drink from my glass. The bourbon's burn felt good on the way down. I stole a glance in the direction Isabella should be returning from if her meddling best friend hadn't kidnapped her already. No, I assured myself. Tyler was out there. He would not let anyone, even Jasper, take her from me. Of that, I was sure.

"No one is going to hurt him," Carlisle reassured his wife. She did look fearful all the sudden.

"It's going to be fine," I said nonchalantly. "Denali is going to outsell anything that Nomad Industries can even begin to think up, and soon I'll be able to take them over and reduce James Hunter to the nothing he is. With no company, no money, he'll crawl back under the rock from which he came. Don't worry, Esme. No one can touch me. I'm like fucking Harry Potter – the boy who lived, remember?"

I knew it was a bad joke the second it left my mouth, but Alice still felt the need to stomp on my foot anyway.

"Ow!"

"That's not even funny!" she spat.

"Fuck!" I exclaimed hopping on my one good foot. "How can something so little do so much damage?"

"You think nothing can hurt you. Just wait, Edward. Keep testing fate and fate will do away with you." She stalked off, shouting something about getting a drink.

My aunt and uncle looked at me with a mixture of worry and hurt. Bringing up my brush with death could have that effect on all of us.

"I don't claim to be invincible." Obviously I was not, as I winced at the pain that was still emanating from my foot. "I'm just smarter than the bad guy, I assure you."

Carlisle put a supportive hand on my shoulder. "No one wants anything to happen to you, son. That's all. Your sister most of all."

My sister. Why my mother thought it was a good idea to bring two children into this world, I would never know. Usually Alice was more like her. Our mother was so foolish and so annoyingly optimistic. Her ability to love the unlovable was mind-blowing. What did that get her? Dead, that was what it got her. My eyes fell back on the doorway, waiting for another foolishly optimistic and loving woman to come back in.

"Alice should know better than to worry about me." I left it at that.

Isabella had been gone much too long. What more did they have to say to one another? Hadn't they had it out this morning? I pulled out my phone and texted Tyler. He had to be able to see her out there.

WTF is going on out there?

Tyler responded almost immediately, like I expected.

There was a very heated exchange. They're hugging now.

Hugging? I must have turned an ugly shade of green given the way my aunt and uncle looked at me as I slid my Blackberry back in my pocket.

"Is there a problem?" Carlisle asked cautiously.

Hugging. I inhaled deeply. I knew that even if I placed a guard on her twenty-four-seven, she would still hug those she cared about. I hated that it made me want to rip my hair out.

"No, there's no problem." No problem, just hugging. My sister hugged everyone. At least Isabella didn't hug everyone.

Alice returned, her eyes looking a little too red. Esme rallied her by talking about something that had to do with her next fundraising event. My sister perked back up.

Carlisle engaged me in a discussion about the promising stock he had heard about recently. Five minutes passed. How much hugging could two people do? Hugging should signal the end of the fight and the return to the dinner party. Another two minutes and I had to pull my phone back out.

"Excuse me a second," I said to Carlisle. I texted Tyler.

Are they still fucking hugging?

It was taking every ounce of self-control not to go out there and retrieve her.

There was some crying. Some more hugging. She appears to be trying to pull herself together so they can go back in. Would you like me to do something?

He made her cry.

I couldn't stop the fury the image of her crying created deep within me. I knew he hated me. Jasper wanted nothing more than for her to get as far away from me as possible. He made that clear this morning. He had all these questions about how much danger she was really in. He wanted to know if she was putting herself more at risk by doing things that verified her attachment to me. He wanted to know if I was manipulating her, making her think she was in danger so she would have no choice but to move in with me.

I wanted nothing more than for him to back the fuck off. If anyone could convince her she was making a mistake by being with me, it was him. I could not let that happen.

No, but if she doesn't come in soon, I'm coming out.

Immediately after I hit send, Isabella and Jasper walked back into the room. She tried to give me a little smile, but it was too forced. That all-consuming desire to take her and lock her away with me forever began to overwhelm me. I had to fight it back, reminding myself she was not mine for the taking. I could only have what she was willing to give. Nothing more. Even if I wanted it all.

"All better?" I asked, snaking my arm around her waist, anchoring her to me.

"All better." She smiled, but it was false. I knew her better than she ever gave me credit for.

Things were a little better. Jasper was smiling and talking with Esme and Alice. But things were *not* all better for Isabella. Whatever he said to her out there made him feel better but not her. Not being able to demand that she tell me was infuriating.

We all moved to the dining room for the meal. Conversation was light and steered clear of my land mines or anyone else's for that matter. Esme was talking about the trip she and Carlisle had planned for their anniversary. They were going to Aruba, the same place they went on their honeymoon.

"How long have you two been married?" Isabella asked.

Carlisle squeezed Esme's hand on the table. "Twenty years the end of this month. Although, sometimes it seems like I have been in love with her my whole life."

Some men might say things like that to be cheesy or get a reaction out of all the other ladies at the table, but my uncle was completely sincere. He and Esme had something few people could achieve - real and long-lasting affection for one another. I was never quite sure how they pulled it off, how they kept from destroying one another with the weight of their love. Why it hadn't poisoned something in their relationship, I didn't know. They had a balance I couldn't wrap my head around.

"How did you guys meet?"

Esme giggled. "Now, that, I'm not sure is a good dinner story."

"Oh, come on. I don't think I even know this one. I was only four when you guys got married." Alice turned to Jasper. "I was their flower girl. The only downside was I had to walk down the aisle with *him*," she said, flicking her head in my direction.

What nine-year old boy wanted to be dressed up in a tux and paraded down an aisle with his annoying little sister? It was humiliating. She didn't even really remember. I, on the other hand, had a very clear memory of the whole embarrassing event.

Isabella put her hand on my leg. "You were the ring bearer?"

I tried to redirect everyone's focus. "Wasn't the question how did you two meet, not how did you go about traumatizing your nephew on your wedding day?"

Isabella smiled, for real this time. How I wanted to lean over and kiss those lips.

"We're all grownups. I think you can tell them," Carlisle encouraged his wife.

She sighed and then smiled at him. "Fine." Esme had everyone's attention, even mine. "I was actually visiting you guys in Chicago. Lizzie was pregnant with Alice and was overdue. The woman was as big as a house. We thought she had to be

having twins. The doctors had to be missing something, because it did not seem possible for one little baby to make her that big."

I involuntarily smiled at the memory. I could remember when my mother was pregnant with Alice. I was in kindergarten and wanted to bring her for show and tell because she looked like she had a giant beach ball hidden under her shirt.

"Finally, on the third day of my visit, her water broke. Edward was at school. We arranged for a neighbor to pick him up and took off for the hospital. You would think that things would have happened quickly because this was her second pregnancy and she was overdue, but Alice was a little stubborn about coming out."

Isabella and I both chuckled, earning us a dirty look from my sister.

"It's the Masen in you, sweetheart. You can't help it," my aunt said like a condolence.

The Masen in us. There was that DNA issue again.

Esme continued with her story. "So, we're in this birthing suite, waiting for your dad, who was in some meeting at work. I was trying to help your mom with her breathing techniques because she wanted to do the whole thing *naturally*." She grimaced at the word. "I swear, had I been able to have children, I would have taken the drugs the minute they were offered to me."

It was Carlisle's turn to laugh. "You do have a low pain tolerance."

Esme swatted at him playfully like Isabella sometimes did to me. I envied them something fierce. That was not a common emotion for me.

My hand found Isabella's under the table and she squeezed it before lacing her fingers with mine. I didn't know why the feeling was so comforting, but it was. Perhaps it was that she offered me the opportunity to never envy anyone ever again.

Esme went on. "The next thing I know, five doctors walked in. Only they weren't real doctors. They were interns."

"Um, honey, interns are doctors, too."

"Did you have your medical license?" She paused for him to answer. Carlisle shook his head. "No. You were an intern, not a real doctor."

He didn't argue with her. That was something they never did - argue. The entire time I lived with them and since, they never argued, at least not in front of us. I wasn't sure how they managed that either.

"So, these interns came in because we were at a teaching hospital. The doctor supervising the interns went over your mom's chart. I notice this guy in the back of the pack. He was blonde, young. He looked too pretty, like he should be in the movies not a hospital." Carlisle blushed at her description of him. "He was asking all these questions and jotting things down in some notebook. Then, the real doctor asked him to step forward so he could check your mom's progress."

I suddenly was all too aware of why this was not appropriate dinner conversation. I had no desire to hear about how my uncle checked my mother's "progress".

"I stood up and told them *no way*. No way were they letting non-doctors touch my sister. She was in a lot of pain, and she didn't need to be treated like some sort of science experiment."

"She was very...passionate about it," Carlisle added. "I think you called me the dumbshit in the back without a clue."

My eyes widened at this little revelation. I had never heard my aunt swear. Trying to picture her as some feisty twenty-something was hard to do. She had always been Aunt Esme. Proper, gentle, warm.

"Lizzie, of course, told me to sit. She was more than happy to help the world create better doctors. Lord, she was such a do-gooder."

"And you're not?" Alice challenged her.

Esme smiled. "Maybe a little bit now, but when I was younger, I was slightly more self-centered. Your mother was the one who wanted to take care of the whole world. I was happy to not carry that weight all the time."

"Sounds like neither one of you made a very good first impression. What changed?" Isabella asked. I could see a real desire to know. Her question made me think of us. We did not make the best first impression on one another either. Yet, here we were. Who knew being a jackass could win you the affection of someone so very special?

"Well, he started checking your mother's progress and looked over her vitals. In the middle of his exam, something went wrong. Monitors started beeping and your

mother cried out louder. I was furious. I was sure he had done something. To your uncle's credit, he kept his composure the entire time, even though I was yelling at him to get away and begging the other doctor to help. He said something to his supervisor, and they started rattling off words that meant nothing to me. Nurses came rushing in; and before I knew what was happening, they were pushing drugs into Lizzie's IV and wheeling her out of the room. Carlisle said something to me about an emergency C-section and promised that everything was going to be fine. One of the nurses brought me into a waiting room outside the OR. I remember thinking everything was taking much too long. Your father was still not there, and I knew he was going to be furious if he found out I had let an intern examine her. If something happened to your mother..." She stopped and was shaking the bad thoughts from her head. We all knew what my father would do if something happened to my mother.

The table was dead silent for an entire minute. The weight of our history was pressing on all of us, even Jasper and Isabella, who only knew part of it.

Esme wiped a tear from her cheek. "Anyway, the good news was nothing happened to her. She gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, making Lizzie the happiest woman on Earth. Carlisle came out to give me the news, and I was so relieved I fell into his arms and hugged him like we had known each other for much longer than we really did."

"I was certain I never wanted her to let me go," Carlisle added. "She might have called me a dumbshit, but I could tell from just looking at her that when this woman loved someone, she loved them with a fierceness that could not be ignored. I asked her to get a cup of coffee with me when I was done with my shift, and she agreed. The rest is so-called history." He smiled at her warmly, their hands still clasped together on the table.

"Wow. How did we never hear this story before?" Alice asked.

"Your mother demanded we downplay the entire thing...for obvious reasons."

Of course. I could only imagine what my father would have done if he had heard my mother's life had been in danger. Everyone would have suffered even though she was fine. It would have made him hate Alice more than he already hated the two of us. I also realized that was why our mom never had any more children. She couldn't take that risk again. She was so lucky he was in a meeting. She didn't test fate again. Not until the fire.

"So what you're saying is that if it wasn't for Alice's stubbornness, we might not

all be here right now?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Everyone laughed, even Alice.

"Thank goodness for that Masen stubbornness," Carlisle said with a wink in her direction.

"Thank goodness you were there, Dad," she replied with a wink of her own.

Their bond was undeniable. Carlisle and Esme had flown to Chicago after the fire. Carlisle almost never left the hospital. He was the one who took charge of Alice's care when my father chose not to. Had it not been for our aunt and uncle, I don't know how my baby sister would have survived all she went through. The physical pain was one thing, but the emotional pain caused by the loss of our mother was torture. I could attest to that. Carlisle and Esme tried to see us both through it. They succeeded with Alice. She and Carlisle were closer than anyone blood-relatives could ever be. It seemed fitting to learn he was the one who helped bring her into the world. So fitting.

"Let's move on to dessert, shall we?" Esme said, jumping up and collecting plates.

Isabella stood and began to help. I grabbed her arm. "You don't have to do that," I said with a shake of my head.

"I know." She smiled down at me as if to add *silly boy* to the end of that sentence.

Jasper stood up as well and told Alice to stay put. *Oh, Prince Charming in the flesh*, I thought with an eyeroll. That left me alone with my sister and uncle.

"You probably would have been glad if I hadn't made it," Alice said to me when everyone was gone.

"Mary Alice," Carlisle scolded.

I looked at her from across the beautifully decorated table. Is this what she thought? That I hated her like our father did? Isabella's words from a few weeks ago replayed in my mind. *She thinks you don't care about her. That you ran into the stables because you don't care about her. She wants to hear that you love her.*

"When mom told me she was pregnant, I remember feeling confused. I didn't understand why she needed another baby. I wondered if she felt like she needed to try again because I wasn't good enough. I was sure I wasn't going to like you." Alice

quirked an eyebrow, thinking this was when I was going to confirm her theories on how I felt about her. "When she brought you home and everyone was doting on you like you were some prize, I was sure I was right."

"Oh, really?" she challenged, folding her arms across her chest. "So, what? You curse the day I was born?"

I ignored her ridiculous question. "Then one night, I peeked into the nursery where Mom was rocking you. I remember feeling so jealous, so...*replaced*. I was ready to run to my room, pack my stuff, and run away, certain no one would miss me. Mom noticed me, though, and called me in."

I had never told anyone about this. The feelings it caused were painful because I loved my mother and any discussion about her weighed me down with the guilt. The more I let out, though, the lighter I felt.

"She pulled me onto her lap and asked if I liked my present. I thought that was a silly question because the only person who had received any presents since the day you were born was you. I must have looked confused. Mom laughed, you know, the laugh that sounded almost like music."

I could see Alice's eyes welling with tears. She knew the laugh.

"She held you up so I could see you better. Then she said, 'Your sister is the only present I could think to get you that you'll never tire of, that you'll never outgrow, that will always be yours no matter what. She's going to love you almost as much as I do, and I'm trusting you to help me take good care of her.'" The ache in my chest was intensifying. I was so young, but that memory was so deeply embedded in my brain that I could never forget it. I took a breath before finishing the story. "Mom told me gifts like you were one of a kind."

Alice's tears were spilling over onto her cheeks. I remember how my mother's words changed my feelings that night. She had wanted me to have someone in my life who loved me like she did. My father was not that person, obviously. I realized now that she had wanted me to do the same for my sister, to be the one that loved her no matter what. I had let her down; I had let them both down. Alice did love me. She loved me more than I deserved. Alice deserved to be loved. She deserved it much more than I ever did.

"I love you, Alice. You were a one of a kind gift from Mom. How could I not?"

There was a surprised gasp or maybe it was a strangled sob that didn't come from

Alice. I looked over by the door to the kitchen where Isabella stood with one hand over her mouth and a plated piece of pie in the other, tears streaming down her beautiful face.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Alice has waited a lot longer than Bella to hear those words, so she gets them first. What do you all think?

Someone asked if he's ever going to call her Bella instead of Isabella. All I can say is that she's never asked him to call her Bella. She has told everyone else to call her that but she has never asked him, so he hasn't. Plus, I kind of like it when he calls her Isabella. I don't know why, I just do. It makes him sound bossy. I kind of like it when he's all bossy and domineering =) For you Fifty Shades fans who have suggested this Edward hook up with Dr. Banner, I think we see here that FaN Edward does not buy into that counseling "crap". You'd never know I was a social worker by trade would you? With that said - I never say never. I won't rule out some counseling! Not sure it will help, but it might make for an interesting outtake!

Fridays at Noon is up for "Flavor of the Week" over at .com You can vote over there to win this story one of the spots. The poll is open until Saturday.

Thanks for the love and support, as always. Oh my, we'll be back on Friday. I'm a bad review repplier this week. Sorry! You guys are the best!

Chapter 14

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Friday, September 17th at noon

"Do you want to wait at the bar for Mr. Masen?" Angela asked after we chatted for a few minutes.

I was early today on purpose. Today was a stressful day for Edward, so I decided I would not make him anymore anxious than he needed to be.

"I'll go up," I replied as a large group of people walked into Eclipse. "You don't have to take me, though."

"All clear, Miss Swan," Liam said, joining us at the host stand. No, I didn't need Angela. I had an escort.

Liam had been assigned to me all week. He was my personal bodyguard/driver. Well, he was my driver until I complained that I had agreed to take a car I was never allowed to drive. Edward agreed to let me drive myself to and from work, but Liam had to follow me.

I waved at Emmett, who made eye contact with me when I passed the main dining area. I didn't know how he felt about things after the crazy way our lunch ended last week. He smiled immediately, which made me feel better.

Before I made it to the stairs, I ran into Rosalie - literally. Liam was a great bodyguard.

"Excuse me," Rose said graciously until she noticed it was me. "Bella? Geez, I see you still have trouble walking and breathing at the same time."

Wow. Without Edward at my side, I was still chopped liver.

"I see you still have trouble talking and not being a bitch at the same time."

She looked at me like I had slapped her but then smiled. "I always knew you were tougher than you wanted me to believe."

I had no idea how to respond to an actual compliment. I started to walk away.

"I was hoping you were going to be here today," she continued. That stopped me cold. "Jasper's girlfriend wants to hang out next Friday and have a girls' night out or whatever. I said I'd go if you came, too."

"Huh?"

"She's Masen's sister. So, you know her, right?"

My brain was still stuck on the fact that she said she'd have a girls' night out with Alice if I came, too.

Rosalie misunderstood my pause. "What? Is she a spoiled bitch like Maria? What?"

"No! No. Alice is nothing like Maria. She's awesome."

"So, you'll come? I'm not sure how I feel about spending the entire evening with someone I don't know."

Yeah, that would be like spending the whole evening with someone who used to be your boss and hates you. Not awkward at all.

"I suppose so, if that's okay with Alice. I don't want to intrude." It was so shocking to be asked by Rosalie and not Alice.

"She thought it was a great idea. Said she was going to talk to you about it." Rosalie pushed her golden blonde hair over her shoulder.

"Isabella?" The smooth tone of his voice sent my heart aflutter.

Edward, Alec, and Tyler approached us. Liam stood at attention next to me, making me realize it wouldn't be much of a girls' night out with my male bodyguard following us everywhere. Tyler flicked his head back towards the front of the restaurant and Liam was quick to go. No reason to have two bodyguards inside.

"Welcome back, Mr. Masen." Rosalie's charm was back in full force.

"Yes. Excuse us." Edward grabbed me by the elbow and guided me up the stairs, leaving Rosalie a little stunned at the bottom.

"Everything okay?" I wondered what was creating the urgency to get upstairs.

He seemed confused by my question. "Everything is fine. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

He stopped at the top of the stairs and pressed his lips to mine, kissing me gently but in a way that left me completely breathless. Alec cleared his throat. I pulled away from Edward and greeted Alec with a hello. We went into the room and waited for Emmett to come take our drink order. I was just about to tell Edward about Rosalie and Alice's girls' night out when the door opened and everyone *but* Emmett walked in.

"Surprise!" Alice shouted, carrying in about a half dozen pink balloons. Behind her was Jasper, Esme, Carlisle, my dad, Sue, Leah, Seth, Claire, and Jake.

What the hell?

I stood up and hugged my dad first. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a slightly belated birthday party. Edward arranged the whole thing. Remember that when you're looking for someone to punish later." My dad gave me a tight squeeze.

I looked over my shoulder at my very nervous-looking, secret-keeping, surprise birthday-throwing boyfriend.

"We celebrated my birthday on Monday," I said pointedly. Charlotte made me a special dinner. Edward gave me a "Teachers do it after class" T-shirt and a set of keys to the estate and the condo on a key ring that had a heart-shaped charm attached to it. Diamonds on the charm and the word Cartier engraved on the ring told me they probably cost a few hundred times more than the shirt, but the shirt was one of my favorite gifts from him yet. It was a quiet evening, exactly what I wanted. I talked to both my parents. I ate a piece of chocolate cake. I made love to the man I loved. What more did a girl need on her birthday?

"Sitting at home with Edward is not celebrating anything," Alice argued with an exasperated sigh.

I hugged everyone else, saving Jake for last. I had a hard time believing Edward had invited Jake, but then again I couldn't believe any of these people were here.

"Happy birthday, Bells." Jake knew better than anyone how much I hated celebrating my birthday. Being the center of attention was never my thing unless I

was in front of a classroom. "See what lengths we all had to go to see you? Maybe if you came home once and awhile, we wouldn't have to come all the way to the big city to torture you."

"Now you tell me," I replied with a playful eye roll.

Edward and Alec were both on their feet, greeting my family and friends. Introductions were made. Edward shook hands with my father and made his way over to me and Jake. He slipped his arm around me possessively.

"Jake, this is my boyfriend, Edward. Edward, Jake." I decided to not label my relationship with Jake. Edward and I had already been over that.

"Glad you could make it," Edward said, sticking a hand out.

Jake stared at it for a second. I could only imagine what he was thinking. Jake and I used to make mud pies in his backyard when we were little. He'd never saw me dressed up in anything fancier than a plaid shirt and jeans, except on special occasions. Yet, here I stood with a guy in a suit that cost more than all the clothes I owned, in a restaurant that served food that wasn't ever going to be on the menu at the Fork's Diner.

"Nice to meet you, Edward." Jake shook his hand firmly. "This is quite a fancy schmancy restaurant. Bet you come here a lot."

Pretentious. That was what Jake was thinking.

"I dine here once a week with Isabella. This is where we met, so it's more than just a restaurant." Edward smiled down at me. I made Eclipse something more to him. The thought made me happy.

"Well, *Isabella's* tastes sure have changed." Jake wasn't talking about what was on the menu.

"My tastes haven't changed. They've just been expanded. There's nothing wrong with that."

"Yeah, until your cupboards are full of paté and caviar, and you forget all about how much you used to love the simple things, like peanut butter and jelly."

His words stung. As if it wasn't bad enough that I was on shaky ground with Jasper, now Jake was giving me a hard time? He didn't even have all the ammo

Jasper had.

Edward knew we weren't talking about food. His grip on me tightened. "Not true at all. She's a huge peanut butter and jelly fan. Our kitchen at home is stocked with the stuff. But, come on, why eat peanut butter and jelly when you can have steak every night?"

Super. Jake and Edward were destined to be best friends.

Seth came over, breaking the tension momentarily.

"Dude," he greeted Edward like they were old friends. "This is the place where you tipped her in pennies?"

"This is the place," Edward replied with a smirk. We all moved back to the table.

Jake tugged on my arm, holding me back.

"Are you kidding me with this guy?" he whispered.

I was so tired of people questioning my judgment. "Be nice or else," I threatened.

Jake let it go and pulled out my chair before Edward could, causing more uncomfortable friction between the two of them. I saw Jasper shaking his head at the other end of the table, looking too amused. It was clear that he had helped with the guest list. He was making my two worlds collide, showing me how different they were. As if I didn't know.

Jasper and I had come to an uneasy truce on Saturday at the Cullens'. He was so worried about me. His worry made him angry. We both said things we didn't mean. Jasper fed into every fear I had about Edward. I accused him of being unsupportive and unfair, considering he was dating Edward's sister. Then he pulled out the big guns. Jasper admitted to being in love with Alice, head over heels, she's-the-one love. He said that what was killing him was that he loved two women who were both tying themselves in knots, waiting for another man to say he loved them. A man who quite possibly wasn't capable of loving anyone. I cried because I couldn't defend Edward. I believed he loved both me and Alice, but I had no idea how to prove it. I wished Edward could be like Jasper and declare his feelings without fear, but he wasn't able to do that - yet.

I felt like in order to make Edward happy, I had to make Jasper unhappy and vice versa. In the end, I promised to keep my name on the lease to his apartment,

allowing me the freedom to come back if things went wrong. I said it even though I knew if Edward found out, he would see that as me preparing for the day when I would run. I had no plans to run, but I couldn't deny I was afraid of some significant chinks in Edward's armor.

Then he told Alice he loved her, and everything changed. With those three little words, Edward gave me the proof I was looking for. He gave me hope that someday he would say them to me. My friend, who loved me like a sister, was still not totally convinced, however. My birthday lunch was Jasper's way of trying to remind me who I was. I was a simple girl, from a simple life. I was from a world that didn't include security teams and constant surveillance.

Emmett came up and took drink orders. Edward ordered some ridiculously expensive champagne that only I knew cost more than my dad made in a week. Jake made some snide comments about portion sizes when the food came. Edward tried to let Jake's words roll off his back, but I could see his jaw clench every time Jake spoke. Unfortunately, Jake wasn't the only one who had an issue with the food. My dad spent several minutes staring at his halibut before he took a bite. French cuisine was not exactly his cup of tea. Leah thought she'd be funny by getting the salad appetizer that had caviar in it; only to find caviar was most definitely an acquired taste, one she had *not* acquired.

Once everyone finished eating, Alice excused herself only to return with Emmett and a giant birthday cake. The thing was big enough to feed fifty. They all sang happy birthday and made me blow out the one candle on top.

"Presents!" Alice cheered and clapped when we were done with our dessert.

I suppressed a groan. Opening presents in front of an audience was so uncomfortable. Alice placed a beautifully pink and white wrapped gift in front of me.

"Mine and Jasper's first," she demanded. Inside the box was a Kindle. I had been talking about getting one forever but had other things like food and rent to worry about until recently.

"The Kindle is from me. All your favorite books are loaded on there. Those are from Jasper."

My best friend gave me a little nod when I thanked him. He really did know me so well.

The gifts continued coming. Leah, Seth, and Claire had gotten me a bottle of my

favorite perfume. Seth immediately joked about being glad the ladies did the shopping. Esme and Carlisle gave me a lovely leather tote bag that was big enough to carry the laptop I had gotten from school. It was so much nicer than my beat up messenger bag. Alec handed over an envelope he pulled out of the inside pocket of his suit coat.

"Happy birthday, Isabella."

I realized how significant it was that Edward had invited Alec to lunch today. It was his way of letting both me and Alec know he was more than just an employee. He was family. Alec gave me a gift certificate to a very upscale salon and spa here in the city. He was very sweet.

Dad and Sue were up next. Dad cleared his throat as he handed over the gift.

"Ah, I picked this one out, Bells. I hope you like it." I could see the worry on his face. He didn't buy gifts like fancy bags or spa packages. I hoped he didn't think that the gift was more important than the giver.

I unwrapped the box, and inside was a brown leather journal with a flap tie.

"You always have your head in someone else's book. Thought maybe you should try writing your own story. You can make one up or just write about your real life. Things seem more exciting for you lately. I don't know." My dad shrugged and still looked uncertain.

"I love it. It's perfect." I got up from the table to give him a well-deserved hug. After our embrace, he pulled out a bottle of pepper spray and handed it to me.

"I wanted to give you this, too, but Sue said I couldn't put it with the gift."

I chuckled at his predictability. Every year, I got a new bottle of pepper spray.

"Thanks," I said before kissing him on the cheek. I gave Sue a hug and then sat back down.

Jake shifted uncomfortably. "I'll go next. I'm sure Edward's saving the best for last." He pulled a small black organza bag from his pocket. "I made you something. Nothing fancy."

Inside the bag was a silver charm bracelet with a small charm carved out of wood. It was in the shape of a whale, reminding me that we used to go whale watching all

the time in La Push.

"Jake, it's wonderful. Memories from home. Thanks, I love it."

"Don't forget where you come from, Bella," he said, helping me attach it to my wrist.

If Edward was allowed to use the word landmine anymore, this was the point where he would have been yelling it. *Loudly*. I put my hand on his leg, an attempt at reassuring him that I could remember where I was from and still head in another direction. Jasper was staring at me, his eyes were telling me to listen to what Jake said. I was back to feeling torn in two.

"My turn." Edward stood up and started for the door.

"But you already gave me gifts," I protested.

Tyler was standing outside the door and handed Edward a black velvet box the size of a school notebook but thicker.

"Today is a big day for my company as many of you may know. We have a celebration to attend tonight." He came up beside me. "I wanted to get you something special, something you could wear to the party."

Edward opened the hinged top. My eyes immediately took in the pear-shaped diamond the size of a large walnut attached to a necklace made of more diamonds. There was one pink diamond above the large one. I was certain all the blood drained from my face in that moment.

The others at the table were commenting, but I couldn't hear them. The only things I heard were the thumping of my own heart and the rush of blood pounding in my ears. What had he done? What had he done in front of all of these people? Millions and millions of dollars were sitting on a pillow of black satin in front of me. It was exquisite and horrifying all at the same time.

"Well, you know it's good when she's rendered speechless," Alice said, suddenly standing next to Edward and coaxing him to close the magnificent box of horror. "Let's open the bottle of champagne and toast the birthday girl."

Her diversion was just what I needed. Once the box was closed, I could focus my attention on Edward's face. There was no crooked smile or playful wink. Edward looked absolutely crestfallen. He set the necklace on the table and walked over to

Alice, who was trying to open the champagne.

"Shit, Bella. You guys are going to need armed guards to follow you around when you wear that thing," Seth said teasingly.

"Oh, she's got those," Jasper assured him.

My dad looked at Jasper and then me, trying to figure out what joke he was missing. It was no joke. The cork of the champagne popped, causing me to jump. Edward was glaring at Jasper.

Fighting all the other negative emotions, I tried to smile and relieve any worry my dad might have by making light of it all. "Looks like your pepper spray might come in real handy tonight, Dad."

After the toast, Emmett came in to see if we needed anything else. Edward asked for the bill and was making a significant effort to avoid eye contact with me. He pulled out his phone and was tapping away. I looked to Alec, who tried to tell me without words not to worry. Everyone from home was discussing coming back to the condo with me to see where I was living now. I wasn't really listening to them because all I wanted was two seconds alone with Edward to tell him I loved him and the necklace. I wasn't sure I was going to get that, however.

Once the bill was paid, Edward was ready to leave. He apologized for needing to be the first to go, but he had a press conference with the heads of Amazon, one of the first big internet retailers who purchased Masen Corporation's newest security program. He shook hands with my father and headed to the door without saying goodbye to me.

"Edward," I called after him, stopping him as he took a step down the stairs. "Tyler, Alec, can we have a minute?"

Tyler looked to Edward for an okay and then headed downstairs with Alec. Edward turned, still not looking me in the eye.

"I have a very important press conference to get to, Isabella." His voice was strained, holding back all the hurt he was trying to hide from me.

"I know. I just wanted to thank you. For the lunch, for the gift." I approached him carefully. I needed him to forgive me for responding so passively to his overly generous gift.

"Don't thank me for something you aren't really thankful for. It's just as insulting as saying nothing at all," he snapped.

His head was even with mine since he was standing down one step. I grabbed his face and made him look at me.

"I was not trying to insult you. You know how I feel about you spending that kind of money on me. That necklace has to be the most expensive thing you have ever bought me. It's not that I don't like it; it's that, besides tonight, I can't imagine where I would ever wear something so extravagant."

Edward's hands grasped my wrists and pulled my hands from his face. I had not made things better.

"Funny, I assumed as my girlfriend, you would be attending functions with me quite frequently. I guess I shouldn't assume you want the same things as I do."

He started down the stairs again.

"Edward," I called out to him, but he continued walking. "Edward." He refused to turn around.

Everyone was gone, and I was left with the task of getting ready for an evening at the Four Seasons with my communicatively challenged boyfriend while wearing a necklace that was worth more money than I could imagine. It didn't help that I had a reason to be a little peeved, too.

When Jake saw my car this afternoon, he almost fell over.

"Where in the hell did you get this thing?" he had asked, running a hand over the side of the hood.

"It's Edward's, but he lets me drive it." I lied, but after the necklace, I couldn't admit that he bought me a car as well. "It's more environmentally friendly than the truck. You know, because it's a hybrid." My car knowledge was lacking. Jake's was not.

"Yeah, I know it's a hybrid. It's the Infiniti M35 hybrid that's not even being sold until sometime this spring. How the hell did he get his hands on one of these?" Jake's eyes roamed over it in awe. "Bella, this is a one of a kind right now."

Of course it was. Everything about the man I was in love with, including Edward himself, was one of a kind. He was unbelievable.

"I think there's a good chance Mr. Masen made the five o'clock news," Charlotte said, joining me in the living room and pulling me from my thoughts.

I grabbed the remote and switched on the television. Sure enough, they covered the announcement regarding the release of Denali. There was a clip of Edward and some other executives shaking hands. Edward had the perfect face for television. His natural charisma was on display for all of Seattle when they showed another clip of him speaking to the reporters.

The female news anchor fanned herself after the segment. "I think it's easy to see why Mr. Masen is one of Seattle's most eligible bachelors. Wouldn't you agree, Lisa?" she asked, throwing it to the woman who did weather.

Lisa couldn't help but agree. "Absolutely, Julie. Same reason he's always included in People's Sexist Man Alive issue."

"Way to focus on his true accomplishments," I grumbled.

Charlotte laughed at me. "Bella, the man might make his money because of his business sense, but he usually makes the news for a very different reason."

"I suppose you're right." I forced a smile. I didn't want to be the kind of girlfriend who got jealous of other women ogling her boyfriend.

"Your family and friends from home seemed nice," she said, thankfully changing the subject.

I blew out a big breath. "I wish I could have shown them Edward's house instead of the condo. This place is impressive, but it lacks a sense of home."

The condo looked like an executive's very expensive bachelor pad. I could tell they were all thinking that when I showed them around. The house in Woodinville was much homier. I think my dad would have been less worried if he saw me living there.

"I think the difference in style is very intentional. You know, you might be the only woman who was ever invited to the estate. You were definitely the first one to ever sleep there."

I blushed, again reminded that privacy was a thing of the past. House managers,

drivers, and bodyguards saw to that.

"I don't mean to pry, but you've seemed troubled since your guests left. Everything okay?" Charlotte asked kindly.

Troubled seemed like a good word to describe how I was feeling. Ever since lunch, I was troubled with doubts again. "What if I'm no good at this?"

Charlotte took a seat next to me on the sectional. "Good at what?"

"Being the woman in his life."

She raised her brow. "Why would you say that?"

I sighed. *Where to start?* "The money is so hard to get used to. The excess and the extravagance. I'm not sure I handle it very well."

Charlotte laughed. "I don't know how anyone handles it. When I first started working for Mr. Masen, you have no idea how nerve-racking it was to dust off things you knew cost more than everything you owned. I kept thinking, if I break this, I'll be broke!"

A giggle escaped from me as well. "The first time I waited on him at Eclipse, he ordered a bottle of wine that cost more than my truck, which at the time was the most expensive thing I owned. Carrying it up the stairs, I thought the same exact thing."

"The way he lives is not normal. The amount of money he has is almost unfathomable. I think what makes you perfect for him is the fact that you want to be with him in spite of the money, not because of it."

She was so good at putting things in perspective for me. I told her about lunch and the necklace. I explained how hurt and mad he was when he left.

She nodded knowingly. "Mad is a given whenever things don't go the way he plans."

I sighed. "He stormed off when I tried to apologize. I guess in his world, people have events to wear million dollar necklaces at quite often. I didn't know that. I have no idea what his world is really like. That's becoming painfully obvious."

Charlotte patted my knee. "You're both learning. The nice thing is maybe you two

can create a new world together, one that makes you both comfortable."

"Miss Swan?" Liam's voice startled us both. For being such a big guy, he could sure sneak up on a person. "Mr. Masen has requested that I drive you to the hotel and get you settled over there. Can you show me what you would like me to put in the car?"

"He's not coming home first?" I was worried he was avoiding me, and that worry was fueled by the fact that he contacted Liam and not me directly.

"No ma'am."

Charlotte gave me a sympathetic smile before I made my way back to the bedroom to pack.

The Presidential Suite at the Four Seasons was almost no different from Edward's condo. We weren't as high up but had a wonderful view of Elliott Bay and Puget Sound. The suite was the size of my old apartment. It was contemporarily designed, with two sofas in the large living room, a private study, and a dining room. The colors reminded me more of Edward's house, though. Terra cotta and chocolate accented the taupe and gold, which dominated the space.

Liam had brought me here to meet up with Edward, but he was still nowhere to be seen. According to the woman at the front desk, he had checked in and left me a key. All attempts to contact him were fruitless. He wasn't answering his cell and my texts were ignored.

The party started at eight and it was a little after seven. I decided to take a shower and get ready without him. The ensuite bathroom was a marble masterpiece. There was a deep soaking tub and a separate rain shower. The little kid in me thought the integrated television in the mirror was kind of cool. I guess wealthy people did not like to miss their favorite television shows while getting ready in the bathroom. I put on one of the satellite radio channels and hopped in the shower. Rain showers were fancy, but when you had hair as thick and long as mine, it felt like it took days to rinse all the shampoo out.

I toweled off and walked into the private dressing suite between the bedroom and bathroom, surprised to find Edward buttoning up his tuxedo shirt.

"Hey," I said, feeling self-conscious for some reason. "I didn't hear you come in."

"Well, it's almost time for the party," he replied coldly, turning his back to me and continuing to dress.

The man sure could hold a grudge. I had apologized, but he did not forgive easily.

"You're hurting my feelings, I hope you know. If that's your intent, mission accomplished. If it's not, will you please talk to me?"

"I can't talk to you right now."

"You can't talk to me? In less than an hour, we're supposed to go downstairs where I'm going to be *presented* to the public as your girlfriend. Can you at least look at me?"

Edward glanced over his shoulder. "I can't talk to you or look at you right now because you're standing there, *wet*, and in nothing but a towel. It is taking every ounce of self-control I possess to not grab you and spend the rest of the night doing lots of dirty things to you."

"Oh," I said in a whisper. A flutter of excitement tickled my stomach. "I didn't realize there was another option. I vote for doing lots of dirty things."

Edward set down the cufflink he was working on and let out a humored chuckle. He glanced back at me, trying to recapture his ire. "Don't test my resolve, Isabella."

"But I'm so good at it, though," I replied, hoping to keep hold of his amusement instead of his anger.

He nodded. "That you are."

"Does the CEO of the company really need to be at the launch party? I mean, couldn't you appoint someone like the Vice President of Marketing to host?"

Edward turned all the way around, so he was facing me. "Come here and take that towel off."

That was the answer I was looking for. Maybe we could skip the party, forget all about the necklace debacle, and enjoy our weekend in complete privacy. Preferably naked.

I walked towards him, pulling the tucked corner of the towel out and opened it wide so he got an eyeful. I let it hit the floor before standing in front of him. His

thumb ran along my bottom lip, causing both of them to part in anticipation. I could feel the heat rising deep in my belly. He dragged his index finger along my jaw, down to the hollow of my neck. I swallowed hard as that finger continued between my breasts, circling around one, and then the other. One damn finger. He was trying to kill me. My warm skin from the shower was beginning to feel on fire. My breathing was unsteady and a few soft moans escaped my lips when his finger brushed against the rosy pink peaks.

"I shouldn't have given you the necklace in front of everyone. I should have waited until we were here. Alone," he whispered the last word, leaning in and brushing his lips against my cheek.

I exhaled in relief. He was mad at himself and me. Hopefully, he would forgive us both and we could focus on those dirty things.

"The necklace is beyond beautiful. I need to get better at accepting gifts big and small."

All of his fingers now ghosted down my sides and then pressed into the flesh at my hips. "Some of my larger gifts you seem to have no problem accepting." He pulled my naked body against his clothed one. I could feel my favorite large gift against my stomach.

My hands clasped around his neck. "I love you. I love that you threw me a surprise birthday lunch." I kissed him on the mouth. His lips were so soft and warm. He kissed me back until his smile became too big. He pulled back from me.

"You really are a terrible liar." A crooked grin lit up his face. He kissed me one more time before releasing me and stepping back.

"Hey," I whined. "I was promised lots of dirty things."

He pulled a Four Season's robe from a hanger and threw it around me. "You were promised nothing. Unfortunately, the party downstairs cannot be hosted by my VP of Marketing. He is not nearly as charming as I am, and I hear he's a terrible drunk when the drinks are free." He tied the belt around my waist, effectively covering me back up. "Get ready." He kissed me on the nose and picked his cufflink off the small dresser in the room.

"But...we were...you said...you started...I wanted to..." I sputtered pointlessly.

Damn him.

When I went to Neiman Marcus, I told myself I was not going to look at the prices of any of the dresses. I wanted Chelsea to pick out whatever she thought would look good on me, the only request I had was that it be blue. Edward loved me in blue. Since that word was reserved for so few things, it was a must for the dress. The dress I ended up getting was a navy blue Dior. It had a ruched bodice, pencil-style skirt, and luckily a deep v-neck, making the necklace Edward bought a good choice. It wasn't too formal but appropriate for a black-tie event. Any dress that cost two thousand dollars better be appropriate for a black-tie event. Okay, I tried to not look at the price tags, but the temptation was too great.

I did my hair and my make-up, leaving my hair down and wearing way more eye shadow and liner than usual. I came out into the living room to ask for Edward's help zipping me up. He was on his phone, pacing around the living room. Something was wrong.

"How does something like this happen? You have thirty minutes to find him or you're fired. Are we clear?" He ended his call and raked a hand through his hair.

"Who's lost?"

Edward hadn't noticed I was standing out there with him. He put his phone in his jacket pocket and rubbed his forehead.

"The man I had keeping an eye on James can't seem to find him at the moment."

I swallowed nervously. This was not the night for us to not know where Mr. Hunter was spending his evening.

"Well, we have a lot of security here. I can't imagine he'll be able to disrupt your party."

Edward didn't look so sure. "You need to be by me or Liam at all times tonight. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"All times, Isabella. If you need to use the bathroom, you need to have Liam escort you up here. Are we clear?"

"I got it." I walked over to him and grabbed his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. "Can you zip me up?" I turned my back to him and moved my hair out of the way.

"You look absolutely perfect, by the way." He pulled up the zipper and rested his hands on my shoulders. Placing a small kiss on my exposed neck, his hands moved down my arms. "You are so beautiful. I love this color on you, but you know that, don't you?"

I fought a smile. "Maybe..."

"You don't have to wear the necklace if it makes you uncomfortable. I'm sure the girl at Neiman Marcus accessorized you appropriately."

I spun to face him. "I am wearing the necklace you bought me. There isn't anything else I want to wear."

He eyed me with doubt but didn't challenge me. I brought it over to him and turned my back again, flipping my hair over my shoulder. I helped him hold it up so he could clasp the ends together. I fingered the large diamond, fascinated by its perfection. I had never seen a real diamond this large. Everyone would know I was his tonight. This necklace would see to that. I wasn't simply arm candy. He had marked me as different, special. Maybe I could get used to this after all.

"All done," he announced. I could feel the full weight of the necklace around my neck as he let go.

I turned to face him and wrapped my arms around his neck. My shoes added a couple inches to my height that made quite a difference. Instead of staring at his neck, I was eye level with those lips.

"I love you," I whispered.

Edward's eyes closed and he dropped his forehead until it rested on mine. He wanted to say it. He wanted to say it so badly. Those three words had to be choking him, caught in his throat, dying to get out.

"Thank you," he said instead.

I took a deep breath and let it out. "Let's go get all the presenting and celebrating done so we can come up here and spend the rest of the weekend exploring those dirty things you referenced earlier."

He smiled back at me. "The anticipation of those dirty things is going to be what gets me through this evening, believe me."

I could wait for the words. He was going to say them someday. Edward needed to feel safe in order to say them. Tonight's events did not make him feel very safe.

"And that's when I told him quantitative easing is a myth! If you think that having the Fed borrow money from the fucking Treasury and banks to buy assets is going to boost the economy, you're kidding yourself! This is a plan created out of fear and panic, plain and simple."

I wished I knew what the man standing in front of me was saying, but Economics was never my strong suit. It appeared Edward had a better understanding of the current topic, since he was nodding and mmhmm'ing in all the right places.

We had made our way around the room quite quickly. Edward, being Edward, had no qualms about cutting someone off mid-sentence to move on to the next person vying for his attention. I had been introduced to close to a hundred people, whose names I was never going to remember. I met bank presidents, CEOs and other high ranking executives of several internet retailers and businesses, as well as Masen Corporation VPs and board members. I met so many powerful and wealthy people; it was beginning to make my head spin.

We had stopped to talk to Alice, Jasper, Esme, and Carlisle for a couple minutes but had to keep moving. I would have liked to stay with them, but Edward's hand was wrapped tightly around mine the entire time we'd been here. He held a drink in one hand and me with the other, only letting me go long enough to shake hands every once and awhile.

"Sometimes I think I should put my business sense to better use. Maybe I should go into politics. Running the country can't be that much harder than running a multibillion dollar company," Edward said, earning a hearty laugh from the man, a Masen Corp financial specialist.

"When you're old enough to be President, you'll have my vote, Masen."

The two men shook hands again in parting, while I nodded and smiled farewell. Sometimes I forgot how young Edward really was. It was hard to believe he was too young to do something. Edward grabbed my hand immediately and pulled me over to the bar.

"Do you want another glass of wine?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I think I'll wait until I get some food in my stomach."

There were several buffet tables set up around to room with fancy hors d'oeuvres. There were a few tables to sit at, but most of the guests were standing. Edward was going to make some speech; then there was going to be a band, so people could dance if they wanted.

"Are you hungry? Do you want to eat?" His voice was laced with concern.

I shrugged. I wanted to sit down. I wanted to stop smiling for a few minutes. I wanted to take a break from being under a microscope. The men Edward introduced me to gave me a good once over with their eyes but then turned their full attention on him. It was the women who couldn't take their eyes off me. Whether they were Edward's business associate or the wife of one, they couldn't stop themselves from inspecting me, trying to figure out why Edward Masen was with someone like me. None of them could resist staring at the diamond hanging from my neck.

He squeezed my hand. "If you want to eat, we can eat. I just need to talk to a couple more people before I make my speech."

"Would you mind if I hung out with your family? Took a little break?"

"You've been such a trooper." He kissed my temple. His smile lit up his already luminous face. "We can attempt a break."

"Edward Masen, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were actually enjoying yourself this evening." One of the women I recognized from the group that accompanied Edward to Eclipse stood in front of us.

So much for taking a break.

"Denali may have launched later than you promised but appears to be extremely profitable out of the gate. Profits always make me happy."

"Well, Irina successfully made me a liar. I'm just glad you didn't let me go, so I can redeem myself." She glanced at our clasped hands, my face, and then on the diamond. She had to recognize me like I did her. I had waited on her at least twice.

"Tanya, you remember Isabella. Isabella, this is Tanya Fisher. She was one of the lead programmers on the Denali project."

I stuck out my hand, which she reluctantly shook. She was staring hard, trying to

place me and failing.

"I'm sorry, have we met before?"

"I used to work at Eclipse, the restaurant."

The lightbulb went on. "The waitress," she said with a nod.

"She's a teacher," Edward said almost defensively. "Isabella is an English teacher at a private school here in the city." He let go of my hand and wrapped his arm around my waist.

His possessive gesture did not go unnoticed. "Well, such a nice change of pace for you, I'm sure."

I wasn't sure if she was talking to me or Edward. All I did know was that I didn't like her or her straight and incredibly smooth-looking strawberry blonde hair.

"Yes, well, we were going to go join my family and get some food. Enjoy the rest of the evening," Edward said, pushing me forward with his hand on my lower back.

We headed towards the table where Alice and Jasper were sitting.

"Please tell me you never-"

"I don't sleep with employees, Isabella; it's bad business," he said firmly in my ear, answering my question before I finished asking it.

"I was going to say, never sang the National Anthem at a Mariners game, but I'm happy to hear sex with employees is out."

Edward's brow furrowed, and then he snickered as he shook his head. "You are so weird sometimes, you know that?"

"You like it when I'm weird. Admit it."

"I like you all the time. More than I like anyone else." He kissed the side of my head again.

More than anyone else. I liked the sound of that.

We joined Alice and Jasper after grabbing some food. Edward sat with us for a

whole ten minutes before someone came over and pulled him away. Luckily, he went without me. Being presented to the public caused me to work up an appetite. As soon as Edward left, Liam was there, standing by the table. I hadn't seen him all night, but he must have been watching me.

Esme and Carlisle sat with us, and Alec stopped by to say hello. It wasn't so bad being around the few people I did know. I tried to imagine myself attending events like this with Edward in the future, events that wouldn't include his family. Those might be harder to get through.

Before Edward could return to the table, he had to make his speech. He was so poised and charming in front of the crowd. Everyone respected him; that was clear. The music started, and many people took to the dance floor, including Carlisle and Esme.

"I meant to ask you earlier, but I asked Rosalie to come out with me next week for dinner and dancing. We were hoping you would come with us." Alice's invitation came as no surprise.

"You and Rosalie?"

"I want her to like me." Leaning in closer, she whispered, "She doesn't seem to like too many people."

Very true. Rosalie didn't even like me.

"I need to talk to Edward about it. We might have to bring..." I flicked my head towards my bodyguard extraordinaire.

Jasper heard that. "Fun girls' night with Bella and the Beast."

Alice narrowed her eyes at him. "You know, my brother is only looking out for her. James Hunter is dangerous." Ever since the big I love you moment last weekend, Alice was totally Team Edward again.

"I'm sure he is dangerous, but he's only dangerous to Bella because she's with *him*. No Edward, no danger. Seems like a no-brainer to me," Jasper argued.

"I thought we agreed we were going to stay out of it," she snapped.

"It's not fair; your friendship is incentive for her to stay with him."

"I would be her friend even if she didn't date my brother, but she is dating my brother, and we are going to stay out of it!"

"What if she was bad for him? Wouldn't you try to keep him safe from her?"

"He's not bad for her!"

"I disagree, and a week ago, you would have disagreed, too. It's ridiculous that because he says he loves you that all the sudden everything is forgiven and forgotten. Love doesn't make this all right, Al."

I got up and left the table, needing to distance myself from their argument. I had fought with Jasper enough about this; I didn't need to listen to the two of them fight about it. It was terrible that my relationship with Edward was having such a negative effect on theirs.

I was done with this whole party. I wanted to leave. It dawned on me that I could leave anytime I wanted. We had a room that was just waiting for me. Edward would understand. I couldn't see him as I looked around the massive ballroom. I figured Liam could somehow tell Tyler and Tyler could tell Edward. Tonight the security guards all had earpieces. It seemed we were getting a little more sophisticated in our security measures.

"Can you ask Tyler to tell Edward we're heading upstairs?"

Liam nodded and started talking into his wrist like the Secret Service guys do in the movies. He followed me out of the room and to the lobby. That was when I realized I left my purse on the table.

"Shit, I forgot my purse. Can you run in and get it for me? Please?"

Liam did not look happy, not that he ever looked happy. He always looked serious, even more serious than Tyler. At least I could get Tyler to smile once and a while.

"I'm not supposed to leave you alone, Miss Swan. We can go get it together."

I sighed. There would be no escape if I went back in. "Come on. Look, I'll be here, waiting for the elevator. I could even go up to the tenth floor and wait right outside the door to the room for you. I'm pretty sure nothing is going to happen between here and getting me up to the room. I think Edward was worried about a party crasher, but there was no crasher. Please. Pleeeease." I was whining obnoxiously, and I knew it.

"I have my orders, Miss Swan."

"If I go back in there, Alice and Jasper will beg me to stay. If I leave, you get to relax because I'll be locked in my room. Would you rather relax or be on guard the rest of the night? I'll wait right here. Come on."

He seemed to be slightly swayed by my argument. He glanced around the lobby. There were only a handful of people milling about.

"There's a guard outside the room. Get on the elevator and go straight up. Wait with that guard until I get up there. Okay?"

A huge smile overtook my face. "Yes, I understand. Thank you, Liam. I'm headed straight to the tenth floor. I promise." I practically bounced over to the elevators. He watched me and then headed back to the ballroom to retrieve my purse.

I could not wait to take my shoes off. One would think that for eight hundred dollars, my Christian Louboutin peep toe pumps should be like walking on clouds. That wasn't the case, though. They still hurt, just like my thirty-dollar Payless pumps.

The elevator doors opened. I was the only one waiting and stepped in. Pressing the number ten button, I scooted to the back and leaned against the wall. I hoped Edward would take my exit as a hint that he should join me. Dirty things were awaiting him.

Just before the elevator closed, a man slipped in. He managed to not touch the sensors on the doors and they shut behind him. I was about to apologize for not paying attention and holding the doors for him when I noticed who it was.

"Isabella, what a coincidence."

There was never anything coincidental about any of our meetings. The hairs raised on the back of my neck. I moved as far away from him as I could in the small space. Unfortunately, that meant I had to move away from the buttons that could shorten this ride immensely.

"If you hurt me, he will kill you," I warned, knowing that was exactly what Edward would do.

James laughed. "I don't want to hurt you, Isabella. I want to *save* you. I need to save you from him. I couldn't save Bree, but I will save you."

"Edward didn't do anything to Bree except show her a better time in bed than you could."

James tilted his head to the side, surprised that I knew anything about Bree or maybe because I was daring enough to provoke him. "Edward shared part of his secret, huh? I wouldn't say he showed her a better time. I think he just paid better. I see he's paying you quite well." He took a step towards me and reached for my necklace. "This is very nice. Not something you picked up at Walmart, now is it?"

I smacked his hand away. "Don't touch me."

He smiled wickedly at me. "I'm not the one you should be afraid of, Isabella." His continuous use of my name annoyed me. "Edward is the dark one. He's the one who will hurt you in the end; don't you see? When he tires of you, which he will, he will get rid of you. I just hope it isn't the same way he got rid of Bree."

The elevator chimed, and the doors opened to the tenth floor. I bolted past James and towards the Presidential Suite. I could only hope James would follow me, so the guard outside the suite could kick his ass. James didn't get out, though. The doors closed, and I ran to the suite alone.

Edward was going to kill me. Well, not in the way James was insinuating, but figuratively speaking, he was going to kill me. That was if Liam didn't kill me first. I turned the corner and saw the security guard outside the door. He greeted me warily, probably wondering what the hell I was doing there without Liam.

Before I could even explain to him what happened, I heard heavy footsteps coming from where I had just come. Edward, Liam, and Tyler were all running towards us.

"What did I tell you?" Edward screamed. He grabbed my arms and shook me one time. "You promised! You promised, and then you left without your guard! You are so fucking lucky nothing happened!"

Oh shit. He didn't know something had happened, and he was already madder than I'd seen him in a long time. The tears welled up in my eyes before I knew what hit me. Edward went from raging mad to remorseful in a split second.

He pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I yelled. Please don't cry."

I cried not because he yelled but because he was going to yell a lot more when I told him what happened in the elevator. I cried because James had scared the hell

out of me in the elevator and I was finally beginning to realize how dangerous that situation could have been.

Tyler opened the door to the suite and held it open so we could go in. He and Liam checked all the rooms, even though there had been a guard standing outside the whole time. I knew the person they were looking for was probably still on the elevator. They left Edward and I alone, and I considered the best way to tell him what happened.

"I asked one thing of you tonight. *One* thing!" He paced in front of me while I sat on the couch.

There was only one way to tell him. "He was on the elevator."

Edward stopped pacing. He might have stopped breathing for all I knew. The room became frighteningly still and quiet. Edward picked up a glass vase filled with stones and one purple orchid off the coffee table and threw it across the room, causing a horrible crashing noise to echo through the entire suite. He then flipped the glass-topped table over in his rage. Decorative wooden balls rolled all over the floor.

"Damn it!" His hands pulled at his hair as he stormed away from me. I wasn't sure if he was running away or looking for more damage to cause. He flung open the door. "Get your fucking asses in here, now!"

Liam and Tyler followed Edward back in. He led them back to me. I was shaking, and the tears continued to roll down my face.

"Tell them!" he shouted at me. "Tell them!"

I wiped my cheeks and looked at Tyler. I couldn't look at Liam because I was probably the reason he was going to get fired tonight. The guilt was overwhelming.

"James Hunter jumped on the elevator with me and rode up here but didn't get off when I did."

"Fuck," Liam mumbled under his breath.

I looked at Edward, who had resumed his pacing. "He didn't do anything. He said he was trying to save me. He said he couldn't save Bree, but maybe he could save me. I told him I knew you didn't do anything to her except sleep with her. He tried to make it sound like you had something to do with her death and told me I better hope

you didn't get rid of me the same way. I don't believe him, Edward. I don't, I swear."

"He wasn't already on the elevator?" Tyler asked.

"No, he jumped in as the doors were closing."

"The lobby was clear. I didn't see him. I looked for him before I left, I swear," Liam said in his own defense.

"He did. I don't know where James came from. Don't be mad at Liam. This is my fault. Be mad at me."

"Oh, I'm mad at you! Don't worry about that!" Edward rubbed his forehead. "I am the only one who can fucking tell the guards what to do. Liam was supposed to listen to me and only me!"

"It will never happen again. I will never ask him to break the rules again. Please don't be mad at him."

Edward shook his head at me in disbelief. He turned to the men. "Go find him." With that, both men left us alone again.

I let my head fall into my hands. After a few minutes of silence, Edward sat beside me.

"I trusted you."

His words were like a stake through my heart. I had done the one thing that I promised I wouldn't do. I had run into the metaphorical burning house, not thinking about the consequences of my actions. I made it out alive, but I wasn't sure that would help Edward recover.

"I wasn't thinking. I never thought he would-"

"Stop," he commanded, leaning back on the couch. He covered his face, pressing the heels of his hands over his eyes.

"I should have listened. I made a mistake. People make mistakes."

"Did he touch you?"

"No."

"Did he say anything else?"

"Not really. Just he wasn't the one I should be afraid of and insinuated that you were trying to buy me."

Edward sat upright and began to undo his tie. "I should fire Liam."

I could not live with myself if I got Liam fired. "Please don't. He really didn't want to do what I asked. I begged. A lot. I am really annoying when I beg. Resistance was futile."

I saw one side of his mouth curve up just a bit and for a quick second before returning to its frowning position.

"If anything had happened to you..."

"I am so sorry. I will not screw around with the security anymore. I swear." I put my hand on his arm, needing him to hold me, to forgive me.

Sensing my need, he turned and pulled me into his arms. I buried my head into the crook of his neck as the tears reemerged. I was crying because even though he was comforting me, I knew he was still mad. I was crying because the reality of our situation was clear. James was a real danger to me. I also cried because I had blown it. Those three little words that I was patiently waiting for him to say were not going to be uttered any time soon.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Phew, anyone else tired? This thing was enough for two chapters. Ugh, James ruins everything! Just when he was so close to telling her how he feels about her. Now he's going to be locked back up. Buried in all that insecurity. Girls' night out next week. That should be a fun, right? .com for a little discussion.

Thanks to the usual suspects. momof4luvntwisaga - for the help with my confusing rambling. All of you for reading and reviewing. I didn't get to reply much this week. With the extra post on Tuesday, trying to get another chapter written, and occasionally functioning in the real world, I didn't get to it. But I read them all. Thanks so much!

Chapter 15

Chapter 15

Friday, September 24th at noon

University Prep's cafeteria was no Eclipse, but its food was a step up from any school lunch I'd ever eaten. My Friday at noon lunch date had been cancelled. Twenty minutes before I planned to leave school, Edward texted me.

Too much to do. Have to cancel lunch so I can be a part of the "male bonding" tonight.

Alice had the great idea that the guys - Jasper, Edward, and Emmett - should all get together while the ladies had their night out. Jasper thought it was a terrible idea, Edward groaned loudly and threatened to go out of town to avoid it, while Emmett was thrilled about going to Edward Masen's estate and hanging with a billionaire and his girlfriend's brother.

Truth be told, I wasn't sure how excited I was about spending the evening with Alice and Rosalie. I loved Alice. Rosalie - not so much. It didn't help that I had to bring my bodyguard with me. Thankfully, that was still Liam. Rescuing his job after almost causing him to lose it didn't make him happy with me. He wasn't very friendly before I got him in trouble. Now, he was cold as ice, all business, and completely by the book.

"Miss Swan?" Kim Wyatt, a sophomore in my second period class, popped her head in my door. "Are you busy?"

"Just eating my turkey sandwich. Come on in."

Kim was a quiet kid, but she was smart and an excellent writer from what I had seen. The first assignment I asked every student to complete was to tell me about themselves in a million words or less. Luckily, no one wrote close to a million words and only one smart ass wrote it in three - *I am me*. He got a C-. Kim wrote a heartfelt essay that earned her a solid A. She was at University Prep on a scholarship. She wasn't from the same neighborhood that most of the kids who went here came from. She lived with her mom and younger brother, worked after school bagging groceries, and wanted to be an author someday. I liked Kim. I wanted to help her be what she wanted to be.

When she walked in, I could tell she'd been crying.

"Everything okay?"

Kim ducked her head and wiped under her eye. "I just don't want to be in the cafeteria right now."

I nodded as she took a seat near my desk.

"You want to talk about it?"

She shook her head and pulled out a wrinkled brown paper bag from her backpack. After spreading her lunch out on the desk, she unwrapped her sandwich and took a bite. We ate in silence for a bit.

"Do you know who Phoebe Sanders is?"

I mentally ran through my class lists. "She's not in one of my classes. I don't know her."

"Well, she's a bitch."

My eyebrows shot up at her choice of words.

"Sorry, Phoebe Sanders is a malicious, overbearing, contemptible human being, who has no regard for anyone but herself."

"Now that's a description that makes your English teacher proud," I joked before taking what she said seriously. "Did she do or say something I should know about?"

"Nothing she hasn't done or said a million times already."

"Maybe we should talk to the headmaster."

Kim rolled her eyes. "You're new here, Miss Swan, but come on. When has it ever worked out for the victim to rat on the bully?"

"It could help," I insisted with a shrug. I didn't even sound convincing to myself.

"Really?" she asked with a skeptical tilt of her head. "I think it just pisses the bully off more. And when the bully is one of the most popular girls at school, you're just asking ninety percent of the other students to join her in ostracizing you. I think I'll

pass."

As much as I wanted to dispute what she said, I knew she wasn't really wrong.

"I'm sorry."

She looked at me curiously. "You aren't going to tell me that's not true and how University Prep students are all too upstanding to do anything like that? Where's my sunshine and rainbows?"

I laughed. "Sweetheart, there are bullies everywhere. They're usually pretty powerful, too. I wish I could tell you it'll be all better when you grow up."

My night with Rosalie was going to be a good example of dealing with adult bullies. Working with Jane the Pain was another.

"You have to deal with bullies?"

"Maybe I *am* the bully." I winked.

She nearly choked on her bottled water. "Yeah, right. You totally give off that bully vibe, Miss Swan."

"Okay, fine. I'm nice. I'll admit it. I am not ashamed of being nice. I do, however, have to deal with people who can be... What was that word you used again?"

"A bitch?"

"That's the one."

Kim sighed. "Great, so there's no relief in sight, huh?"

I shrugged. "There are not nice people in the world, sweetheart. That's just a fact. The key is remembering that they can only hurt you if you let them. I've also learned that there's usually good and bad in everyone. Some bullies are just caught in a terrible cycle that leaves them broken and kind of lonely. Sometimes they need to have someone stand up to them and let them know they can't walk over everyone."

I was thinking of a very different bully now. A rich and handsome bully, who was learning to embrace his kinder and gentler side.

"Phoebe Sanders doesn't ever look lonely to me. All the boys love her, and all the

girls except for me want to be her."

"That's not always a desirable position to be in. Trust me. Those are sometimes the loneliest people of them all."

Kim tossed the rest of her lunch in my garbage can with some oomph. "Are you trying to make me feel bad for her? Because I'm not going to. She's evil."

"No, no, that's not what I'm saying. You don't have to feel bad for her. Just don't assume the grass is always greener. Empower yourself by remembering that no one's life is perfect. Not even Phoebe Sanders'. Your life might even be better, considering you don't feel the need to be cruel to other people like she does."

Kim sank back in her seat, contemplating what I said. She seemed satisfied with my insight when the bell rang.

She zipped her backpack up. "I thought maybe you'd be gone for the day. I was only going to hide in here," she admitted.

I smiled. "Usually I would be. My lunch date cancelled."

She smiled back. "I'm glad. You're pretty cool, Miss Swan. Have a good weekend."

"You, too, Kim."

She left, running off to her next class. I decided I was glad, too. Not that I didn't want to see Edward, but I was happy that I could make someone feel better today.

Edward, my former bully, was having a bad week, and nothing I said or did seemed to make him feel any better. He was stressed out about James and still holding a bit of a grudge about my trust-breaking elevator ride. When Edward was hurt and unhappy, everyone around him was bound to be the victim of his bullying ways.

I finished grading some papers and writing my lesson plans for the following week. It was nearly the end of the school day when I was done. I texted Liam that I would be out in a minute and that I wanted to stop at the grocery store on the way home. He texted me back immediately.

Orders are that you go straight home. No stops.

This was Edward's new way of controlling everything I did. He didn't dare directly

tell me I wasn't allowed to go somewhere. He told Liam, and then Liam informed me where I could and could not go. Since I made a promise not to mess with security anymore, I was left with no recourse. We were going to have a conversation about this before I was tempted to break my promise.

I called Edward on my way to the car.

"I'm very busy, Isabella."

I *hated* when he answered the phone like that.

"I want to stop at the grocery store. Can you please let Liam know that's okay?"

"When you get home, tell Char what you need, and she'll get it."

"That's ridiculous. Why would I send the woman out when I'm already out? Liam can come in the store with me and follow me around. It'll take five minutes."

"No."

"No?" He had to be kidding me.

"I need to go. I should be home by six-thirty."

"Edward-" I started, but he hung up. He was completely infuriating. *Bully*. He was being nothing more than a bully.

Liam was parked next to my car, waiting and ready. I walked over to his door and motioned for him to roll down his window.

"I just talked to Edward. He said it was fine if we stopped at the store. I'll be quick, I promise." I figured it wasn't messing with security if Liam was with me the whole time.

He shook his head.

"I just talked to him," I said truthfully.

"If he texts me, you can go. If not, we go home." Liam pulled out his phone and checked his messages. He wasn't going to get a message.

"He told me he was very busy. He barely had time to talk to me. I'm sure he

doesn't have time to text you about a five-minute grocery store stop."

"Miss Swan, do I look like I'm new to this job? I ignored Mr. Masen's order once. It won't happen again. Ever."

Damn him.

I stormed over to my car and drove straight home.

Revenge. It was the only thing I could think of that would make me feel better. Problem being, I didn't have much power to exact any really good revenge. I could, however, do some very small things that I knew would get under Edward's skin and not break any of the security rules.

The little black dress I was wearing had not seen the light of day since college. It was short, had a plunging neckline, and looked fabulous with my new Christian Louboutin shoes. Smoky eyes, a little bit darker lipstick than I was used to, and my hair twisted up and off my neck were bound to do the trick.

I walked past his open office door. Edward had gone straight in there after greeting me briefly when he got home. He was on the phone, talking to someone about his busy schedule and having no time for two sessions, whatever that meant. I paused for just a second, placing a hand on the doorframe and adjusting my shoe unnecessarily. I didn't check to see if he noticed me, but I didn't have to.

"I have to call you back," he said to the person on the phone as I dropped my foot and walked away. "Absolutely not, Isabella! No! No! No!"

I smiled and continued to make my way into the kitchen where Charlotte was busy making some food for the guys.

"Wow, you look amazing," she said, sprinkling fresh mozzarella on some handmade pizzas. Jasper wasn't going to be able to complain about the food tonight.

Before I could thank her, Edward came barreling in.

"Are you kidding me?"

"Kidding you about what?" I asked, playing dumb and setting my clutch on the counter.

"You aren't going out looking like that. No way."

"I'm sorry, but I'll go out looking any way I like. You might be able to keep me from stopping at the store after work, but you will not tell me what I can and cannot wear."

He pushed his hair back with his hand. I could see him trying to come up with a way to dispute what I said.

"I'll tell Liam you can't go," he stated confidently. This was his answer for everything lately.

"Great idea. Or maybe you should lock me in a tower or chain me to the bed. Oh, I know, you should buy me one of those dog collars that go with those invisible fences, and then, when I stray too far I'll get shocked!" My voice was rising with each ludicrous suggestion.

I noticed Charlotte had slipped out of the warzone, leaving us to duke this out alone.

"Maybe I should! At least then I could trust that you weren't going to do something stupid!"

"Stupid?" My eyes widened in surprise. "I made one mistake, Edward. One. I should have stayed with Liam. I understand that. I have apologized for that. I won't make the same mistake again. That doesn't mean you get to treat me like a child."

"It only takes one time, Isabella. One time for him to get his hands on you. Now, you're dressed up like that, begging for attention? Did you forget you're going to the same club where you were nearly assaulted last time?"

I learned this week that Edward owned the club that Jasper and Maria had taken me to all those months ago. I didn't know Edward owned a club, but apparently, he owned several establishments in Seattle and around the country. Restaurants, night clubs, bars, and even a hotel/casino in Vegas. I also learned that he would only allow me to go out with Alice if we went to his club, Le Venin.

"I have a bodyguard. No one is going to be allowed near me, I'm sure. Liam follows orders to the T now."

Edward rubbed his forehead. "He's paid to keep you safe. If you have a problem with that, I'm sorry."

"I don't have a problem with that. I have a problem with you! I have a problem with you trying to control every single thing!"

"Ah, finally!" He threw his hands up in the air and then pointed towards the front of the house. "Well, you know where the door is. Anytime you want to leave, go right ahead! I'm sure Jasper will welcome you back with open arms and throw you a welcome back party or some shit like that."

The truth was out. He was testing me. He was waiting for me to break all my promises and run. His trust in me, in us, had been so severely rattled. I stepped up to him and grabbed the lapel of his suit coat. I took a minute, so I could speak calmly. Fighting was not solving our problem.

"I'm not going to leave you. Do you want me to leave you?"

He ran the back of his fingers across my cheek. "I could make you leave if I wanted to." His tone was a mixture of sadness and stubbornness.

I sighed at his inability to believe we were going to be fine. "Do you want to?"

"No," he replied in a whisper. His head dropped in defeat.

I moved my hands up to his face. "I'm not leaving you. If you want to get rid of me, you're going to have to leave me. Stop trying to push me away, because I'm just going to push back. Don't you understand that?"

"You say that, but..."

"But what?"

"Believing it is another story," he admitted.

"You can't scare me away. I'm here. I love you." I kissed him firmly as if to seal the words to his very being. He kissed me back, holding me to him. The kiss grew deeper, and his hands roamed under the skirt of my dress.

"Wouldn't it be better if we cancelled and stayed home tonight, just me and you?" He kissed under my ear and down my neck.

That did sound like a really good idea. I could only hum in agreement. Edward's hand came out from under my skirt and pushed its way down the front of my dress until he was cupping my breast. I shamelessly let my hands wander, too. I undid his

belt and managed to get the button undone while still kissing him along the jaw line. I unzipped him and slid my hand into his pants. Edward was always ready for me. That made me feel like the sexiest woman in the world; it empowered me, emboldened me. I ran the tip of my tongue across his bottom lip before kissing him one more time.

"I love you," I whispered against his lips. No one who worked for Edward was going to walk into this kitchen when they thought we were fighting. I definitely had time to show my appreciation for not making me go out with Rosalie. I pushed him towards the pantry and then pulled him inside. Edward's walk-in pantry was the size of my father's entire kitchen. I dropped to my knees. I tugged at his pants and underwear until he was freed from his confines.

"Shit," he hissed as I gripped him and ran my tongue over the tip of his penis. He moaned loudly and dug his fingers into my hair as I took him in my mouth. It was difficult for him not to thrust his hips and push me further than I was already going. He usually liked to control the pace of everything we did, but tonight he was letting me do it my way.

Staying home and having lots of hot sex was so much more appealing than anything Alice and Rosalie had in store for me. I popped him out of my mouth and pressed the flat of my tongue against his length, staring up at him in that way I knew made him absolutely nuts.

"You are so fucking hot. Do you know that?" he groaned. He made me this way. He made me feel hot and dirty, but in a good way. I took him back in my mouth, and one minute later he came hard.

I stood up and made my way back in the kitchen. I leaned over the counter, spitting into the kitchen sink. I didn't care what people said in romance novels, that stuff never tasted like sweet nectar or yummy marshmallow fluff. It was thick and salty and made me gag if I even thought about swallowing. I walked around to wash my hands and rinse my mouth out. Edward tucked his shirt back in and zipped his pants up.

"You probably cause as much stress as you relieve, but no one relieves it better than you. I think you're the only therapy I need." He came around the counter and behind me as I dried my hands off. His lips tickled the side of my neck, sending tingles down my spine.

"Are you calling your sister or am I?" I asked as his hands gripped my hips.

"My sister will not accept any excuse other than death for canceling on her."

I spun to face him. "But you were the one who said we should cancel. I thought we were canceling. I thought we were going to go upstairs, and you were going to get me out of this dress."

Edward inhaled and exhaled through his nose. He cocked his brow and smirked. "I would love nothing more than to get you out of this dress, whether we cancel or not."

I pushed him away. "We're not canceling?"

He shook his head.

"Why is it that saying no to me is so damn easy but saying no to Alice is like asking you to walk on water?"

He grabbed my hand as I walked away and pulled me back. The smirk was gone, and his eyes were shaded with a sadness I felt just looking at him.

"Knowing what she has had to endure makes it impossible for me to deny her. I pray every day that I'll be able to protect you from ever suffering one second of that kind of pain, physically or emotionally."

With those words, my heart clenched and I was guilted right back into the girls' night out. I ran upstairs to wipe off the stupid makeup, but I was wearing the dress whether he liked it or not.

"We get to walk right in?" Rosalie asked as the bouncer unclipped the velvet ropes and ushered us in.

"It's Edward's club," I explained.

"God, I could get used to this. Our own driver to take us everywhere, VIP status at Le Venin, do we get free drinks, too?"

I shrugged. I didn't think about free drinks. The last time I was here, Edward paid for his own drinks and one of mine.

"We should pay for our drinks," Alice said as she led us further into the club.

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "What good is it being his sister if you don't take full advantage?"

"I never take advantage of my brother," Alice answered back. "There are enough leeches out there."

That was why I loved her. Edward was so fortunate to have a sibling that did not see him as nothing but a free ride. He funded the foundation she worked at but that was charity. She never asked him for anything remotely selfish. She could easily not work. Edward would take care of her if she asked. She could be a socialite, running around, partying, living it up. Alice spent her time taking care of others instead. Using her brother never crossed her mind. I knew that meant a lot to him. I wondered if she knew he'd give her anything she wanted. She'd probably be mad at him for feeling bad for her. She did not come off as someone who wanted anyone's sympathy.

Edward was lucky that Rosalie was not his sister. Tonight, she was successfully annoying the hell out of Alice. Poor Alice was trying so hard to get along with her, but it was harder than she imagined. Rosalie was a pain at dinner. We went to Purple in Woodinville. I thought it was great. The food was good, the service was super, and the atmosphere was cool. Rosalie was nothing but critical. She thought the menu design was unimpressive. She called the food uninspired. She was mean to the waitress and only wanted to tip ten percent. Alice was mortified. Ever since being a server, I was overgenerous with my tips. I knew how hard it was. I would have thought Rosalie would be more understanding. Why I thought Rosalie could muster that, I wasn't sure.

Rosalie was also fixated on Alice's burns. I noticed her staring at them several times at dinner. When Alice went up to the bar to set up a tab, Rosalie took advantage of our time alone.

"So, what happened to her? Was she born that way?"

"Born what way?"

"Please, like you haven't noticed the skin on her arm and neck is all messed up," she sneered. "What happened?"

"Oh my-" I was so appalled I didn't even know what to say. "Do you not talk to your brother at all? She was burned in a fire when she was little. A fire that killed her mom, so you might not want to bring it up."

"Oh." Rosalie looked humbled for the first time all night.

"She's trying really hard to get along with you. She loves your brother and is really good for him. I'm sure he'd appreciate it if you were a little nicer to her."

She seemed affronted. "I've been nice to her."

"She planned this whole evening, and all you've done is put it down. Dinner was great, and you acted all superior. If you can't be nice for your brother's sake, maybe you can be nice for your own because if you can't act like you're having a good time, I'm sure I can persuade Edward to take his Friday lunch business elsewhere."

Rosalie crossed her legs and sat back in her seat. "Wow, you're blackmailing skills have significantly improved."

"I don't want to blackmail you," I said with a sigh. "I want you to make your brother proud. Jasper doesn't ask very much of you. Getting along with Alice is not asking a lot."

"I have no problem with her. I didn't know I was coming off so badly. Dinner was fine. I was just showing her I know a thing or two about the business."

"You were being a bitch," I said plainly. Kim would be proud.

Rosalie's eyebrows shot up. "Duly noted. And, by the way, I know Jasper likes her. He loves her. He wouldn't have let her near me if he didn't like her."

We both smiled at the thought of Jasper really and truly in love. If there was one thing Rosalie and I had in common, it was our affection for Jasper.

Alice returned with a waitress carrying a tray of cosmos. We toasted and drank up. Rosalie made a few positive comments. The two of them began talking about Jasper. Rosalie was sharing some funny stories about him when he was younger that I was sure he was going to thank her for later. At least she was trying.

Liam was standing close to me, since it was too crowded in the club to allow him to watch me from a distance like at the restaurant. I was afraid to go anywhere by myself because then she would know he was there specifically for me. Currently, Rosalie thought he was our designated driver. Dancing was going to be a problem. I was going to have to come up with an excuse. Liam was *not* coming out on the dance floor with me.

When a song Alice liked came on, though, she tried to pull us all out there. I convinced her I should stay and hold the table. Rosalie was going to say something about having Liam do it, but Alice caught my drift. The two of them left me and my all-business bodyguard alone. I pulled out my phone, thinking I should text Edward to see if he was being nice to Jasper and vice versa. I was surprised to see I had a message waiting for me.

You have no idea what seeing you sitting alone does to me.

I spun around in my seat, looking for him. How could he have possibly known I was sitting alone unless he was there? The club was so crowded. I stood up, causing Liam to bristle.

"I think Edward is here," I shouted over the music at him.

Liam nodded and pointed towards the bar. There were Edward and Tyler.

The part of me that was madly in love with him wanted to run over to him and throw my arms around his neck. The independent part of me wanted to know why the hell he was crashing the girls' night out that he refused to let me cancel. He watched me text him back.

No boys allowed at this party. Go home.

I saw him smile and shake his head.

I own this place. I'm here in a professional capacity. Don't bother me while I'm working.

He was so full of it.

Where are Jasper and Emmett? Did you ditch them to come spy on me?

I cocked an eyebrow at him after I hit send. He still smirked at me.

I came to do much more than spy on you.

He had a way of completely setting me on fire with just a few words on a tiny screen. I couldn't wait to find out what else he came here to do. I wasn't going to let him know that, though.

You had your chance to do several things to me. You chose to make your

sister happy. Where are J and Em?

A scowl replaced his smirk.

You don't even want to know what I'm here to do to you?

His disappointment was clear. This was his game, and I was not playing the way he wanted me to. I shook my head, so he answered my last question.

They don't have the self-control I seem to possess.

He motioned to the dance floor. I looked over at the sweaty, dancing group of people. There were Alice and Rosalie getting their groove on with no other than Jasper and Emmett. So much for our girls' night out. At least, I gave my boyfriend a hard time about being here. They seemed to welcome theirs with open arms. I picked my clutch and drink up off the table and made my way over to Edward.

"How come you weren't dancing? I was looking forward to knocking out some excessively flirtatious loser without a chance in hell of ever spending one minute alone with you," he said after I kissed him. Like he would have risked hurting his pretty CEO hands to punch someone. That's what Tyler was for.

I rolled my eyes. "Liam would have made sure there was no one to knock out."

Edward cradled my cheek with his hand and kissed me one more time. Kissing him was almost my favorite thing to do. He took my hand and pulled me through the crowd. I thought maybe we were going to leave so we could do more of that kissing and hopefully get to my most favorite thing, but he led me to a door and into an empty stairwell.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we walked up the stairs.

"VIP room. My VIP room."

We entered a darkened room. There were candles lit on small round tables all around the edges of the room. There were no chairs, only blue fabric-covered banquettes lining two of the walls. One wall was floor to ceiling windows and looked out over the club.

"Wow, you can see the whole place from up here," I said, moving towards the glass.

"You can see them. They can't see you. It's mirrored glass." Edward moved behind me and put his arms around my waist. I liked how the heat of his body made me feel so safe and comforted. He pulled back and walked over to a small bar. I followed him and set down my things on the counter.

"Can I make you something, Miss Swan?"

"If I have any more to drink, I'll pass out before I get home. There will be no fun in that," I replied flirtatiously. I had three glasses of wine at dinner and two cosmos since we got to the club. I was feeling the effects of all the alcohol.

"Water it is," he replied, pouring the contents of an Evian bottle into a glass for me. He filled a highball glass with some expensive looking scotch. He was such an old man. Sometimes I imagined him sitting in his office drinking scotch and smoking a pipe. He so rarely acted his age.

"Dance for me," he said in that demanding tone of his.

"No," I said with a laugh. I was drunk but not *that* drunk. He was not getting a private dance up here.

"Come on. You know you're the sexiest woman ever. I want to see you dance." He sat down on one of the banquettes and watched me.

"Dream on, Mr. Masen. I already performed once for you today." A blow job in the kitchen was as slutty as I was getting tonight.

I walked back over to the wall of glass and looked for Alice and Jasper. They were still out there with Rosalie and Emmett, dancing away. Edward came back up behind me. He planted a soft kiss in the crook of my neck.

"Always so difficult."

I let out a quiet laugh. "Not giving you your way all the time does not make me difficult. It makes me..."

"Exactly what I need," he said, finishing my sentence and making me smile. "This is where I was when I saw you on your first visit here."

"Really?" I asked, turning my head to look at him.

"I saw you sitting at that table over there." He pointed to the spot where Jasper

and I sat talking about him coincidentally. "You and Jasper were talking. I thought he was your boyfriend because of the way you smiled at him. He made you laugh, and I remember feeling terribly jealous."

"Jealous? You didn't like me very much back then. Have you forgotten?" That was the same day he tipped me in pennies. He had gotten his revenge on the waitress who pissed him off the week before.

"I remember liking you more than I should have." His hands began to move up my arms to my shoulders. He was beginning to make my heart race.

"I didn't like you at all back then," I asserted as he kissed my neck again and his fingers began to work the zipper of my dress.

"You're a terrible liar. You liked me a little. You were at least intrigued."

He began to pull down the zipper, kissing my exposed back. I should have told him to stop, but I was powerless against his need for me.

"I'll give you intrigued," I admitted.

"Then, that other woman came over and took Jasper away. I thought maybe I was wrong; perhaps he wasn't your boyfriend. You sat there all alone, and I was pissed at him for leaving you by yourself and relieved at the same time."

He pushed the dress off my shoulders and let it fall to floor. I stood in front of the large window in nothing but my black bra and lace panties. My breathing was slightly uneven, and it felt like my skin was tingling all over.

"I hope you weren't lying about all those people down there not being able to see me," I said as he kissed my shoulder and his tongue ran up my neck.

"Believe me; no one gets to see you like this but me." I knew he wasn't lying. Edward did not share.

His hands splayed across my stomach and his fingers slipped under the top of my panties. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the feeling of his hands on me.

"Is that when you came down and rescued me from that jerk?" I asked as his hands made it all the way inside.

He didn't answer my question. Instead his fingers began to move against me. "I

love being with you like this. I love that I make you this wet."

There was that word. Twice. He loved being with me. He loved turning me on. He had to love me. Why wouldn't he just say it?

"That scumbag who put his hands on you was lucky I didn't let Tyler do more than break his nose."

"I don't remember Tyler being inside the club with you." My voice cracked at the end as he slipped a finger inside me.

"I left him up here. My plan was to get you to come up here with me. I was going to fuck you. I thought if I fucked you, I'd be able to get you out of my head."

He pulled his finger out of me and pushed two back in. I leaned forward, placing my sweaty palms on the glass in front of me. No one could make me feel this way but him. He made me surrender to his every whim. He made me want him all the time.

"Like I could ever get you out of my head," he whispered in my ear. He pulled his fingers out and stepped away from me.

My legs were shaky. I pressed my forehead on the glass, looking down on all the people. Maybe it was because I was in a lust-induced haze, but suddenly everyone in the club seemed to be giving off an intensely sexual vibe. Everyone was standing too close. People were touching with their hands, their mouths, their bodies. One couple was making out in a booth in the corner. A guy had his hand on some girl's ass as she rubbed her body against him on the dance floor. I heard the ripping of a condom wrapper and the ringing of his phone. He wisely ignored the caller.

I tried to play coy. "I wouldn't have had sex with you that night. I didn't really know you, and what I did know I didn't like very much."

Edward was back behind me. He pulled my panties down and had me step out of them. Now, of course, I would have sex with him whenever and wherever he wanted. Now, I could not stop myself. The music was sending vibrations through the glass, through my hand, through my whole body.

"Probably not, which would have driven me completely insane." He pushed my legs apart with his knee. "You make me *feel* so many things, things I don't even have a name for."

He pulled me down on him as he pushed up inside me from behind. One of his hands held me, while the other pressed on the glass next to mine.

"Ahh," I groaned. He knew how to work my body. He knew how to make me want him more than anything else in the world. Back and forth he rocked against me.

"I could fuck you every day of forever, and it would never be enough. It will never be enough. I need you so fucking much." He placed his hand over mine and slipped his fingers in between mine. "I have never wanted someone as much as I want you. All the time. Every minute of every day. It's always you. It will *always* be you," he declared passionately.

Love, obsession, lust, desire. He was feeling all of those things. He was feeling those things about me. I couldn't deny that I was feeling them as well. These feelings were overwhelming, especially in this moment. I watched the people below gyrating, grinding, rubbing against one another. Arms were in the air, some were wrapped around the neck of their partner. Hips thrusting, swinging, rolling. Hands on bodies, lips on lips. Desire, lust, obsession, love.

I screamed out as the wave of pleasure hit me. Smacking the glass with my palm, I worried I might break it or at least call some attention to us up here. The music was so loud that no one heard me. The glass was too thick to crack under my hand. It was only Edward who responded to my release. He groaned as he came and cussed about it being too quick.

"I have no fucking control when it comes to you. It's the story of my life now. No fucking control," he complained. He wrapped his arms around me, kissing my neck and shoulder.

I lifted my head off the glass and leaned it back against him. I was breathing heavy and my legs were like rubber. I was happy Edward was there, holding me up. I turned my head and kissed his cheek.

"I love you," I said breathlessly.

He kissed me sweetly and then pulled away. He got himself put back together as I leaned forward against the glass again. I looked back down at the crowd below us. I tried to find Alice and Jasper. I searched and searched. It wasn't Alice or Jasper that I saw. It wasn't Rosalie or Emmett.

"James."

"What?" Edward growled.

James was standing by the bar, looking around for someone, looking for me, I was sure. I pointed to where he was standing.

"He's here. Why is he here?" I stepped back, suddenly afraid that he could see me.

Edward grabbed his phone off the bar and swore under his breath as he read something on there. He headed for the door. I snatched my dress off the floor, shouting for him to give me a minute. He stopped and paced back and forth, clawing at his hair.

"Do not leave this room. Do you understand?" he said harshly as if I planned to disobey.

"Where are you going?"

"It's time he and I have a conversation."

I stepped into my panties and shook my head. "No. Just have Tyler throw him out."

"We need to get a few things straight. You are going to stay here." He reached for the door.

"Wait!" I ran over to him and threw my arm around his neck. "I love you. Please don't let him provoke you into a fight."

"Do not leave this room." He kissed me hard and then pulled my hands off of him. He and Tyler went down the stairs as he shouted for Liam to guard the door with his life.

I went back to the windows and watched James walk around, scanning the room for me. I finally spotted Alice and Jasper. Alice was looking at her phone. Edward and Tyler came out, and I could see Edward was punching a text into his phone. They were headed towards James. Alice rounded up Rosalie and Emmett, and they left their table. They cut through the dance floor, headed this way. Edward must have told Alice to get up here. Tyler and Edward were right behind James. My heart was racing, but I couldn't look away.

Edward tapped on James' shoulder. They exchanged some words, nothing that seemed too heated. Edward turned, and with Tyler behind him, led James to a booth. Tyler intimidated the people sitting there out of their seats. Edward and James sat

down while Tyler stood guard. Edward was facing my way. I could see him saying something that I was sure was not very nice.

"VIP all the way, baby!" Emmett's voice came booming.

"Wow, this is amazing," Rosalie commented, following behind him.

I realized I hadn't zipped my dress up and struggled to quickly pull it up. Alice's eyes met mine immediately. She was at my side in a flash.

"Are you all right?" she asked, putting a hand on my shoulder.

"Can you help me?" My hands were shaking too much to get my dress zipped. Alice took care of me, no questions asked.

Jasper came over as well. "Where's Edward?"

I turned back to the windows and pointed to him and James still engaged in their discussion.

"Can we have whatever we want from the bar?" Rosalie asked.

"Knock yourself out," Alice replied. "This time it really is on my brother." She joined them at the bar. If there was one thing Alice was good at, it was distracting people from the elephant in the room. Jasper stayed at my side. His hand was on my back, rubbing a small circle in an attempt to comfort me.

Emmett and Rosalie made themselves drinks and took orders from the rest of us. I turned down a drink, too wound up to do anything but watch what was going on down below.

"Nothing's going to happen in a crowded bar," Jasper whispered in my ear. He was trying to calm me down. He had no idea how much I had missed his unconditional support. I leaned into him, thankful for his presence for the first time in so many weeks.

"Bella, I think I'm in love with your boyfriend. I say that as a completely secure heterosexual man, by the way. I can't believe he owns this place. I wouldn't leave the house if I owned that house of his, but this club is sweet!"

I didn't mean to ignore Emmett, but I was trying to read Edward's lips. It was pointless since I had no idea how to read lips. I watched his body language, tried to

figure out how pissed off James was making him. He looked calm, but I knew he wasn't. He jabbed a finger into the table in front of him, obviously making some sort of point, maybe a threat.

"Come dance, Bella!" Emmett said, tugging on my arm. His timing could not be worse.

"Dance with me, Em," Alice said, coming to my aid once again.

James was on his feet when I looked back down at the club. Tyler was escorting him out of there. Edward waited until James was gone before he made his way back up here. I went to the door and pulled it open. Liam blocked my exit.

"Edward's coming up," I said, pushing on him.

"Please get back in the room, Miss Swan."

"He's coming. I want to talk to him."

Pushing Liam was like trying to move a brick wall. "Please get back in the room, Miss Swan," he repeated.

I stopped pushing and tried to see around him. Finally, Edward appeared.

"Can I come out?" I asked him, feeling completely frustrated by my inability to do as I pleased.

"It's okay, Liam."

Immediately, Liam stepped aside, and I rushed for Edward. I hugged him, and he hugged me back.

"What did he say?"

"Can we not talk about this here? I promise when we get home, I'll tell you everything." This wasn't him trying to avoid me. He was thinking about how it would look to everyone else.

We tried to act normal and enjoy the rest of the evening with our new little group of friends. After a half hour of pretending to have a good time, Edward announced it was time for him and I to go. I didn't argue. I hugged Alice and Jasper and waved goodbye to Emmett and Rosalie.

Tyler was back when Edward opened the door. He and Liam escorted us to the car. Once we were shut in, I was ready to talk.

"What did he say?"

Edward rubbed his eyes. "Can we wait until we get home? I just want to enjoy the quiet for a couple minutes."

I laid my head back on the headrest. Pushing him was going to get me nowhere. We drove home in silence. The ride seemed endless. Once we got home, Edward led me straight upstairs. He went into the bathroom to undress and get ready for bed. I did the same, feeling exhausted by the day's events. Up and down, up and down. This was my life with Edward. Always a rollercoaster ride. He took me to my highest highs but also my lowest lows, exciting me one minute but terrifying me next without notice.

I washed my face and hung my dress on its hanger. I put on something to sleep in. Edward and I stood side by side as we both brushed our teeth. It was so strange how we could be so normal when our lives were anything but most of the time. Edward was wearing sleep pants and nothing else. He was barefoot and shirtless. A sight to behold, really. His skin was still browned from our trip to Fiji. Soft skin covered the hard, sculpted lines of his body. He was such a beautiful creature. Always beautiful on the outside. Much more complicated on the inside.

He laughed softly as he wiped his mouth.

"What?" I questioned, my mouth still full of toothpaste foam.

"Sometimes I can't figure out how I got here."

I spit and rinsed away all the minty mess. "Where would *here* be?"

He took my hand and pulled me towards him. "Here is with you." He pushed some hair behind my ear. "Do you have any idea how long I've waited for you?"

"Me?"

"You." He kissed me softly on the lips. "I was getting so good at being alone. I convinced myself I was choosing it. The truth is nobody but you ever really wanted me, though."

My broken Edward was back. I couldn't help but wonder what James said to him.

His insecurity was clearly rising to the surface.

"You never have to be alone again. You know that, right?" I pressed myself against him, wishing I could melt into him.

"I hope so."

"What did James say?" I asked, lifting my head up so I could see him.

He exhaled sharply. "He would most definitely like to see me alone."

"What did he say?"

"Let's do this in bed," he replied, tugging me into the bedroom.

Under the covers, Edward held me, letting me rest my head on his chest.

"He told me you were too good for me," he said, squeezing me a little tighter. "I told him I was well aware of that."

"That's not true."

"It's absolutely true. Don't argue with me."

Bossy, bossy, bossy.

I lifted my head and rested it on my pillow so I could look at him. "What else did he say?"

Edward stared straight up at the ceiling. "He said he was going to make sure that I don't get to keep you."

"Did he mention how he was going to do that since it really isn't up to him?"

"He wasn't very specific." Edward pulled his hand through his hair.

"What did you say?"

"Well, I tried to sound convincing when I told him he was never going to get near you, but he reminded me that it was quite easy to get to you last week."

I squeezed my eyes shut, pissed at myself for making it so easy for James to

compromise Edward's security. I reopened them to find Edward had turned to face me. We were nose to nose.

"That's not going to happen again, though. Did you tell him that?"

His hand caressed my cheek. "It better not."

"I promise," I assured him.

He kissed me gently. "If I had a-

"Stop," I groaned. The nickel line was going to be retired along with the land mines. "Liam and I are going to be best buddies. We'll be like you and Tyler in no time."

Edward smiled crookedly. "Tyler likes me. *You*, on the other hand, completely infuriate Liam."

I smirked back. "Well, I might annoy him, but you intimidate the hell out of him. He's going to do whatever you say."

"He'd better," he said sternly. He took a deep breath and continued to caress my cheek. I loved when he could be so gentle. "Emmett asked to be your bodyguard tonight. He thinks he's suited for that type of work, and God knows Rosalie is asking for trouble by sleeping with an employee. I could see you and Emmett being best buddies."

Something told me that I already had too many guys as best buddies for Edward's liking.

"Emmett looks tough, but he's too nice. He'd let me manipulate him. I might not like it that Liam never listens to me, but I know that my safety is what he cares about more than anything. That's probably better than having him like me."

Edward looked befuddled and shook his head. "James is wrong about one thing. You're anything but naive. You amaze me with your ability to view this so rationally."

"Well, one of us needs to be rational. We know that's not your strong suit," I teased, kissing his forehead.

Edward pushed me on my back and climbed on top of me. The weight of his body on mine felt so good. I wanted to be covered in Edward all the time, surrounded by

his smell, his warmth. He was distracting me or maybe himself.

"I lose all sense of rationality when it comes to you. You make me an emotional mess." He ran his finger along my jaw. "I wanted to reach across the table tonight and strangle him. I wanted to watch as the life was squeezed right out of him."

Exciting me then terrifying me without notice. That was what he did best.

I stroked the side of his head. His hair was so soft and finally growing out on the sides.

"Don't let him feed the darkness in you. Please."

He averted his eyes for a second and then stared into mine with such intensity. Even in the darkness of our bedroom, I could see them turn to that cloudy jade color.

"I'm trying. It's so hard."

"I know, but I don't want to lose you. Don't let him take you away from me." I knew the truth; there was a very bad guy inside of Edward. If he took over, we would not survive. I was going to cling to the good guy with all my might.

"I'm trying, Isabella," he repeated sincerely.

That would have to do for now. It was all he had to give. At least he wasn't making promises he wasn't sure he could keep. Not like I did when I promised him everything would be all right. I should have known better than to promise something that wasn't completely under my control.

"Did he say anything else I should know?"

Edward kissed my cheek and buried his head in the crook of my neck. "He plans to see to it that I die alone."

I hugged him tightly. My fingers dug into his hair.

"Not if I have anything to say about it," I whispered into the darkness.

A/N: I don't own Twilight, but I have been snowed in for two days. I have

heard the pleas to save those in the same situation from the boredom. So, it's Friday somewhere in the world. This is only posting early if we want to be picky about it =)

Congrats to only a bird who came up with the name Le Venin for the club - it means Venom in French. I love it. There were so many good suggestions it was hard to choose! Thanks to everyone for playing along.

I imagine Rhianna's Only Girl in the World playing while they were... you know... in the VIP room. That's Bella's song in this story for sure! Usual blabbering on my blog. I'm on that blasted Facebook now. You can check out the Troublefollows page and add to the discussion over there. Twilighted thread has been heating up. Love reading everyone's rants. Love, love, love it!

Thanks to momof4lultwisaga for her time and ear and her ability to always find the errors I overlook. Big thanks to all the readers who pimp the heck out of this thing on Twitter and Facebook. People like magnessina, livindol, and jitzpattzing. Yeah I totally stalk my story on Twitter so if you rec it, I know about it! There are a ton more and I thank you all, esp. the ones that have been doing it since the start of all of this. Big hugs to Nicole and her five thousand FB friends =)

Hello to all the new readers this thing has gotten this week. I swear my alerts shot up like crazy. Thank you for all the added alerts and story favorites. And lastly, I went to go vote for someone else over at the Shimmer Awards and found Fridays at Noon had been nominated in a couple categories! Didn't even know I was nominated! Awesome - go vote for somebody - me or whoever! .com

Links to everything on my profile. What's next? Who loves Tyler? I do. Bella and Tyler get some time next week. Until Friday XOXO

Chapter 16

Chapter 16

Friday, October 1st at Noon

Emmett was a great guy. I loved his dimples and silly jokes. He made me laugh and was always in a good mood. I liked him a lot. I liked him too much to support his desire to get a job on Edward's security detail. He was selling himself hard, however.

"I have a black belt in karate. I also train in MMA. I don't compete, but I spar all the time. I can hurt someone with nothing but my hands, I swear."

"Which gym do you go to?" Edward asked as if he was actually considering this nonsense.

"You have a job, Em. A job that does not require you to hurt anyone," I interrupted.

"I do this to make ends meet. You think I want to be a waiter my whole life?"

"It's a nice, *safe* job," I reminded him.

"Safe is overrated, Bells," he said full of bravado.

Edward was annoyed that his question was ignored. "Which gym?" he repeated.

Emmett grinned, happy Edward was still interested. "Ivan over on 8th."

Edward nodded like he knew exactly what and where that was. I shook my head at him, making it known that I did not think this was a good idea.

Emmett put his hand on my shoulder. "Nobody would get near Bella with me on her."

Edward narrowed his eyes at him, causing him to remove his hand faster than fast. I looked across the table at Alec, who, like me, couldn't resist laughing. Emmett "on me" would be interesting.

Emmett backpedaled. "I mean nobody will get near her. You know, while I'm guarding her. Not on her. Why would I be on her? I won't touch her. I promise."

"I'll think about it while you get us a bottle of wine. You have a Rusden Shiraz, don't you?" Edward asked, scanning the wine list.

"We have a couple, I believe." Emmett tried to look over Edward's shoulder.

"Bring me a bottle of the most expensive one you have," Edward ordered, holding up the list for Emmett to take from him.

Emmett grabbed the wine list and was out the door before I could ask for some sparkling water. My stomach hurt, and this talk of Emmett coming to work for Edward was not helping.

"This is a bad idea," I complained. "I told you, he's too nice. If you have him guard me, I'll get my way every time. That's not what you want, I'm sure."

Edward was not happy with my reasoning. "Why is it that you seem to clearly understand how important it is that you do what I say, but you constantly imply your plan is to defy me the first chance you get?"

"Because I'm difficult and stubborn and too independent." The list really could go on and on, but I went with those three. "It also has something to do with the fact that you have a tendency to be overbearing and overprotective."

"It's impossible to be overprotective. I can't protect you enough," he replied sternly. "Emmett is huge and obviously strong. He's smart and highly motivated. He cares about you, so he has a vested interest. I also think you give yourself too much credit. He would challenge you more than you think."

"He's my friend. Doesn't my worry matter to you at all?"

"Your worry is very sweet but misplaced. You should be worried about yourself. Not Emmett."

I wasn't going to win this argument, so I threw in the towel. My stomach was killing me. At school, I thought maybe I was just hungry. Now, I was sure I couldn't eat.

"What's the matter?" Edward asked when I grimaced.

"I don't know if I can eat."

He sighed and rolled his eyes. "I haven't even hired the man yet."

"It isn't about Emmett. I feel sick; I felt sick before I got here."

"You do look a little pale," Alec commented.

Emmett returned with our wine. Edward ordered me the sparkling water and asked for some bread, but lunch was a bust. As soon as I ate some bread, it came back up. I barely made it to the bathroom. Tyler looked truly concerned when I came out.

Edward had me go straight home. Liam drove me and was utterly repulsed when I threw up into the plastic container Emmett sent home with me.

I spent the rest of the afternoon curled up on the marble floor of the master bathroom. Charlotte was a godsend. She braided my hair, getting it out of my face. She made sure I drank some water and rubbed my back while I heaved nothing but bile into the toilet.

By six, I was finished with the worst of it. I climbed into bed after rinsing my mouth out for the last time. I drifted in and out of consciousness for about an hour. Edward came in and sat on the bed beside me.

"Hey, sweet girl." He pushed some stray hairs from my face and used the back of his hand to check for a temperature. "Char said it wasn't a very pleasant afternoon."

"Not pleasant at all. You better hope you don't get this. You'll definitely rethink the whole roommate situation."

He smiled but didn't laugh. "I can always force you to stay here while I go to the condo. Or..." he raised a finger like the idea just came to him "...I could ship you out to the guest house. It's so great being filthy rich. It provides so many options for quarantine."

"Ha ha," I said without humor. My eyelids became too heavy to keep open.

Edward continued to stroke my head. "I'm sorry you're sick. Can I get you anything?"

I shook my head, happy to just have him there with me. I couldn't help but wonder

if Edward had ever taken care of anyone who was sick. He sat with me until I fell asleep again, running a hand over my hair and humming me a quiet song.

The cramping was back and woke me later that night. I could tell it was much later by how dark the room was when I opened my eyes. Edward was sleeping soundly on his side of the bed. Usually when we slept, Edward liked to be pressed up against me with his arm thrown over my body and his hand on my breast. He was a total molester while I slept. Tonight, though, he was as far away from me as he could get. It was kind of funny. I had to believe that the last thing he wanted was to catch what I had. Something told me Edward didn't do sick very well.

I quietly made my way to the bathroom and got rid of whatever my stomach was mass producing on its own, seeing that I wasn't putting anything in there. I felt better once I got it out. I decided I needed to try eating some crackers or something. I walked into the kitchen and checked in the pantry. I grabbed the Saltines and munched on a couple, hoping they wouldn't reappear any time soon. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and headed down the hall to the stairs. I noticed the lights on in the game room. I wondered who could be in there when Edward was fast asleep upstairs. As I got closer, I could hear the sounds of gunfire and helicopters. Someone was playing video games at two in the morning.

I pushed open the door to find Tyler standing in front of the large flat screen, playing Call of Duty. I knew this because I had watched Jasper play more times than I cared to admit.

"I thought you were sick. Shouldn't you be in bed?" he asked without taking his eyes off the game. I couldn't figure out how he knew it was me. The eyes in the back of his head were what made him the best at what he did. That was why he was Edward's bodyguard.

"I needed some crackers and water," I replied, stepping further in the room. "What are you doing up so late? Shouldn't *you* be in bed?"

"The only time I get to play is when the boss is in bed. Gotta take advantage when I can."

I sat down on the couch, tucking my legs under me. I watched him play for a couple minutes.

"You know there's a cheat that gives you all the intel."

Tyler turned his head enough to look at me. "You know a cheat for CoD?"

"What? I don't look like the kind of woman who would know that kind of stuff?" I asked like I was affronted by the question.

Tyler laughed. "I learned not to judge a book by its cover a long time ago, Miss Swan."

"Would it kill you to call me Bella? I spend all day with kids who have to call me Miss Swan, but in my own home can't I be called by my first name? Charlotte calls me Bella."

"Charlotte dares to cross lines with him that I choose not to," he replied, giving me another look over his massive shoulder.

"Really? Calling me by my first name is crossing a line with Edward? That is *so* ridiculous."

"Shit!" Tyler shouted in response to getting shot in his game. He was under heavy attack.

"Retreat," I suggested. "There's a missile launcher you need to pick up to get past that point."

"Well, *Miss Swan*, you seem to think you can do better than a guy that's actually been to war. Here." He handed me the controller.

I sat up and set my feet back down on the ground. Grabbing the controller, I began to play. I retreated and found the weapon I had seen Jasper get a million times before. I shot a few bad guys and completed the challenge. When the little movie part came on, I held the controller out for Tyler, who put his hands up like I was handing him toxic waste.

"I don't want your sick germs," he said with a smirk. "Nice job, though." He grabbed another controller and switched it out.

"You should see me with a real gun," I bragged.

"You shoot? Real guns?" he questioned with his hands on his hips.

I picked up my water bottle. "Boy, what happened to not judging a book by its cover?"

He shrugged and smiled sheepishly.

"My dad's a cop and a hunter," I explained. "First rule when you live in a house with a gun is never touch the guns. The second rule is know how to use one properly in case you ever need to touch one. He taught me how to shoot and took me hunting with him when he thought I was old enough. The very first time I went out with him, I shot an eight point buck. He was completely floored. I was like thirteen years old, I think. He made this big deal out of it. I accepted everyone's congratulations and pats on the back, and pretended to be all proud. Then, I cried myself to sleep that night. I figured there was some deer family out in the woods waiting for their dad to come home, but the daddy deer wasn't coming home because I killed him. I think my dad heard me crying, because after that he only had me shoot targets. I'm pretty good with a rifle, but I am dead on with a 45."

Tyler stared at me in disbelief. "You're serious?"

"Betcha want to start calling me Bella now, don't ya?" I wiggled my eyebrows.

He let out a thunderous chuckle. I was sure I had never heard Tyler laugh so freely.

"I definitely need to rethink who I should be more afraid of."

"I'll make you a deal. You can call me Miss Swan when Edward's around, but when it's just you and me, you call me Bella."

Tyler narrowed his eyes, considering my proposal. "Deal," he accepted with a nod. "*Bella*."

I felt like I had just won the lottery with that one concession. I watched him play a little longer. He took my advice here and there. We talked about his time in the military. Since he was the one who brought up that he had been in a real war, I figured it was a topic that was safe to dig into. Tyler was with the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which was one of the first U.S. forces that went into Afghanistan after 9/11. Tyler and his unit helped seize Camp Rhino, which he said was essential to getting the ground war started. They seized the airport as well and constructed a detainment facility that held almost five hundred Taliban and Al Qaeda terrorists.

Tyler was the real deal. He fought against terrorists and was a pretty high ranking major or something like that. The things he had seen would probably give me nightmares the rest of my life. I could see why Edward trusted him with his life.

"So how did you go from defending the country from terrorists to guarding a billionaire?" I asked, stretching my legs out on the couch.

"It was Liam's idea to go into private security. We both were in Afghanistan together. Both saw things we wish we could erase. My mom got sick." He shrugged in an attempt to downplay his obvious feelings about that. "This job pays a hell of a lot better than the government ever could."

"Is your mom doing better?"

"She lives in Atlanta, near my sister. She's got Alzheimer's, so that doesn't ever get better, you know?" He looked back at me, and I nodded. "She's in one of the nicest assistive living places on the planet. That part is good. I never could have provided her that luxury if it weren't for Mr. Masen. He had his uncle help me find a place, offered to pay for her to stay there himself, but I didn't like the idea of him giving me more than he already gave me. He pays me more money than I know what to do with, so I use that to keep her there. My sister has to deal with the worst parts. I just have to send the checks."

Tyler and Edward suddenly seemed so alike. Both of them were strong, proud men with an extremely soft spot for their mothers. Emotions were hard for both of them to express and throwing money at their problems was always easiest. They even had sisters who were somehow better equipped to handle the emotional baggage. I wondered if Tyler's experiences in the Middle East affected him the way Edward's past haunted him.

I was surprised at how much Tyler talked to me while he played the game. Maybe because the game distracted him, the walls came down. I would have to try this with Edward. Black Ops was coming out in a month or so. I could sit him down, watch him play, and learn all his secrets.

"So you and Liam knew each other before you came to work for Edward. That's interesting."

"Why is it interesting?" He glanced back at me, looking puzzled.

"I don't know. It's just interesting to know something about you guys, that you have a relationship outside of your job working for Edward. Tell me about Liam. He's not much of a talker."

Tyler laughed again. "You act like I am."

"Well, you have been tonight."

He was caught up in his game and didn't give me an answer right away. He

finished a scene and then turned to look at me.

"What do you want to know?" he asked hesitantly.

I smiled at his willingness to give me something. "What's his story?"

"I don't give out other people's stories. Be more specific."

"I don't know. What does he like? What's his favorite pastime?"

Tyler scrunched his nose up. "Why in the world do you want to know about that?"

"Because he hates me. Maybe if I know what to talk about, he'll like me and talk back."

Tyler shook his head at me and chuckled. "He doesn't hate you."

"Oh, he hates me. I can tell when someone hates me."

"He doesn't hate you. You are...a challenge."

That was so untrue and frustrated me. "How am I a challenge? I go to work, I come home."

"You compromise security. You ignore orders. You-"

"Excuse me, I do not *get* orders. No one gives me orders, so there are no orders to ignore."

"Exactly the problem," he said with a nod of the head.

"So, I'm a challenge because Edward doesn't get to boss me around?"

Tyler sighed in frustration. "I shouldn't have said you ignore orders. I should have said you ask Liam to ignore orders. We work for Mr. Masen. If Mr. Masen says jump the only time we question him is to ask how high. As Mr. Masen's bodyguard, I have no problem. He tells me what to do. I do it. Easy. Liam is your bodyguard. Mr. Masen tells him what to do. He tries to do it, but sometimes you don't want to do what Mr. Masen wants you to do. That, my dear, makes you challenging."

"Shouldn't my bodyguard do what I say? Shouldn't I get to be the boss of *my* bodyguard?"

Maybe that was my issue with the whole security situation. I had no control. Security should protect me wherever I chose to go, not protect me wherever Edward said I could go.

Tyler put up his hands. "That's not my question to answer. Like I said, we work for Mr. Masen. You have to work that out with him. I will say you didn't do yourself any favors by getting on an elevator without your guard."

I let my head fall back against the couch. I was never going to live that down. "I thought that if James was going to do something, it was going to be at the party. I never thought he would show up to just talk to me."

"Maybe that's why you shouldn't be in control of your own guard. You were lucky that Hunter only wanted to plant seeds."

"Plant seeds?"

Tyler paused his game and took a seat next to me. "Do you really not see what he's trying to do?"

I shrugged. I knew James wanted Edward to die alone. That was it.

"He's trying to make you afraid of Mr. Masen. He wants you to think the worst, or he at the very least wants you to consider the worst. My worry is that his next move will be something that actually does bring out the worst in Mr. Masen. Everything Hunter has done thus far in regard to you has been to make Mr. Masen feel out of control. He tends to make..." he considered his words carefully "...poor decisions when he's out of control. I figure Hunter's plan is to push him to do something that really does frighten you away."

James was provoking the darkness inside Edward. He was drawing him out, baiting him. I was afraid of the darkness. I could not live with the darkness. James Hunter was betting on that.

"What do you think I should do? How do I stop Edward from losing control?"

Tyler stroked his jaw with his huge knuckles. "I don't know. I'm no relationship expert." He popped up from his seat and unpaused the game. The intimacy of our conversation was becoming a little too much for him. "All I know is you're a challenge for Liam and an even bigger challenge for Mr. Masen."

"What does that mean?" I asked, shifting in my seat. If anyone understood

Edward, it was probably Tyler.

"He doesn't know what to do with you half the time. He wants you to be happy. He wants you to be safe. He wants you to do what he says. At the same time, I think he likes it that you don't always do what he says. It's pretty damn confusing."

That was an understatement.

"Edward makes everything confusing," I complained, pressing my fingers against my temples in an attempt to rub away my headache.

"You want my honest opinion?" Tyler said without looking at me.

"No, lie to me," I muttered.

He shot me a look. "Now, see I would say cut that shit out, but I know he kind of likes your smart mouth, too. Me? Not so much."

"Sorry. Yes, please, I want your opinion," I replied sincerely.

"Your safety is more important to him than anything. Even more than your happiness. He'd rather have you alive and pissed off than dead and happy." His words sent a chill down my spine. "If you can use your security the way Mr. Masen has it set up for you, I think that will help a lot. Just being with you helps with the other stuff. You make him lighter than I ever thought possible."

I was glad that Tyler thought I was good for Edward. The rest of it, I would have to think about. Edward and I definitely needed to have a talk about security. Between Liam hating me and the possibility of Emmett coming to work for us, I needed to think about what concessions I was willing to make. Something else was bothering me, though.

"Do you think James will try to kill me if his plan to make me leave doesn't work?"

Tyler looked back at me sympathetically. "No. I don't think you're his target." He raised my spirits slightly but then added, "I think his goal has always been to kill Mr. Masen."

That did not make me feel better. That scared me more than anything. The look on my face must have given me away completely.

"That's not your worry, though. That's my worry, and my job is to make sure it

doesn't happen. Mr. Hunter will never get his hands on Mr. Masen. You have my word."

All of this was more than I bargained for when I popped in here to see who was still up so late. I was exhausted again and needed to go to bed. I stood up and walked over to Tyler. Wrapping my arms around him from behind, I hugged him as hard I could.

"Thank you, Tyler," I said with my face pressed against his enormous back.

"No problem, Bella," he said kindly before reverting to the hard-ass he really was. "Now get your sick germs away from me, please." He held his arms up in the air, waiting for me to release him.

I let go and wished him a good night. When I got back upstairs, I could hear Edward before I saw him. The light shone from under the bathroom door. I pushed it open to find him kneeling over the toilet.

"Oh baby, I'm sorry," I said as I knelt down beside him.

He was shirtless, and his body was covered in a light sheen of sweat. He grabbed some toilet paper and wiped his mouth. He was so pale.

"Go tell Charlotte that I forbid her to make Chicken Florentine ever again."

I tried to stifle a laugh, thankful I did not eat dinner. "I'll let her know first thing in the morning. I promise."

"If this is how you felt all afternoon, I feel sorrier for you than I did before."

"I have good news. You only have to do this about twenty more times and then you'll feel better." I felt much better, just tired.

He lay back on the floor and covered his face with his hands. "Great. Thanks for that," he groaned.

"Always here to help."

"You weren't, though. Where were you? I don't like waking up alone." He was sick and yet so cute.

"Went downstairs to get some crackers," I began.

Edward bolted upright and threw up again. My own stomach rumbled. Maybe staying to take care of him was a bad idea.

"Don't talk about food."

"Sorry," I said sympathetically. I knew all too well what he was going through. "Can I do anything?"

"Don't ever bring a stomach virus into our house again," he replied with no humor in his tone. I kind of loved it when he called this our house. He was definitely not good at being sick, though. We were in for a long weekend.

"Well, maybe if you weren't always shoving your tongue down my throat and gave me a little personal space once and awhile, you wouldn't have gotten all my germs."

He retched again. He spit into the toilet and wiped his mouth. "God, Isabella, please don't talk about shoving tongues anywhere right now."

He was right, that was a visual not even I wanted right now.

"I think I'm dying. I know I'm dying," he moaned, wrapping his arms around his stomach and lying back down.

I crawled around him and sat with my legs folded in front of me. I had him rest his head on my lap. I ran my fingers through his hair, remembering how comforting that felt when he did it to me earlier.

"You aren't going to die. I won't let that happen. I promise." The words coming out of me caused my chest to tighten. Did Edward know how dedicated so many people were to keeping him alive?

"Are you saying that because you don't want to feel guilty since it'll be entirely your fault?"

I laughed through my nose. "I say it because I love you, you jerk."

"You can't call me a jerk when I'm sick," he said, opening one eye to look up at me.

"Fine, I love you, sicko."

He shut his eye again. "I'm glad." He lay quiet for a bit then added, "Even though your affection for me is to blame for this excruciating pain I must now endure."

I smiled and shook my head. Some things were never going to change. He was always going to be this, a cranky bastard. I felt like I could handle it, though. This was not the true darkness. I needed to keep that part of him out of our life. I prayed that night that I would succeed.

A/N: I don't own Twilight

I hope everyone liked learning a little more about Tyler. I love this guy. Bella sees the similarities between him and Edward and that endears him to her even more. I know not a lot happened in this chapter, but everything in this chapter had a purpose. At least James didn't show up! I can't wait to hear what everyone thinks is going to happen.

Thanks to my friend and prereader - momof4luvntwisaga. Hope you're all reading her story All I Want. It's getting so good! All the Twitter and FB ladies who brighten my day all the time. Thanks to jessypt and ememmyem for their Lemon Report of FaN on The Perv Pack's Smut Shack. Glad last week's lemon left everyone a little overheated! I tried so hard to reply to all the reviews this week but fell short. Seriously, if my husband asks me if I'm coming to bed one more time while I'm trying to reply... So, if I did not reply, know I love you dearly and appreciate it so much when you take the time to leave me some love.

only a bird picked a EPOV outtake of Chapter 4 as her prize for naming the club last week. I am almost finished with that. After I get it to her, I'll share here.

I have a rec this week. Puddle Jumping by 107yearoldvirgin. I love this story hard. It is sweet and simple. No major angst but the right amount of everything. I don't favorite much, so hopefully that's saying something!

Ramblings about this chapter on the blog. Tuesday Teaser will be on the blog and the Troublefollows FB page, too. Links on my profile.

So, tell me what you love, what you hate, what you hope is going to happen, what you hope isn't going to happen, what you had for dinner last night, whatever! Thanks! XOXO

Chapter 17

Chapter 17

Friday, October 8th at noon

I was having a bad day. Jane the Pain had been extra bitchy at our department meeting this morning, setting the tone for the rest of my day. She was so rude that I almost considered going to talk to Aro about it. I decided against it, though. Being the part-time nobody, I didn't need to look like I was incapable of working things out with my department head. I needed to do well this year in hopes they would hire me full time. I loved it at University Prep. The kids were amazing. Apart from Jane, the teachers were very nice. Ben Cheney was one of the nicest. He and I supervised the cafeteria together two days a week. I actually set him up with Angela from Eclipse, and they had hit it off. I was a real matchmaker. Maybe that was Jane's problem, she needed to get laid.

I showed up at Eclipse for lunch with Liam in tow. We were no closer to being friends, but I had taken Tyler's advice and didn't challenge Edward's security decisions this week. It seemed to make Liam a tiny bit more relaxed.

Angela was all smiles. She led me up to the room where I had no idea who was going to be our waiter, since Emmett had gotten himself a new job. I was surprised when I walked into school on Tuesday and found Emmett standing inside the main entrance. It appeared he was hired as a security guard for the school.

Emmett worked for the school, but I knew better than to think he got this particular job without some help. To me, he clearly worked for Edward. I couldn't figure out how Edward did it but decided a billionaire could probably create jobs for whoever he wanted. Thankfully, Emmett was stationed by the main entrance and not outside my classroom. No one could possibly know he was there to keep an eye on me in particular. I tried not to let it worry me that Edward felt we needed to have someone in the building with me all the time, but it did.

Edward and Alec arrived minutes after me. There was a guy with them, who I didn't recognize. He was young; he barely looked over eighteen and was dressed extremely casual. Dressed in a Rolling Stones T-shirt and black jeans, he had such a baby face that I wasn't sure he even had to shave. Dark hair, almost black, sat on top of his head. It was long and had that oily, I-haven't-washed-in-a-few-days look to it. There was a large black backpack slung over his shoulder. I wondered what in the

world he was doing with my two executive lunch companions.

I stood up to greet them. Edward kissed me on the cheek and Alec gave me a hug.

"Isabella, this is Peter Forney. Peter, this is Isabella," Edward said, waving a hand between us.

Peter was smiling ear to ear and opened his arms like I was going to hug him as well. "Isabella Swan, we finally meet."

"You *do not* touch her," Edward said with a frustrated huff, stepping in between us.

Peter had a twinkle of mischief in his eye. "What? Alec gets to hug her, but I get nothing?"

"Did we not go over the rules this morning?" Edward asked, shaking his head. "This is why all your friends are online."

My annoyed boyfriend led me back to the table and pulled out my chair for me. I was so confused, and my face must have shown it.

"Peter is a... *special* employee," Edward explained. "We need to go over a few things with you."

"Aw, Masen, I think you're special, too."

Peter took the seat next to me after he set his bag on the chair on the other side of him. I had never heard any employee talk to Edward that way. Peter certainly was special. Edward did narrow his eyes at him in warning, but Peter just smiled and began taking things out of his bag. He had a laptop and a phone.

"Peter is in charge of acquiring information for me. He's also what I would call my I.T. guy," Edward continued to explain.

Peter threw his arm along the back of my chair. "Basically, your boy pays me a lot of money to do the things he's really quite legendary for but can't do anymore because he's all legit now."

My brow furrowed in confusion. "My boy is legendary?" This was good stuff.

"Masen is a total legend! Edward Masen is the greatest hacker of all time. The

man could hack his way into any system on this planet. Are you sitting here, telling me that you don't know what this man is capable of doing with a computer?"

I had no idea what Edward was capable of doing with a computer. I knew what he told me. I knew he got in trouble for hacking into his school computers when he was young. But legendary? I was absolutely unaware of his *legendary* hacking status.

"Can you shut the hell up?" Edward's patience was being tested to the nth degree. "She doesn't need to hear about that. The woman uses the computer for email and that's it. Can we focus on why you're here, so I can eat lunch and get back to work?"

Peter was fascinating. He was adding this entirely new dimension to my already multifaceted boyfriend.

"Dude, always so grumpy," Peter said, raising his hands up in surrender. "What are we telling her first?"

"Let's start with the phone," Edward said with a sigh.

"All right." Peter clapped his hands together and picked up the cell phone on the table. "Now, I don't know what kind of phone you have now, but you are now the proud owner of an iPhone. Only, I tricked it out a little."

"Tricked it out?" I asked, taking the phone from him. I couldn't wait to hear why I needed a new phone.

Peter smiled. "Well, first, we added a tracking device. This way Mr. Masen can know where you are at all times."

I closed my eyes for a second and then turned my head towards Edward. I opened my eyes to his ambivalent gaze.

"You're chipping me?"

"Chipping you?" He looked confused.

"Why not just inject me with a tracker?"

"Isabella," he sighed and rolled his eyes "...I could track you now with your cell phone if I wanted to. This allows me to do so without breaking any laws. Don't be difficult."

This was news to me. "How can you track me with my cell phone?"

Peter laughed incredulously. "Seriously?"

Edward glared at him with those hard emerald eyes, causing Peter to pretend that he was zipping his lips shut. Edward turned his attention back to me.

"Your safety is my number one concern. This is not about tracking your every move. This is a precaution in case something was to happen."

"Something like what? What's James going to do? Kidnap me?" I said somewhat sarcastically.

"He used the word take, but kidnap works," Peter interjected.

Edward slammed his hand on the table. The sound echoed through the room. "If you can't shut up, I'll have Tyler come in here and clamp his hand over your fucking mouth! Do you understand?"

I stiffened at his outburst, but my mind was stuck on what Peter let slip. The words began to rush from my mouth. "When did he say he was going to *take* me? You didn't tell me he said he was going to take me. Did he say that to you a couple weeks ago? If he said that and you didn't tell me..."

Edward pulled on his hair and looked extremely vexed. "He didn't tell me he was going to take you. I told you what he said at the club." With his elbows on the table, he pressed the heel of his hands against his eyes. "We've been monitoring his phone calls and emails...for a while."

Oh my. That could not possibly be legal.

"Alec, Peter, could I have a minute with Edward?" A shaky hand pushed some hair from my face. "Please?"

Alec and Peter both nodded and stood up, leaving me to sort this out with Edward in private.

"You didn't tell me you were hacking into his email."

He rolled his eyes. The attitude was starting to irk me. I had been on the receiving end of enough condescension today.

"I don't tell you certain things for your own good. I have the ability to do things, so I do them. I've never claimed to play by the rules. James has been a thorn in my side for much longer than I have known you. I have my ways of dealing with him."

"You could get yourself arrested, Edward."

"I'm not going to get arrested," he responded with an adolescent tone. "I'm not doing anything. Peter is, and he's almost as good as I am. He can get into things like a ghost. They couldn't trace it back to him if they tried."

He was always so cocky about the things that I thought he should take a little more seriously. Unfortunately, the possibility of his incarceration was the least of my problems.

"What did he say about me and to whom?"

"He's been smart about encrypting his stuff for a while, but he forgets what I'm capable of getting around. We started picking up on some questionable things in his emails recently and started tracing his calls. James made an offhanded comment to one of his men on the phone that Plan B is taking you."

"Plan *B* is taking me? What the hell is Plan A?" I shrieked.

Edward sat back in his chair. I could see the frustration in his eyes. He didn't want to tell me this much. He was trying to shelter me from it all.

"We've figured out he's calling you 'The Lamb'. Plan B is taking the Lamb. Plan A seems to be removing 'The Lion'."

"The Lion? You?" My throat was suddenly so dry. Edward nodded. "And removing you means..."

"His pathetic plan is to kill me. It always has been." He said it like it was nothing, no big deal. James was putting together a plan to assassinate him, and he was acting like James was planning an ill-conceived prank. "He's not going to kill me, Isabella. I promise."

His reassurance did nothing to ease my worry. I felt sick, not in the same way as last week, but I wanted to throw up all the same. Tyler told me this was the plan, but now it was confirmed.

"I don't understand why the police are not involved. You know he's behind all of

these things, yet he roams free, waiting to strike again. I don't get it."

Edward grabbed my hand with both of his. "Knowing it and proving it through legal means are two very different things. I will credit him with the ability to cover his tracks. I can't go to the police and hand over stolen emails and recorded phone calls from an illegal tap."

"What about stalking me? Can't we go to the police about that so if he comes near me, he can be arrested?"

"He's made no direct threats to you. He has approached you in public places and again has made no direct threat. You've admitted that in the beginning the not-so-coincidental meetings seemed very innocent. The last couple times, he has done nothing but tell you he's afraid for your safety because of me. The police would look at you like you were crazy if you tried to get a restraining order over that. Not to mention that if he tried to take you, he wouldn't do it personally. He'll have hired hands do that."

I pulled my hand away and rubbed my forehead. My bad day was getting worse. All I wanted was to have a nice lunch with Edward and Alec. Now, I was learning I needed to be tracked in case I was taken by a man who was most likely capable of getting away with murder.

Edward stood up and pulled me out of my chair. He hugged me tightly. "James will not touch you or me. Let's finish with Peter and eat some lunch."

Alec and Peter rejoined us. Peter was ready to show me a couple other things he had come up with for added protection. I suddenly felt like I was dating Bruce Wayne and Peter was his gadget man. I learned my phone was the only way I was to contact Edward about anything. The emails that it sent would be hacker-proof and the calls could not be traced by anyone but Edward and Peter.

I was waiting for them to tell me my car could fly or that I was going to have to wear a batarang on my belt from now on. He gave me a new keyless remote for my car. My car could not fly, but it did have a tracking device on it and a panic button inside. There was also a panic button on the keyless remote that would immediately alert Edward, Liam, and Tyler if there was a problem. If I hit the panic button in the car twice, it would disable the car. The remote could also set off the car alarm, and I was encouraged to use it to attract attention should anyone get past Liam.

"Okay, so let's say they get to me when I don't have all this stuff in my hand or I'm not in or by my car. Then what?" I asked, thinking back to my ride in the elevator

with Mr. Hunter. I didn't have my phone or my keys with me then.

"Then we use this," Peter said, reaching into the front pocket of his backpack. He pulled out what looked like a penny. "This was Masen's idea. I'll just attach this charm to your bracelet." He carefully grabbed my hand and fingered the bracelet Jake had given me for my birthday. He clipped on the penny charm. "Consider yourself chipped."

I didn't say anything but more closely inspected the penny charm. Edward Masen was so damn adorable and suffocating at the same time.

"It seems only fair that I be represented as well."

I shifted my eyes to meet his. He was bracing himself for my wrath. The penny meant so much, but I couldn't forget its real purpose.

"I kind of love it, even if it is a tracking device."

He exhaled slowly in relief and a pleased smile played on his lips.

"It's more than a tracking device," Peter piped in. "I tricked this out, too. You can open the gates outside the estate with it. Just swipe it in front of the sensor out there. We reworked the whole house system this week. When you walk into a room wearing that charm, the lights will come on automatically. If you want to play music, I can load all your playlists to the chip inside so your favorite songs will follow you wherever you go in the house. We can have it set the temperature of the room to your liking. There's lots of cool stuff we can do with it. I tried to make it fun and practical."

Practical wasn't exactly the word I was thinking.

"What about Edward? He doesn't get one? How will the lights know to turn on for him?" I said teasingly.

Edward grinned. "Oh, I have been properly chipped as well." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his wad of cash. He slipped off the money clip and handed it to me. Set in the center of the platinum clip was one silver nickel.

Damn him.

"What if we're both in the same room? Whose chip decides how warm or cold it is in the room or what music to play?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"It always defaults to me, Isabella. Always." Just like everything else in my world now.

Peter got up to leave after he finished showing me everything.

"You aren't staying for lunch?" I asked, wondering why in the world he wouldn't eat with us.

"No, I'm on a...special diet," Peter said with smirk.

"Peter only eats at restaurants that serve fries," Edward added.

Peter laughed, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. "Don't knock it, Masen. You've probably never stepped foot in a McDonald's. You don't know what you're missing."

"I can't imagine I'm missing much," Edward grumbled. I smiled, remembering the way he looked at the cheeseburger at the Summer Bash. Edward certainly had particular tastes.

A waiter was sent in when Peter left. Lin was someone I knew but not well. He was one of the tallest Asian men I had ever met. He was thin and soft spoken, the complete opposite of Emmett. Lin was all business and took our orders. No small talk. Edward was looking at something on his Blackberry while Alec and I chatted about this and that.

"I don't think I want to go to this dinner tonight," Edward announced, interrupting our conversation. Edward was scheduled to go to dinner with some board members.

"Would you like me to cancel for you?" Alec asked, pulling out his phone.

"No, there are things I need to go over with them." Edward paused and then brightened. "On the other hand, you could probably go over the performance indicators as well as I could. How about instead of canceling for me, you go to the dinner for me?"

Alec seemed surprised. "You want *me* to talk to them about the performance indicators?"

"You've been in all the meetings with the team leaders. You know the information as well as I do."

It appeared letting Alec go to this dinner in Edward's place was kind of a big deal.

"You usually like to be the one to share this kind of information."

"I don't have to be in control of everything."

I unintentionally barked out a laugh. Thank goodness I wasn't eating or drinking when he said that. I would have been choking or spitting all over the table. Alec couldn't help but smile. Edward did not find me amusing. He glared at me, daring me to comment. I chose to say nothing.

"But they're expecting you. I don't know how they'll feel about dealing with me," Alec said, regaining Edward's attention.

"Dealing with you should be no different from dealing with me. You're my damn right hand. They know that."

Alec nodded and sat a little straighter in his seat. "I'd be happy to go."

"Brady can drive you down to Olympia if you'd like. I won't be needing him tonight."

I smiled at Alec, who appeared to be feeling like the king of the world. What I loved the most about it was Edward did that for him. My controlling, domineering, egomaniac boyfriend did that for someone else by just giving up a little control over something. I hoped he saw it, too.

"Romantic comedy with attractive female lead for you boys or action movie with a hot male lead for us ladies?" I asked Jasper over the phone.

"Romantic comedy only if there's nudity."

"Does seeing Katherine Heigl's butt count as nudity?"

"No boobs, no deal."

Jasper and I were almost back to normal. I wasn't sure what Alice had been doing to him, but he hadn't given me a hard time about Edward in over a week. He and Alice were even coming over for pizza and movie night. Jasper suggested it. Having my friend back in my corner was making up for all the other crap that was going on

in my life.

We agreed on a movie, and I let him go so I could check out. Liam stood silently beside me with his back to the register, so he could watch the people coming in and out. I was sure that didn't look strange *at all*.

The girl behind the counter scanned my video card, looked me over, scanned the movie, looked me over, told me the total, and continued looking me over. She took my money and then the lightbulb seemed to go on above her head.

"I've seen you before."

Jasper usually picked up the movies, but I had been in this particular store before. Liam reacted before I said anything. He whirled around and stared menacingly at the poor girl.

She stepped back in response to Liam's overreaction. "You're that girl. The one that's dating Edward Masen."

"How would you know that?" I asked, putting a hand on Liam's forearm, hoping he'd relax. I didn't think James could have set up the girl at the video store to abduct me.

The girl giggled. "You're, like, famous." She reached behind her and pulled out a Life and Style Magazine hidden in a stack of other papers. "Who's that girl? Everybody wants to know," she said, flipping the magazine open and showing me an article with that headline.

There was a full page picture of Edward and me from the Denali launch party. There were also pictures of us walking out of Eclipse. Another one of me from high school.

"Oh. My. God." I snatched the magazine out of her hand and quickly skimmed the first paragraph of the article.

Life and Style Magazine had done its homework. They had my name, my hometown, my educational background, even an interview with an inside source, who told them Edward and I met at Eclipse when I worked there as a waitress. It went on to claim that the multibillionaire Mr. Masen was quite possibly off the market. *A source close to the couple says Miss Swan moved into Mr. Masen's \$13.5 million estate and is desperate for a ring to make their relationship official.*

My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. I somehow managed to keep reading, skipping to the next page. According to the magazine, Edward was famous not only for his computer software empire but for never being photographed with the same woman twice. The fact that I was now living with him had everyone thrown for a loop. There was speculation that I was pregnant. The unnamed source didn't deny the possibility that a Masen heir was on the way. *Edward Masen is a very powerful and wealthy man. Becoming a father could be the one thing that might cause him to change his ways.* I dropped the tabloid on the counter and headed for the door.

"Your movie!" the girl shouted after me. Liam took it from her and followed me out.

"She must be pregnant. Look at the way she's trying to cover up her baby bump. He'll dump her ass as soon as the baby is born."

"You need to stop reading that nonsense," Edward said with a shake of his head.

I had spent the rest of my afternoon googling myself and going to gossip websites, like a sick masochist. Edward got home and found none of it the least bit interesting.

"Trina from Kentucky thinks, and I quote, *this is obviously a trap. There's no baby, and I bet after this trampy waitress slash gold digger gets Masen to marry her, she'll mysteriously lose the baby.* Great! I'm damned if I'm pregnant and damned if I'm not!"

Edward came up beside me and pushed the laptop shut. "Trina from Kentucky is probably twelve years old and has watched one too many episodes of whatever bullshit soap opera is popular now. That, or she's missing teeth and probably married to her second cousin."

He pulled me off the stool and away from the kitchen island I had been planted at for the last few hours. He wrapped his arms around me and pressed his lips to my forehead, my cheek, and finally my lips.

"Just because she's from Kentucky doesn't mean she's some sort of hillbilly."

"You're defending the woman who flamed you on the internet?" Edward snorted.

"I'm defending the good people of Kentucky." I dropped my head, resting my forehead on his chest. "I don't know."

"It doesn't matter what the good people of Kentucky or the not so good people of Kentucky think. It only matters what I think."

He was so conceited sometimes. It would be nice to be so unaffected, though. I was anything but.

"I just love how people automatically think I'm taking advantage of you. I love how it's assumed it was my idea to move in, that I want to get married and have your babies."

"You don't want to get married and have my babies?" he deadpanned.

I struggled to get away from him, but he laughed and held me tighter.

"If it will make you feel better, I'll call a press conference Monday morning and tell everyone you are not pregnant and it was completely my idea for you to live with me because you give the *best* blow jobs."

I wriggled in his arms again. He was not funny in the slightest. Edward disagreed. He thought he was hilarious.

"I wonder what they'll say when I move out tonight," I threatened.

He tilted my chin up with his fingers. His green eyes were soft and lovely, melting my anger immediately. "Isabella, people can think whatever they want. It doesn't matter. Don't let it matter."

"Easy for you to say. They aren't calling you names and questioning your integrity."

"We can sue them all for slander if you like. My lawyers are very good, I assure you. I can call Mr. Jenks right now."

I relaxed in his arms and let him hold me. The feel of his strong arms around me was a comfort. Being wrapped in Edward was never a bad thing. I couldn't sue every idiot with an opinion. Trina from Kentucky didn't know me. She was never going to know me. Why care what she thought?

"It just hurts my feelings."

"Now, I most definitely want to sue." Edward let me go and pulled his phone out.

I grabbed his arm. "We're not suing anyone. I'll get over it."

He put his phone away and caressed my cheek. "I don't like it when you're hurt. I hate when something associated with me hurts you."

"Good thing I'm in love with you. This would be a deal breaker otherwise."

Edward snorted again. "Let me get this straight, tabloid gossip is a deal breaker, but there's no plan to run, knowing there's a threat of abduction by my worst enemy?"

The tabloid fiasco had actually done a good job of keeping my mind off our real problem. I didn't want Edward to know that, though.

"You won't let anything happen to me," I replied, standing on my tip toes to give him a kiss on his perfect lips.

Edward wasn't satisfied with a simple peck. He grabbed my face and kissed me deeply, his tongue playfully swirling around mine. He pulled away with one more quick smooch. Then he swept me up in his arms.

"We need to get you out of these work clothes."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "You think I should change before Alice and Jasper come over?"

"No, I think you need to get out of those clothes," he replied with a wink.

He carried me up the stairs and closed the bedroom door with his foot.

"You are the most important thing in my life. You know that, don't you?" he asked, staring at me with an intensity that caused my heart to beat double time.

That was about as close to *I love you* as I was going to get.

I smiled and planted a kiss on his cheek. "I do now."

Edward laid me on the bed and dove in, kissing my neck while unbuttoning my blouse. I kicked off my shoes and reached for his belt buckle. His five o'clock shadow tickled the delicate skin on my neck. Edward was a combination of different textures that left me in sensory overload. My hands gripped his erection, hard and smooth. His lips were soft, while his tongue was warm and rough. His mouth

travelled down my body. He pulled down the fabric cup of my bra, quickly lapping at the puckered flesh. A breathy sigh fell from my lips. It was incredible how much it turned me on to watch him do things to my body. He didn't just make me feel good, he made me feel good while looking so damn sexy doing it. His sparkling emerald eyes met mine as he gently rubbed his prickly chin against my nipple. He could melt me with a look, but the sight of him coupled with the feel of him was enough to set me aflame.

His hands began to slip down and under my skirt, moving it up with them until he reached my panties. "When you aren't naked, you should always wear skirts. I like getting straight to the point," he said, yanking the panties off my body in one fluid motion.

He grabbed my legs and dragged me closer to the edge of the bed. The movement caused my skirt to ride the rest of the way up. He pushed my legs apart and dropped to his knees.

"Beautiful," he said with a boyish grin. His hands ran up and down my thighs. "I hope our guests are running late."

God, so did I.

"He was so much better in the Bourne Identity," Alice said as we watched Matt Damon shoot at the bad guys.

I was snuggled up against Edward, my head on his chest, his hand stroking my hair. "Hotter for sure," I replied.

Edward's hand stilled. "I'm going to ignore that comment."

"He doesn't want to be a sex symbol anymore. That's why he's been choosing different roles lately. I don't think it's helping with his popularity," Alice remarked.

"When I was in Denmark once, this one place was selling all these T-shirts that said Matt Damon for President. I think he's quite popular with the Danish," Edward said matter-of-factly.

I started giggling. *Where did he come up with this stuff?* A handful of popcorn came flying at me from where Jasper was sitting.

"No talking during the movie."

I picked up a kernel of popcorn and tossed it in my mouth. I had a bad day but this pizza and movie night was making up for it. Jasper and Edward were getting along better than I hoped. I could foresee the four of us doing things together more often. There was a chance this whole thing was going to work out if we could get James Hunter to leave us alone.

"I knew we should have gotten the Katherine Heigl/Ashton Kutcher movie," I said as Edward helped me eat the popcorn that was all over my lap.

Alice's head popped up from Jasper's shoulder. "I heard he was smoking hot in that movie. Why did we not get that movie?"

"No boobs," I replied with a snicker.

Jasper started laughing.

"I don't get it," Alice complained.

Edward's phone rang. He shifted under me so he could pull it out of his pocket. He read the text and stuffed it back in his pocket.

"Alec says the dinner meeting went well. He's headed back to the city."

"Good. I think it meant a lot to him that you trusted him to handle it."

He smiled and kissed my head. If Edward could relax a little at work, not take on all the responsibility, that would make things so much easier on him. When things were easier for Edward, they were bound to be easier for me.

We finished watching the movie, and I was too comfortable to jump up and turn on the lights. In fact, I was ready for everyone to leave so Edward could carry me upstairs again. I also wouldn't mind repeating the love-making before drifting into a well-earned slumber.

Alice was not as tired as I. She leapt up and flipped the switch, lighting up the game room. I had convinced Edward that movie night would be better here than in the movie theater where we couldn't snuggle. He was all for snuggling now that we were both healthy again. His nightly groping had not gone unnoticed.

"Mr. Hale, I challenge you to a rematch in pool," Alice said, extending a hand to

help him up.

"You're on, Miss Masen," he accepted, taking her hand and standing up. "I'm all out of cash, though, so you'll have to come up with something else we can bet with."

I rolled my eyes. So much for them leaving. Their foreplay was going to consist of cueballs and pool sticks. There was a bad porno movie title in there somewhere.

"So, have I earned an invitation to the next pizza and movie night?" Edward asked as he played with the penny dangling from my bracelet.

I shifted and laid my head on his lap, stretching my body the length of the couch. "You're invited to all my pizza and movie nights."

"Good." He entwined our fingers and lifted my hand to his mouth for a kiss.

"Tonight made up for my crappy day. It reminded me that it doesn't matter what all those mean people out there say. The people that I love are all that matter."

"Promise me you will not go to any more stupid gossip websites. There is no reason to invite the mean people in."

I tickled the tiny whiskers that were growing in on his chin with my fingertips. "If I could only avoid the mean people at work."

Edward grabbed my wrist. "What mean people at work?" The harshness of his tone startled me.

"It's nothing. There's really just one person who seems to think I suck."

"Who?"

"Jane the Pain." I giggled. It was such a ridiculous nickname.

"What?" Edward did not find it funny. I wasn't sure if it was the Dr. Seuss name I had given her or the fact that someone was mean to me that was making him so agitated.

"Sorry, some people call her that because, well, she's a pain in the ass sometimes. Jane Nelson is the English Department Head. She gave me a hard time when I asked a question at the department meeting this morning. She's always giving me a hard time."

"Jane Nelson?" he repeated her name like he was committing it to his super-powered memory.

"Come on," I said, sitting up. "Let's go watch the rematch. I don't want to think about work until Monday." I stood up and put out a hand to help him up.

Edward looked unhappy but took my hand. His phone went off as he stood up. He looked perplexed when he saw the caller ID.

"Masen speaking." He paused and listened to what the caller was telling him. "When? Where? No. Do you know *anything* about the people in the car?"

Something bad had happened. Edward looked absolutely frantic. His hand was clawing at his hair. I wondered if I should get Tyler. He hung up, and I saw the despair immediately.

"There's been an accident. I need to go."

He was almost to the door when I stopped him.

"Who's been in an accident?" I looked over at Alice, who was now moving towards Edward as well. I feared for Carlisle and Esme. Alice and Edward would not handle something happening to one of them well.

He looked at me with barely reined-in panic. "It was my car."

Alec and Brady.

"I'm coming with you," I told him. It was not a request.

I grabbed a jacket and my purse. Edward and Tyler were waiting for me by the entrance to the garage. His Mercedes was connected to something called mbrace. It was Mercedes version of OnStar. They had contacted Edward by cell when they received no response from anyone in the vehicle after the airbags had been deployed. Emergency rescue had also been contacted, but they still had not heard anything about anyone in the car. Edward's attempts to contact both Alec and Brady were unsuccessful.

Edward had been told the GPS location of the car, and we headed in that direction. They were supposedly about twenty miles outside the city limits. Tyler drove while Edward began calling hospitals for the one that was expecting to admit two men from a car accident.

The gaper delay and flashing lights from the emergency vehicles made it easy to locate exactly where we needed to be. Tyler pulled over. An officer approached the car immediately. Edward jumped out, hopping over the guard rails that separated the road from the grassy area in the center of the highway.

"Sir, please get back in your vehicle," the officer demanded politely.

"It's my car," Edward said, ignoring him and making his way over to the accident scene. I jumped out and followed him.

"Sir," the officer said again, this time putting a hand on Edward's arm. I knew that was a mistake. Edward reacted, pushing the officer away.

"We have friends in the car. Dear friends," I explained, trying to get myself in between Edward and the now very unhappy officer. "Please. We just want information about our friends."

"They've been taken to the hospital, ma'am. You really need to get back in your car. You can't be parked over there. You're going to cause another accident."

I grabbed Edward's arm this time. We had made it across the four lane highway. Once we got around the fire truck, we could clearly see the Mercedes. Firefighters were putting out flames. The car was flipped over and looked like it had hit a tree before it rolled. The whole thing was smashed and all the glass broken. The driver's side door was pried off. Whatever had happened was bad, very bad.

I pulled Edward away and back to the car. We needed to be at the hospital, not here. Tyler had found out which hospital the men had been taken to and got us on our way immediately.

Edward stared out the window. He didn't utter a single word the entire drive there. An unbearable mixture of fear and panic was beginning to consume me. Not only was I worried about Alec and Brady but what it was going to do to Edward if something bad happened to them.

The nurse working the desk in the ER was friendly but could pass on little information. She did confirm that the accident victims had been brought to that hospital but could not give us more than that because we were not family. We were family, though, just not in the ways that mattered to the hospital.

Edward got on his phone and started calling God knows who. Tyler led me over to the seating area and told me to stay put. I could see the worry in his eyes as well.

There was no denying that our main concern was Edward. If Alec or Brady were hurt badly, this had the potential to break him.

"Alec's daughter is on the way. Brady's parents live in Nebraska. They aren't going to be of any help until I can get them out here," Edward said, storming over to me and pacing back and forth.

He was in control mode. He was controlling what he could of the situation. He was arranging to get the family members here. He was calling Carlisle to see if he could use any of his medical connections to gain information. He was calling Peter and whispering about medical records. Something told me St. Francis Hospital's computer system was about to get hacked into.

Alec's daughter arrived before anything else happened. The petite blonde woman was not much older than me. She greeted Edward, and he brought her over to the check-in desk. After a minute or so, someone from inside the trauma area came out and took her and Edward back. Tyler and I exchanged nervous looks but said nothing.

I understood why Edward needed to be doing something because sitting and waiting was pure torture. Every second felt like a lifetime. This was a million times worse than the last time I sat in an ER waiting room. Then, I knew Edward was fine. This time, I hadn't been given that same comforting information. Terrible thoughts ran through my head, and they weren't only the morbid ones involving what could have happened to Brady and Alec. They were guilt-ridden ones, like thank goodness Edward sent Alec to the dinner because it could have been him back there possibly dead or badly injured. I liked Alec so very much. I even liked Brady, even though we only exchanged hellos and goodbyes. I was in love with Edward, though. If Edward had been in the car tonight, I would be destroyed and no one would have kept me or Tyler from going back there to see what was going on.

Fifteen minutes passed. The door to the trauma area opened, and Edward walked out. I was on my feet and over to him before he took more than a couple steps into the waiting room. I knew when I saw his face and the wetness on his cheeks, he was not going to tell me what I wanted to hear.

I threw my arms around him, but he did not hold me in return. There was almost a lifelessness about him. He stood rigidly in my embrace. It was almost as if he had stopped breathing. His stillness was frightening.

"Alec's dead," he murmured, his voice vacant of any emotion.

He said the two words that cut through my soul. I felt my heart break for Alec and for Edward. I tightened my hold, even though Edward remained motionless.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," I sobbed into his chest.

Everything that Edward hated about himself and his life began its wave of destruction that very moment, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

I'm not sure what to say in this AN. This is almost worse than when I broke them up on Christmas Eve. Sorry! Sorry for the late post (busy day!) and the sad ending. It's about to get dark and angsty. I will warn you that the next chapter is terribly sad. At least, it was sad to write.

Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for her support through the writing of this one. To all the usual suspects on Twitter and FB still pimping this puppy out, I love you. To TwiCarol for her fic rec on the Jasper's Naughty Girls blog, thanks so much for the kindness.

Love it, hate it. James thought he was going to kill Edward. Was this worse?

Chapter 18

DISCLAIMER: This chapter deals with sensitive issues regarding suicide, mental illness, and PTSD. Please be advised.

Chapter 18

Friday, October 15th at noon

It was raining the day we buried Alec. It felt like it had been raining every day since he died. I stood huddled under the umbrella with Edward. Even as the priest spoke, all I could hear was the pitter patter of the raindrops hitting the stretched nylon that hovered above us. There was a bitter cold wind that cut right through me, causing me to shiver.

Edward was completely stoic. He stood rigidly at my side; back straight, shoulders square, eyes always forward. He had not shed a single tear all week long. He had cried with Alec's daughter that night in the ER, but he did not allow himself the relief of an emotional release since.

I, on the other hand, cried myself to sleep every night. I cried because of the loss of a friend. I cried because I felt guilty. It had not been Edward who died, and I was glad. But mainly I cried because I was losing the fight to hold onto the man I loved. The darkness was taking over. It wasn't just winning, it was kicking my ass.

I woke up alone this morning, just as I had every morning this week. Edward didn't come to bed at all, his side of the bed was cold and still made up. I wasn't sure if he slept or not. The dark circles under his eyes told me probably not. We exchanged a few words at breakfast, but the distance between us was becoming a massive chasm that I wasn't sure I'd be able to bridge.

He spent the majority of the week helping Alec's family make arrangements. Alec's daughter, Karen, lived outside of Seattle with her husband. She had a brother in California and their mother, Alec's ex-wife, lived in Chicago. Alec also had a brother in New York. Getting them all to Seattle wasn't as easy as Edward would have liked, but he managed it.

I hadn't ever thought about Alec's family before. I didn't know he was divorced or that he had children. I realized I knew so very little about a man I called my friend. He was Edward's assistant and right hand man. He preferred beef to seafood and

never added any salt to anything that he ate because he was watching his sodium intake. He had impeccable manners and one of the kindest smiles I had ever seen. I knew that he loved Edward like a son and didn't doubt Edward's feelings toward Alec were equally familial.

When Edward wasn't dealing with funeral arrangements, he was checking on Brady. Brady had been wearing a seatbelt and surrounded by airbags, so he had sustained non-life threatening injuries but was still in bad shape. Edward saw to it that he was moved to Harborview as soon as he was stable. He wanted Brady to only be treated by doctors he or Carlisle trusted.

Brady was conscious but unfortunately didn't remember much about what happened. He remembered picking Alec up at the restaurant and starting the long drive home, but the details of the accident were sketchy. He had a hazy memory of being surrounded. He remembered not being able to go the speed he wanted. The few witnesses that were found reported three cars ran the Mercedes off the road after they forced it to maintain a dangerous speed. Alec was in the back, not wearing a seatbelt. He had been thrown from the car and died of massive head trauma. He had been pronounced dead at the scene.

I told the police it was James Hunter's doing. In fact, I told anyone who would listen. I was so passionate about it that one of the detectives asked me if I was on any medication. It turned out that James was in Chicago attending a family wedding that night. He had two hundred witnesses that placed him far from Washington State.

The police told us James appeared quite saddened by the news of Alec's death. Saddened my ass. He was saddened that he had once again failed to kill Edward. The detectives looked at me like I was crazy, which seriously made me feel crazy. Tyler had to literally carry me out of the station. No one was willing to listen, and once again James was going to get away with murder. Even my own father didn't see how we could make a case against the elusive Mr. Hunter unless we had some evidence. All we had were illegally-obtained emails and recorded phone conversations. None of which mentioned running Edward's car off the road. Even if they had, Edward said we couldn't turn them over to the police anyway. Edward did say there was a text intercepted telling James the Lion was put down and then another a few hours later that stated there was an error and the Lion had escaped.

James wanted Edward dead, but little did he know that killing someone in his place was almost worse. Edward wouldn't talk to me. He could barely look at me. He certainly wouldn't let me comfort him. He did not want to be comforted. He did not think he deserved to be comforted. I knew that was what it really was. Edward wore

his guilt like a bulletproof vest. It was impenetrable; I couldn't get through it no matter how hard I tried.

The priest finished his final blessing, and the coffin containing Alec was lowered into the cold, wet dirt. I wiped the tears that were streaming down my cheeks with the bunched up Kleenex I had fisted throughout the ceremony. Alec's family took turns tossing roses into the hole. When it was all over, Edward handed the umbrella to Tyler and directed him to take me to the car.

I walked to the car but didn't get in. The Cullens, Alice, and Jasper got in their car, which was parked in front of ours. I watched from the gravel road as Edward stood in the rain, his hair turning the color of antique bronze as it got wet. He stood alone beside Alec's grave completely motionless, a statue of grief and guilt.

Darkness 1, Bella 0

Ignoring Tyler's constant requests to get in the car, I let Edward stand there for a full three minutes before the need to rescue him from himself became too great. He was soaked to the bone and showed no signs of moving. I ran to him and grabbed his hand.

"Please come to the car with me, baby. You're going to catch a cold if you stand out here any longer," I pleaded, pulling on his arm slightly.

He didn't move, but he did speak. "My father tried to kill me."

I froze. The rain began to fall harder as he confessed his final secret.

"He lured me into the basement of our house a week after my mother's funeral. He told me he needed help finding some of her things. It smelled bad, like soot and mold." His nose scrunched like he could smell it now. "Like death. It was so dark down there. He had this stupid red plastic flashlight. I don't know where it came from. He wouldn't let me hold it, even though he made me go down the stairs first."

There was a rumble of thunder in the distance. It was a warning that the storm was only going to get worse.

"There was nothing down there that we could take with us. Everything was ruined by the water they used to put out the fire. I wanted to leave. I was pissed at him for bringing me there. I didn't want to be there. She died there. She *burned* there. It was almost like I could feel her. She hated me, I was sure. Just like he hated me all along. My heart was beating so fucking fast. It was so damn cold."

I took his hand in mine, trying to keep him from getting lost in this horror of a memory.

"I wanted to go to the hotel where we were staying with Esme. He got in between me and the stairs, the only way out. He had no intention of either one of us ever getting out. I didn't know that, though, until he pulled out the gun."

Tears began to mix with the unrelenting rain as they both wet my face. It was beginning to hurt to breathe.

"I think he had to talk himself into it, psych himself up to kill his own flesh and blood. Wanting to do it and actually pulling the trigger were two very different things. I remember him pacing back and forth like a caged animal, but I was the one who was caged. *I was the one who had no way out.*"

He gripped my hand tightly, and I squeezed back to let him know I was here. I was here with him, and I wasn't going to leave him.

"He pointed the flashlight at me." Edward held his hand up and squinted, shielding his eyes from a light that wasn't there. It was like he was back there, in the basement. "I tried to block it from blinding me. I didn't want him to think I was afraid of him. But I was. For over a week, he had pretended I didn't exist. He couldn't pretend any longer. He needed me to not exist for real."

I could feel Edward begin to tremble. Perhaps it was from the cold, but something told me it was the memories that were shaking him to the core.

"All children did was take. Take, take, take. I took the most. I was arrogant and self-serving. My inability to do as I was told always took my mother away from him. Ultimately, it took her away for good. He couldn't let me get away with that. He couldn't stand by and let me continue to breathe when my mother was never going to breathe again."

"Oh, Edward," I choked out, my voice trembling along with him.

His head turned, and he looked down at me for the first time. His eyes were black as night, the darkness literally engulfing him.

"He wasn't wrong. I killed her, Isabella. She died because of me. So, I didn't argue. I just stood there, waiting for him to put me out of my misery."

His eyes shifted from my face to a point in the distance in front of him. "He was

such a fucking coward, though. He shook like a leaf and dropped the flashlight. I remember it making a splash as it hit the water that covered the floor. The light shone for a minute until the water made it go out. I remember watching it, waiting for the light to turn off. Waiting and watching. Wondering if I would die before it did."

Edward lifted his free hand like he was holding a gun. "*You did this! You took my only reason for living. Do you understand why I have to do this?*"

It was as if he was reliving the whole experience right in front of me, repeating the words his father had said to him. The anger and hurt in his voice broke my already seriously damaged heart.

"I understand. *Do you?* Yes, I understand!"

The thunder cracked overhead and the rain was falling in sheets as Edward played out this sick and twisted memory.

"Bang!" Edward pretended to shoot his finger gun and then pointed it to his head. The thunder seemed to be in sync and rang out at the same time as Edward shouted, "Bang!"

My legs turned to rubber as the blast of this land mine hit me full on. Edward turned his head and looked at me like a confused little boy.

"But I didn't die. I didn't even get hit by the bullet. They couldn't even *find* the bullet. There were two bullets missing from the chamber of the gun, but they couldn't find the one he shot at me. It vanished. Some people think I made the whole thing up, imagined it. They think he didn't shoot at me, but he did, Isabella. He did, and for some reason I didn't die. It's like God wants to punish me by not letting me die. This is my punishment for killing her. It's like I'm immortal. My curse is to be a soulless monster, forcing others to die in my place."

I let go of his hand and held his face. His skin was like ice. With all the fierceness I could muster, I voiced my dissent. "That's not true! That is so not true. You did not kill your mom. Edward, you *did not* kill Alec."

"I did!" he shouted, pulling out of my grasp. "I sent him to that dinner! I sent him when I knew people were trying to kill me. I changed the plans last minute. I was supposed to be at that dinner. I sent Alec in *my* car with *my* driver. He's dead because I can't die!"

"You're not immortal, Edward. You're human like me. You feel, you breathe, you bleed, you love, and you're loved. You're human."

He shook his head vehemently as his hands clenched in tight fists. "I'm a monster. You said so yourself not so long ago."

I tried to grab ahold of him, but he wouldn't let me, pushing me off and stepping away.

"You're not a monster. A monster wouldn't feel guilty like you do. I wouldn't be in love with you if you were a monster. I love you. I love you so very much. Please come to the car with me."

"I'm going to kill you. Don't you see?" His anguish was overwhelming him and me.

I shook my head. "You aren't going to kill me. Come to the car with me." I pulled on him until he moved.

We walked back up to the car. I saw that his family had waited and been watching us from their car. Alice and I made eye contact. She looked as miserable as I felt. Once inside the warm car, I instructed Tyler to drive us straight home. Edward had helped Alec's family arrange a luncheon, but he was in no state to be around people.

He sat in the backseat, shivering and mute. Whatever had come over him had left him a shell. I took off my wet jacket and tried to get him to take off his.

"You're soaked," I said as I helped him pull his trench coat off.

Edward seemed oblivious to his current condition. The water from his hair dripped down his nose and chin. He made no move to wipe it away. My own teeth were chattering, but I placed my hands around his in an attempt to warm them up. My chest ached in response to his pain. I would give anything to take it away, to provide at least some relief.

Tyler took us to the estate. Carlisle followed us. I brought Edward inside and upstairs. I got him out of his wet clothes and started warming up the shower, stripping off my own clothes. I turned on every jet that shot out of his fancy shower and pulled Edward in with me. The water stung at first until my skin acclimated to its warmth. I wrapped my arms around him and pressed my naked body against his. He held me, too. We stood in silence, letting the shower do its job of fighting off the physical chill.

"I love you so much. I love you more than anything," I repeated over and over, hoping my words would heal the massive hole in his heart.

He said nothing, but he let me hold him. He let me tell him how I felt about him. I was doing the best I could to take care of him, hoping it would be enough but knowing that it probably wasn't. Edward Masen, Sr. had done the same thing James had. He tried to kill Edward, but in failing, wounded the man worse than if he had succeeded.

Darkness 2, Bella 0

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder was something I knew existed but associated with Vietnam veterans or people who lived through things like 9/11. I didn't imagine it could be the thing that made Edward, well, Edward.

After the shower, I dried him off. We put on some comfortable clothes, and I lay with him in bed, running my fingers through his hair and lightly scratching his back until he fell asleep. I wished sleep could take me away from all of this as well, but I was hyper-alert. There would be no sleep for me. I climbed out of bed and made my way downstairs to find Edward's family and Jasper still waiting for us.

With all the secrets out in the open, I had no qualms about talking to his family about what was going on. Carlisle was very helpful. He explained that PTSD was basically the re-living the traumatic event again and again. Sometimes this was in the form of nightmares; sometimes the person suffering from PTSD could have flashbacks or vivid memories of the event during their waking hours.

It seemed his family was aware that Edward often dreamt about what happened in the basement. Edward had reported to Carlisle that the dreams were becoming less and less frequent. Sleeping with me had made some sort of difference, quieting his mind at night in some way. According to Carlisle, the social support I had been providing over the last couple months had begun to significantly reduce his symptoms.

Edward had been emotionally numb for years. This was his way of detaching. He pretended he didn't care about anything. With me in his life, these things had improved drastically. His confession to Alice that he loved her was a real breakthrough because it was the first time in almost fifteen years Edward had admitted to an attachment of any kind. Carlisle asked me, without trying to pry, if I had noticed Edward talking more about feelings, which I had. He had been trying so

hard over the last few weeks to put names to all these feelings he was experiencing. He had been shutting his emotions off for so long, it was no wonder he found it so difficult.

Edward also avoided things that reminded him of the event. Basements - huge landmine. I remembered how just the mention of a basement had set him off the first time I came to the house. He also hated dark, wet places. I thought back again to how uneasy he looked when he first thought about spending the night in the tent in the rain. Knowing how that could have been difficult for him, the fact that he stayed to be intimate with me made the whole thing even more meaningful.

The list of symptoms went on and on, painting a perfect picture of Edward. Excessive awareness, irritability, outbursts of anger, and survivor's guilt were all things Edward wrangled with on a daily basis. All of these things, Carlisle felt had been improving since Edward began his relationship with me. His attachment to me was very powerful but had the capability of moving him forward or setting him back. The thought of losing me had been causing him a great deal of anxiety.

Carlisle had pushed Edward to seek some counseling, which I guess he had without telling me. Unfortunately, he still wasn't a big believer and had only attended one session with no intention of going again. Esme added that for him to even consider it, though, was more than they ever thought possible.

All this information was welcomed but overwhelming at the same time. The entire day had been such a clusterfuck. I was ready for it to be over. Alice was sitting so quietly. She hadn't said a word while I talked with her uncle and aunt.

"Are you okay, Al?" I asked, pulling her from her own dark thoughts.

Her eyebrows pinched together as she tried to come up with how to express herself. "This is Mom dying all over again. This is almost worse than Mom dying."

"We're all going to need to be here for him. He's going to need all of us," Carlisle nodded solemnly.

Alice shook her head. "He's not going to let us. I know about nightmares and flashbacks. I know about wanting to desperately shut off your feelings so you don't feel at all. What he's going through is equivalent to what I would have gone through if he hadn't made it out of that fire in the stables. If he had died..." Her head fell into her hands.

Esme got up and sat beside her niece. She and Jasper tried to comfort her. I could

offer no solace. I was drowning in Masen misery. It was pulling me under, and I feared I would not resurface.

"I'm so sorry, Bella," Alice said in her tiny voice.

She was apologizing to me?

She was apologizing because she knew. She knew the darkness was coming ... hell, it was here.

Before I could say anything, a scream came from upstairs. Edward's wail was bone-chilling. I hopped to my feet and took the stairs two at a time, followed closely by Tyler. I burst in the room, causing the lights to come on immediately, thanks to my penny charm. Edward was thrashing in the bed, tearing one of the pillows apart. Feathers were floating all over the room, covering the bed, covering Edward, falling to the floor.

Tyler and I both hesitated, unsure of how to even begin to calm him down. Alice slipped past me and went straight for her brother. She crawled across the bed and kept saying his name over and over.

"Edward. Edward. You're okay, Edward. Edward."

She put her hands on him, and he immediately stilled. His eyes shot open, the panic still very real even if whatever he was dreaming about was not.

"It's okay. You're home. You're safe." Alice sat next to him and rubbed her hand up and down his arm.

He looked at her like he was trying to determine if she was real or not. His breathing began to slow and the panic was fading.

"It was a dream. It wasn't real. It was just a dream," Alice assured him.

"A dream," he mumbled, sitting up in the bed and running his hand through his wild hair.

Alice reached for his hands. "I need you, Edward. You're the one who has to take care of me, remember? We take care of each other. Just the way Mom wanted it. I need you. Okay? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He nodded and touched her face, wiping the tears that I couldn't see were running

down her cheeks.

"I love you," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

The two of them sat there without saying a word. He scrubbed his face with his hands. His face contorted with such pain. I knew he was beating himself up on the inside. He was wrestling with his guilt and sorrow.

"I need Isabella," he finally replied. The fact that he didn't tell her he loved her back was not lost on me or her.

I stepped forward. "I'm right here."

I took Alice's place on the bed. She slipped out of the room as quickly as she had come in. The soft click of the door told me everyone had left, giving us at least the semblance of some privacy. He looked me over as he ran a shaky hand down my arm. He seemed to be making sure I was alive and well.

"You're okay."

I swiped a feather from his floppy bangs. "I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"I don't want anything to ever happen to you," he murmured.

I crawled into his lap, displacing feathers and sending them floating in the air like fluffy snowflakes.

"Nothing is going to happen to me."

His hands were all over me, his nose skimmed my cheek. "Alive and warm," he mumbled. "I need to feel you. I need to feel you all over."

I put my hands on his shoulders and tilted my head back as he began to kiss my neck. "I'm right here. I'm fine."

His hands went under my shirt. His palms were soft and caressed my back and then moved to my breasts. He grabbed at the flesh, used his fingers to stroke my nipples until they responded by hardening. His mouth attacked mine. His tongue forcing its way into my mouth. He was demanding, rough. His hands gripped my face like a vice as his lips pushed and pulled on mine.

He stopped kissing me to yank my shirt over my head. He grabbed me and threw

me back on the bed. More feathers went flying across the room. Edward was on top of me, and his need was both exhilarating and frightening. He kissed across my chest and then trailed upward back to my mouth. His hands were pushing my hair back as he ground his hips and erection into me.

I pushed on his shoulders. His family and Jasper were still in the house. "Edward," I protested.

"I need you. Don't fight me." His eyes were still so dark. "You're so warm and soft. So...alive."

I began to realize he had been dreaming about me, most likely dreaming about me being dead. I wasn't dead, though. My body was reacting to his loving yet maniacal assault. He caused my skin to flush, the heat rising instantly wherever he touched me. His lips, his tongue, his hands, and his body were all having their way with me, all confirming to him that I was real.

He had been so cold and distant all week long; this was such a change. I had forgotten what it was like to be worshipped by him. His tongue swirled around my taut nipple before he sucked it into his mouth, stopping only to switch to the other breast. As much as I knew he should stop, I was unable to voice that opinion. He kissed down my belly and made me moan softly as he tugged my pants off me.

"Tell me you love me again. Tell me you need me as much as I need you, Isabella," he said against the sensitive skin of my inner thigh.

Oh, what he did to me. Even with all the turmoil in our life, he could make me feel like we were the only two people in the world.

"I love you. I need you so much, baby."

He kissed me just above the spot that was aching for his touch. His breath was hot and heavy. I tightened my hand into a fist, grasping a handful of the feathers that were scattered all over the bed. They were in Edward's hair and stuck to his clothes.

"Only me, right?"

"Only you, Edward," I said with a heaving breath as he brushed his fingers between my legs.

"Warm, alive, real." He pulled his own pants off and then fell back on top of me. He pushed inside without any warning. His lips pressed to mine as he tried to wrap

me up in nothing but him and vice versa.

"Tell me you love me, Isabella. Tell me you're never going to die. Tell me."

This wasn't right. As much as I wanted him and wanted to give him what he wanted, this was wrong. He wasn't going to be able to convince himself this way. Sex and false promises were not going to heal him. He moved above me, entering me with long, forceful strokes. He would wince when he slid out and relax when he was buried deep. I had no plans to die, but it wasn't something that I could promise him was never going to happen. Death was not something I wanted to have control over. That was for fate to decide. I could only hope it wasn't in the greater plan to take me from Edward before we had a chance to live.

"Stop," I said as forcefully as I could. "Stop."

He stilled his movements, pushed as far inside me as possible. "Don't fight me. I need you, don't you understand? Give me what I want," he demanded. "I need to feel you living, breathing, loving."

He was breaking my already broken heart. I held his face with my trembling hands. "I love you. I love you so much, but I don't want this. Not like this. Not when you're so scared."

"I need you so much it hurts. I don't want to hurt anymore." His head dropped onto my shoulder. "I want to feel good. You are the only thing that makes me feel good. Please, Isabella."

He lifted his head back up. His beautiful face was clouded with such sadness. It was the face of a fallen angel, hurting and lost. It took everything I had to deny him.

"We need to stop. This isn't the way I should take care of you. Let's talk about what's going on. You let me in, don't shut me back out. Don't distract yourself with sex. Talk to me."

His eyes dimmed at my request. He shut them for a moment, then pulled out of me and jumped off the bed completely. Snatching his discarded clothes, he made his way to the bathroom.

"Tell my family I want them to leave. Then tell Charlotte to get up here and clean up all these fucking feathers." He slammed the door to the bathroom so hard that the sound resonated through the room.

Charlotte stood behind me, picking out the little white feathers that were stuck in my hair. Something told me there was no way we were going to get them all. I had helped her clean up the room; we changed the sheets and vacuumed up the feathers. In return, she helped me clean myself up.

Edward had stayed locked inside the bathroom for over a half hour before storming out and locking himself in his office downstairs. I had done as he asked and asked everyone to leave. I could have used the buffer of his family when he finally emerged from his self-imposed prison but figured it was best to do as he said. I had denied him once today; I wouldn't be able to do it again.

"I think you might just have to wash it all out, sweetheart. We could be here all night," Charlotte said in defeat.

I dropped my hands, knowing she was right. I let out a sigh. "Thanks for trying."

She walked to the pantry and pulled out the broom and dust pan. She swept up the feathers that littered the kitchen floor.

"What should we make for dinner tonight? I could teach you how to make those chocolate molten cakes. He loves those," she said with a smile.

Charlotte was trying desperately to cheer me up. I smashed my cheek against the palm of my hand as I propped up my head. If only chocolate molten cakes could solve all our problems. Something hot and sweet did sound good, though.

"My mom used to make me the best homemade mac-n-cheese. It's the ultimate in comfort food."

Charlotte dumped the feathers into the stainless steel garbage can. "Well, there you go. You can teach me how to make that and I'll show you how to make the dessert. It's nice not having to do things alone, isn't it?"

Her words tugged at my heart. I wished I could make Edward see that he didn't have to handle all this alone. He was so afraid of being alone, but sometimes so determined to live that way. I stood up and wrapped my arms around her. I couldn't speak because the lump in my throat was too great. I would never complain about having her or Tyler around the house ever again.

"I think I'm in love with this," I said, sliding a finger through the remnants of batter that clung to the mixing bowl and licking it clean.

Charlotte laughed. "I believe this recipe is responsible for several deaths by chocolate."

Edward walked into the kitchen dressed in dark navy pants and a pale blue button down shirt. "I'm going to the office."

I glanced at the clock on the microwave. "At six-thirty on a Friday night?"

"I've been out of the office all day, Isabella." His tone was sharp and mean. "I don't give a damn what time it is. I have things to take care of!"

"We made dinner." My voice was so small in comparison to his. "We made dinner for you."

His face twitched. As hurt and damaged as he was, he didn't like hurting me back. He took a deep breath and tried to come off gentler. "I'm sorry. I have to go. Don't wait up for me."

He was out the door before I could even respond.

"I can eat with you if you like," Charlotte offered sympathetically.

I shook my head and fought the tears that threatened to fall. They would have to wait until I was alone in my room. No food was going to comfort me. No amount of polite conversation with Charlotte was going to take away my pain.

"Forget it. I'm not even hungry." With slumping shoulders, I made my way out of the kitchen. "I'm going to take a shower and go to bed."

I made it to the top of the stairs before I lost my fight. The tears rolled fat and wet down my face. I walked into the bathroom and started the shower. I needed to wash everything about this day away. Burying Alec, Edward's dark memories, my failed attempt at making things better for him, the dinner that would not be comforting anyone tonight. I lifted my face to the water, holding my breath until my chest hurt from something other than my battered heart.

I never realized how hard it could be to be in love with someone. I used to wonder why my parents didn't try harder to stay together. They had made vows. Vows that before I was in love didn't seem so hard to uphold. Vows that they would love each

other in sickness and health. I could do that. Edward and I had survived being sick, even if it was only for a weekend. I knew that I would stand beside him no matter what illness made him a big fat baby. For richer or poorer. He was richer, I was poorer. We were muddling through that reality. I was learning to accept that he was rich. Edward, in spite of all his other faults, had never judged me because I was poor. In good times and bad. This was the one that was harder than the rest. It was easy to love someone when they were up. It was harder to be in love with someone when they were down. It wasn't that I loved him any less. I probably loved Edward more the worse things got. That's why it hurt so bad. It pained me to watch him suffering. It was killing me to not be able to stop the bad times from happening, to promise they wouldn't happen again.

I got out of the shower when the water ran cold. I lay in bed until one in the morning when the exhaustion finally took over. Edward never came home that night.

Darkness 4, Bella 0

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Many of you had guessed it. Papa Masen was a complete bastard and tried to kill his son before shooting himself. This was an unpleasant one. Sorry again. Mr. Mood Swing will be in full effect next chapter. Poor guy is all over the fricking place.

Can I just say the readers of this story are AWESOME? The last chapter had over 400 reviews. I tried to answer a bunch but as soon as I threw in the Ch. 4 outtake (which you can find on my profile), my inbox became so overwhelming I couldn't keep up. I read them all. Thanks for all the alert adds - we're over 4000, which completely floors me. My last story had over 400 and I thought I was hot shit. The response to this story is unbelievable and I am so grateful. To all the ladies on Twitter - thanks for pimping this out and getting kicked out of Panera and stuff like that ;) The Facebook crowd - I love you hard. There's a Pennyward Support Group if you're interested in joining. Look on my profile for a link to my FB stuff. Message me and I'll add you to the Support group. They like to do drive by boob grabs, just warning you.

momof4 - prereader, soul sister, song finder ;) Thanks for everything. She's the best, really.

The darkness is kicking Bella's ass right now, but our girl isn't going down without a fight. She's going to kick some butt next week. She's going to try at least. Ramblings on the blog .com

Who loves molten chocolate cake? Hmm? Choclover82 - I know you do. I would have eaten that stuff before I went upstairs. You just know Char can cook. What's your favorite comfort food? I think we all need some for dinner tonight!

XOXO, troublefollows

Chapter 19

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Friday, October 22nd at noon

I sat in the passenger's seat of my car, fiddling with the temperature controls. It made me feel better to be in charge of something since I was no longer able to drive the car. Liam began driving instead of following me right after the accident. I refused to sit in the back seat to Liam's chagrin.

"So, how was your morning?" I asked, trying to make conversation.

"Fine, ma'am."

"Do you sit in the parking lot the whole time I'm working or do you leave and do other stuff now that Emmett's in the building with me?"

"I stay in the parking lot."

"What do you do to pass the time? Listen to the radio or read?" I couldn't figure out what he did all day.

He shook his head. "I'm paid to make sure certain people do not get anywhere near you, Miss Swan. I spend my day doing that."

How boring was this man's job?

"So, you just sit there, waiting for someone to show up?"

He nodded. We drove a few more blocks in silence.

"I have a Kindle. I could let you borrow it," I offered, feeling bad that he sat and did absolutely nothing all day because of me. "You could read or play games on it. We could buy books that you like if you don't like what I have on there." I felt stupid, not knowing what he liked. This was why I needed Tyler to tell me these things. "You know... if you like to read."

His phone went off before he could respond. "The Glory of Love," by Peter Cetera came blaring out of his phone. I raised an eyebrow. Liam didn't strike me as a Peter

Cetera fan. Six-foot plus, forty-something, red-haired Irishmen weren't the ones usually buying up all the soft rock albums from the eighties.

He cursed under his breath and hit a button to turn the song off. We were stuck at a light. I was going to ask him about the Kindle again when "The Glory of Love" started playing again.

This time, Liam grabbed the phone and pushed a button to answer it. "I told you not to call me when I'm working. I have to go... yeah... I know... me, too." He cringed. "I can't say it. I'm at work."

He stole a glance in my direction, and I tried to pretend I wasn't paying attention even though I was hanging on every word.

"I'm in the car, driving her to lunch," he grumbled and looked over at me one more time. Then he lowered his voice. "Fine. I love you, too. I'll call you when I'm off."

He hung up and set the phone back in the cup holder. Liam was in love with someone. That was the cutest thing I had ever heard.

"Karate Kid is a really good movie," I said, biting my lip so I didn't laugh.

Liam was not amused. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?" he snapped, realizing a second too late that he snapped at me, *the boss' girlfriend*.

"Your ringtone. It's 'The Glory of Love' from The Karate Kid 2. It's a good movie and a good song."

I could see that he was blushing under that beard of his. "My girlfriend messed around with my phone. She shouldn't mess with my stuff."

"It's sweet that she set her number to that for you. Have you guys been together a long time?" I was prying, but he was the one who brought her up.

"Miss Swan, it's a really bad idea to bring my personal life into the workplace. I need to keep them separate."

I tried to hide the hurt I felt when he said that. "Right. Sorry."

"I just need to keep them separate, so I can be diligent. If I let this get personal and then something happens..." he trailed off not wanting to finish the thought.

"No, I get it. I'll leave you alone. I promise."

Liam sighed and rubbed his beard with the back of his hand. "I'm not trying to hurt your feelings," he said, softening ever so slightly. "It's..."

"Complicated. I get it." I waved it off. I didn't want to be a stupid, overly emotional girl, who cried over the fact that her stupid bodyguard didn't want to be her friend.

We pulled up to Eclipse, and the valet opened my door. I didn't wait for Liam. I headed for the door only to be met by Edward, who was coming out.

"I thought I could do it, but I can't. We can't eat here. Let's go." He turned me around and handed the valet his ticket.

It was our first lunch at Eclipse without Alec. We hadn't talked about it this morning, but I wondered if he and I would be able to handle it. Alec ate with us so often, and this was the last place I had seen him alive.

"Are you okay?"

His hand flew through his hair.

"Do I look okay?" His tone smacked me across the face.

I closed my eyes and covered my mouth with one hand so nothing completely rude came flying out in retaliation. Just when I thought the silence was the worst part, he proved me wrong by being a complete asshole. I dropped my hand and opened my eyes.

"You know what? I'm going to have Liam take me home. You can get lunch by yourself." I stepped back towards my car, but Edward grabbed my arm.

"I'm sorry. It's been a rough morning. I didn't realize it would be so hard to come here without him." He pulled me into his arms and dipped his head so his forehead almost rested on my shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Fire and ice, fire and ice. I never know what I'm going to get," I complained.

He turned his head and kissed my cheek so innocently. "I'll never know why you put up with me."

There he was.

"Because there's this guy in there who's not always so extreme, and I really like him."

He cocked an eyebrow. "You only like him?"

Half of my mouth curved upward. *Always so insecure*. Edward was a walking contradiction. Strong and over-confident on the outside; vulnerable and self-doubting on the inside.

"I said *really* like."

"But you can't say you love him." He was one to talk.

"I really like the guy who doesn't bite my head off or give me the cold shoulder, but I love the whole package. I love you, Edward, all of you. Jackass and all."

"I'm sorry. I know I've been acting like a prick. I'm going to make this better. I'll be better, I promise," he said, hugging me tightly. "You pick where we go to lunch. I'll go anywhere you want to go."

I needed to draw out the Edward I wanted to be with so desperately. We needed to step out of this crazy world of his and enjoy a little break in my world. Since my car was ready and waiting, Edward had us get in it and told Liam to follow us in the Hummer. With the Mercedes totaled, Edward had taken up being driven around the city in his own personal tank. The safer the better. That was my new motto.

I had Tyler take us to my favorite sandwich place - Jimmy John's. I couldn't remember the last time I had eaten there. The people behind the counter greeted us with their usual warm welcome. I knew they were told to do it, that they did it to everyone that came in, like they exuberantly wished you well when you left. There was something refreshing in the way that they did it to everyone regardless of who they were or how much money they had. Everyone was equal. Edward and I could be just like every other couple out on a lunch date.

Edward looked around the small shop like it was foreign land. I was so taking him to McDonalds next week. Maybe Peter could join us. The thought caused an ache in my chest. I couldn't deny that I missed having lunch with Alec no matter where we were dining.

Liam came tromping in after he found a place to park, not looking happy about me choosing an establishment without valet when he had to find a spot for a car the size of a small country. He and Tyler put their heads together, and Liam took a seat by

the door, while Tyler stood in line behind us.

"So, what's good here?" Edward asked.

"Everything. Pick whatever sounds good to you. You won't be disappointed."

We ordered our subs and walked together to the soda dispenser. Edward looked at it like he'd never seen one before. I shook my head and grabbed his cup from him.

"What do you want to drink?" I asked as I filled both cups with some ice.

"A nice glass of Petrus Merlot?"

"Powerade Fruit Punch it is," I replied, pressing the cup against the dispenser.

He snorted and grabbed some straws and napkins. We walked over to a small table in the back. Edward took a napkin and wiped it over the table top and then his chair before sitting down.

"This used to be fancy eating out for me. Before I met you, that is," I said, tapping my straw on the table until it popped out of its paper wrapper.

Edward peeled the paper off his straw and smiled. "Goodness, I'm not sure you really lived until you met me."

Mr. Cocky had come out to play. I took a pull from my Coke. "You haven't had your sandwich yet. Just wait."

He tipped his cup towards me after taking a sip. "Well, this Powerade is a rare vintage, I can tell."

We laughed until our number was called. Sometimes things could be so easy. Sometimes I could see being together like this forever - sharing little bits of our worlds with one another, enjoying each other's company, being a normal couple. Normal would be so very nice.

Life with Edward would never be normal, though.

"Hey!" some guy near the front of the restaurant yelled out.

Liam was on his feet and holding what looked like a phone. He was pushing buttons.

"Give it back before I have someone call the cops!" the man yelled again.

Liam finished what he was doing and tossed the phone in the direction of the door. "Get your picture-taking ass out of here," he growled.

Tyler stood up and made his way over to them. The two bodyguards side by side made quite a massive wall of intimidation.

"Asshole!" the guy shouted, picking up his phone and making sure it wasn't broken. "They're in a public place. If they don't want people to see them, they should stay home."

"You should go," Tyler said in his deep monotone.

All eyes were on the three of them, but I was blushing fiercely. I knew he was talking about us; he had been taking pictures of us. He probably could sell the pictures to TMZ or some stupid thing like that.

"It's a free country," the guy argued as he backed out of the restaurant. He might have known his rights but wasn't a complete idiot. Tyler and Liam couldn't care less about his rights.

Edward ate his sandwich, completely unfazed. "This is good," he said, still enjoying a bite.

Tyler and Liam both sat back down. I half expected someone who worked there to ask them to leave. Of course, if I didn't know them, I probably wouldn't dare ask those two to do anything.

We finished our lunch and threw out our garbage. Everyone seemed to have forgotten the scuffle from earlier. I tried to convince myself we were still like everyone else. Unfortunately, when Edward and I left with Tyler and Liam leading the way, there was no cheerful goodbye or farewell from the usually friendly staff. I looked over my shoulder at wide eyes and covered mouths, hiding whispers. No, Edward and I were anything but normal.

"You want to help me with dinner tonight?" Charlotte asked, popping her head in the library where I was hiding and writing in my journal.

"Is Edward even coming home for dinner?" I replied somewhat grumpily.

Charlotte stepped further into the room. "He texted me a few minutes ago, letting me know he should be expected within the hour."

I closed my journal and fastened the tie. "We should make something fancy. I made him eat like a peasant for lunch today."

Charlotte smiled. "Well then, we'll make a feast worthy of a king."

She wrapped an arm around me, and we made our way down to the main level. We walked past the living room where I could see Liam pacing back and forth on his phone. He was doing something I had never seen him do before. Liam was...smiling. Then he did something else I had never seen him do. Liam...laughed.

My pause outside the door did not go unnoticed. The moment he saw me there, his austere demeanor was back. I smiled to let him know it was okay, but he ended his phone call immediately.

I followed Charlotte into the kitchen.

"What was that about?" she asked, assumedly as surprised as I was that Liam could smile and laugh.

"Someone has a girlfriend," I whispered. I did not want to get caught gossiping after I promised to leave him alone.

Charlotte's eyes went wide. She smirked and then mouthed, "Oh."

I giggled, reveling in the comfort her company provided me. Without Charlotte, I would be lost.

We planned and prepared a very gourmet meal for Edward. I decided we would eat in the solarium. Edward had not been up there in awhile. I thought spending some time in that part of the house would be good for him. I was so busy setting the table that I didn't hear him come in.

"Char said you were up here."

He looked so beautiful in the soft light. His hair was a copper-streaked mess on his head. He had been pulling on it way too much lately. He had loosened his tie and taken off his jacket. His green eyes looked tired but gentle. There was hope for a relaxing dinner after all.

I shortened the distance between us. He kissed me softly.

"You're home," I said with a happy sigh and a smile.

His strong arms wrapped around my waist, and he let out an equally happy sigh. "I love it when you say that."

"I take it your afternoon went better than your morning?"

"I'm good now; that's all that matters. I see you've been keeping yourself busy. You know, I think you're trying to make Charlotte's job unnecessary."

I pulled back slightly alarmed and shook my head exaggeratedly. "No, no, no. Charlotte needs to stay. I wouldn't know what to do without her."

"Then, she's yours forever." He kissed me again with a little more passion behind it. "God help me when you leave. I'll have no one to cook for me then."

It was a joke, but it made me sad. Everything had been so strained lately. Edward's confidence in the lasting power of anything good was practically nonexistent. More than ever, he was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for that day I was going to walk away.

My fingers brushed his lips before I kissed them one more time. "I'm yours forever."

"I love it when you say that, too," he whispered against my cheek.

We ate and then sprawled out on our backs side by side on the shag rug in front of the fireplace in the library. We were playing a heated game of Hangman on his iPad.

"You are such a cheater," I said, hitting the letter Y and getting a leg drawn on my stick figure. Supposedly his stupid three-letter word had no vowels. "Every word has at least one vowel. There are no words in the English language that don't have a vowel."

"Yeah, there is."

"No, there's not."

"There is."

"I'm an English teacher, Edward. There are no words that don't have an E, A, I, O, U, or Y in them."

"My IQ is high enough to grant me membership in Mensa. I could be the king of Mensa. Would you like me to recite you the entire dictionary, Isabella? Because I can."

He was so arrogant but probably not lying about that dictionary reciting business. I hit the letter B and watched my little stick figure dude get hanged.

"C, W, M. That is not a word."

"It's pronounced koom. It's a word. You can google it."

"Cwm?"

He nodded, his face adorned with that crooked grin I presently want to kiss and slap off at the same time.

"If it's a word, what does it mean?" I asked, thinking he couldn't possibly come up with a definition for his pretend word that wouldn't be a dead giveaway of its phoniness.

"It's Welsh. It means a valley."

"You are so full of shit."

He couldn't hide his amusement. "Google it."

I quickly typed cwm into the Google search box, and damn if he wasn't right. Only Edward would know the one word in the English language that didn't have a vowel.

"I hate you."

"No, you don't. You hate losing. You're a sore loser," he teased.

I sat up and straddled him as he lay on his back. His eyebrows shot up. He liked this new position more than he should.

"I've got a tough one for you." I typed in my word and handed the iPad to him.

He took it but set it down beside him so he could hold onto me with two hands. "I

can think of other games we could play."

His one hand drifted upward and rested on my breast. I swatted it away.

"Solve the puzzle, and maybe I'll play another game with you, Einstein."

He narrowed his eyes at me but picked up the game. He hit all the vowels.

"I thought you said there were no words without vowels, Miss Swan."

"It's more of a sound than a word. Did I forget to mention that?" I asked, feigning innocence.

He pressed the wrong letter, and the answer was revealed.

"A row of Z's?"

I hovered over him, resting on my forearms that sat on either side of his head, my hair creating a curtain around our heads.

"It's the sound of you putting me to sleep with your superior intellect."

He smirked and set the iPad aside. "Is that right? I thought it was the sound you make every night when you snore."

My mouth fell open in shock, and I slapped both of my hands on his chest. "I do not snore!"

Edward proceeded to make obnoxious snoring noises. I moved to get up, but he was quick to grab me, flip me on my back, and roll on top of me.

"I do not snore. Take it back," I demanded.

He shook his head as he pinned my arms above my head. His tongue darted out of his mouth and wet his bottom lip. I was completely fixated on his beautiful mouth. It had always been one of his features that mesmerized me.

"You're in no position to make demands, Isabella. You are completely at my mercy. Now, tell me how stimulating I am."

If by stimulating he meant capable of making my heart pound, my breathing hitch, my skin tingle, and my panties spontaneously combust, he was very stimulating. We

hadn't been intimate since our disastrous interlude the day we buried Alec. My need for him had to be written all over my face.

"No," I replied stubbornly, knowing it would push him to excite me even more.

He shifted his hands on my wrists so he could hold them with one. He let his other hand slip in between us.

"Say it or I'm going to call your bluff." He started working loose the button of my jeans.

I shook my head and then pretended to fall asleep, complete with horrific snoring noises.

I heard him laugh. He got the button of my jeans undone and pushed down the zipper.

"You are so full of it. Well, you're going to be full of it," he said with a chuckle as he shoved his hand down my pants.

My eyes shot open, and I stopped my silly noises. His lips were on mine before I could protest, not that I planned to protest. Our tongues touched, exploring one another. He pulled on my bottom lip with his teeth as his highly skilled fingers called my bluff big time.

"Oh, I appear to be very stimulating," he bragged with a lascivious smile. He began placing open-mouth kisses down my neck, nipping the skin every other kiss.

There was no denying he was right. I would always want him like this. My body reacted to him without any conscious effort. I was breathing heavy and pushing my body against his.

"I'll be right back," he said, stopping all the stimulation he was so good at providing. "I need to grab some protection."

"No, it's okay," I said, locking my legs around his waist so he wouldn't get off me. "Liam didn't tell you about our trip to the doctor?"

Edward stilled and looked at me with knitted brow.

"I got my shot. We are fully protected for the next three months."

Edward's mouth fell open in surprise this time. "When?"

"A couple weeks ago actually."

"A couple weeks ago? You've been holding out on me for a couple weeks?"

"Excuse me, but *you* are the one who has been avoiding our bedroom like the plague."

Guilt and remorse clouded his eyes immediately. "Only because of the dreams, Isabella. Never because I don't want to be with you."

I touched his face gently. What I wouldn't do to be able to take away the nightmares, to grant him some peace. He settled his weight back down on me and kissed me softly. Kissing Edward was an experience. It was something I felt from my head to my toes. His lips really were perfect, capable of the right give and take. They were full and soft, warm and welcoming.

We shed our clothes, like two little kids excited to play a new game. Edward had entered me unprotected before but both times were tainted by such negative emotion. This time it was just us. There was no overwhelming need for anything but one another. Sex wasn't being used to diffuse a situation or take away some terrible fear of losing one another. It was only being used to express our love for one another.

Oh, how I loved him.

Edward's eyes nearly rolled back in his head when he pushed his way inside me. He hummed with pleasure before kissing me. With my head uncluttered with all of our emotional baggage, I could appreciate the way it felt to have no barriers, nothing shielding us from one another. It was all in my head. I knew it really didn't feel that much different to me, but what it represented to both of us made it that much more amazing. We were completely stripped bare, literally and figuratively. There were no more secrets between us. There were no more landmines. We had set all of them off and survived.

It must have felt very different to Edward, because he was trembling. "I wish I could tell you how you make me feel," he mumbled against my shoulder.

He was moving so slowly and deliberately. I tangled my fingers in his hair and stroked his face as we indulged in unhurried and amorous kisses and made love like it was our first time.

"I...God, I..." he stammered. He loved me. I could feel the words even though his fear wouldn't let him say them.

Edward shifted our position. He sat and pulled me onto his lap, facing him. It wasn't the best position for very vigorous lovemaking. He didn't want me to move, though. He just relished in the feel of being connected like this. My legs and arms were wrapped around him, smashing my body to his. His hands splayed across my back. He attacked the crook of my neck with his lips, tongue, and teeth.

"Only you, Isabella," he whispered so softly in my ear.

I believed him. I felt the same way. He was the only one. Everything I had to give was his. *Take it all, take everything I am.*

"Can you feel that?" I asked.

He tightened his grip, afraid I was going to move. "I feel *everything*."

"Can you feel how much I love you? Because I love you so much. I want it to take the hurt away, baby. I want it to protect you from all the fear and doubt."

Edward's forehead fell against my shoulder. "I feel it. Everyday. Every time you look at me."

"I love you," I whispered. "Forever."

I gently scratched his sculpted back with my nails and placed another kiss on his ever-eager lips. His kisses were full of all the things he couldn't say. All the I love yous in the world could not express what he was feeling. Edward felt so much it terrified him.

I felt him pulse inside me as his head tipped back, his eyes clenched tight.

"Fuuuuck! I'm sorry," he groaned. He hated coming before me. So much for being such a self-described selfish lover.

"Don't apologize." I ran my fingers through the hair on the nape of his neck. He dropped his head back on my shoulder.

"All I can think about is you. That doesn't help my control at all. I need to visualize something repulsive. My fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Stark or something," he said with a sigh.

I laughed and his head popped up.

"Oh God, do that again," he begged. "I can feel that."

I didn't mean to laugh again, but I did. "Please don't visualize your fifth grade teacher when you're having sex with me."

He was recovering from the feeling of my laughter milking him for everything he was worth. His face was contorted in this look of pleasure mixed with pain.

"If you ever want to have a sexual experience that lasts longer than five fucking minutes, I'm going to need to do something. You just take over every sense, every thought. It makes it impossible, simply impossible to deny my release."

"We'll just have to do it more often, help you build up a resistance." I smirked and kissed his cheek.

"I'll never be able to resist you, Isabella," he stated adamantly, pulling me inexplicably closer. "You will never be able to comprehend what you mean to me. I'm addicted. I'm your hopeless junkie."

I laughed again. I remember feeling that exact way about him.

"Oh, please keep laughing. I'm going to be ready to go any minute if you keep doing that." He started tickling my sides, and I gave up. I laughed, as did he; both of us carefree for that moment.

It was about time we gave into something other than the darkness.

I woke up in our bed, unable to remember how I got there. Edward and I had done nothing but try to increase his stamina all evening long. We got him up to a solid forty-five minutes on the third attempt. Never mind the workout he gave me during his recovery periods. He really did feel guilty when I didn't get off with him. I must have passed out while he was cuddling me in the chair by the fire after he pounded me to death on the piano. I was never going to be able to look at that piano the same way again.

Edward's side of the bed was cold and empty. I was disappointed. I had hoped he would stay in bed with me tonight. The clock told me it was after two in the morning. I was determined to get him to sleep with me tonight. If he held me, maybe

the dreams wouldn't come.

I noticed immediately that he had put me to bed naked. Something major must have happened if he could manage to leave our bed knowing I was undressed. I put on a robe and padded down the stairs. The light was on in his office, and I could hear voices. As I got closer, I realized Edward was talking to Tyler and Peter.

"I'm not sure what we've accomplished except pissing him off, sir," Tyler said with lots of worry in his tone.

"We've accomplished making me laugh my ass off! This shit is pure entertainment," Peter replied.

Edward's voice came next, sounding slightly frustrated. "I wanted him to be annoyed. Getting into Nomad's email system was a way to shove it up his ass that he'll never be as good as me. The fact that the fake memo got leaked to the public and added a little humiliation is nothing but a bonus."

"You're provoking him before we're truly prepared to do something about it," Tyler complained.

"We'll be ready," Edward assured him.

"I just wish I had been there when his credit card got denied. Did Garrett say he flipped out or what?" Peter asked.

"Garrett reported he was not at all happy," Tyler answered unenthusiastically.

Peter was laughing and hitting the desk or something with his hand. "I would have felt bad if his bank used Denali firewalls, but since they don't I think we'll gain a new client out of this, too."

"Your work on the financial side of things was genius. He knows I can cripple him, but he thinks I'm playing baby games. This is exactly what I want him to think, so when I end him, he'll never see it coming."

I pressed my hand over my mouth for fear I would make a noise. Edward was playing with fire, and I had no idea.

"Ending him is going to be a little tougher, dude," Peter's voice turned as serious as it could for him. "I got the specs on his place. Security is tight. For me to get into the system, I'm going to need to be there. Otherwise, there's no way I can get into

the camera feeds."

"You can't get in remotely?" Edward sounded perturbed.

"No way. It's a closed system. I'm going to have to be wired in. It's the only way if we're still doing this at his house."

Tyler's deep voice interrupted them. "Sir, I still think we should consider a few other options. I also think we need to reconsider me being the one to complete this mission."

"Don't start with that again," Edward warned. "I've made up my mind."

"I just think there's no good reason for you to get your hands dirty." Tyler was trying in vain to convince him not to do this, for that I could be grateful, but Edward was being difficult.

"I want to see his face when he takes his last breath. I want my face to be the last thing he sees. I want my voice to be the last thing he hears. I want my name to be the last word he utters as I drain the blood from his soulless body."

I gasped with my hand still firmly planted over my mouth.

"You've been very clear about that," Tyler said with a sigh. "Excuse me one minute."

Shit. Mr. Eyes-in-the-back-of-his-head must also have x-ray vision or maybe super hearing. He certainly wasn't leaving this chat to use the bathroom. I took off down the hall and ducked into the next room, hoping to hide and go undiscovered. Unfortunately, the second I entered the game room, one of the sensor-triggered lights turned on.

Damn penny charm!

Tyler stepped into the room and closed the door.

"Bella."

"Tyler," I said, pulling on my robe to cover myself better.

"What did you hear?"

"Enough."

Tyler closed his eyes, put his hands on his hips, and let his head fall back. He blew out a heavy breath. "I suggest you get your pretty little butt back upstairs. Now."

I crossed my arms in front of my chest and resisted the urge to stomp my foot like a petulant child. "I suggest you watch how you talk to me."

His eyes opened and he looked back down at me. "If he thinks you know what's going on, he's..."

"If he thinks I know what's going on, he's what? Going to lose it? News flash, Tyler, he's already lost it! How can you let him conspire to commit murder? He can't murder James in cold blood, no matter what that man has done."

"I understand that, Bella. I'm trying my best to stop him."

"By offering to kill James yourself? That's not much better! You become a murderer, and he's still guilty of conspiracy. You both go to jail for the rest of your lives. That's if you're lucky enough not to get the death penalty."

We were both trying to whisper and yell at the same time. Tyler looked tired for the first time since I had met him. This was wearing on him as much as it was me.

"I need you to trust me."

"Trust you? How long have you three been planning this?"

Before he could answer, the door to the game room opened. Edward stood in the doorway, staring at the two of us in horror.

"What are you doing up?" he asked me.

"What are you doing up?" I replied confrontationally.

"You need to go back to bed, Isabella. I have business to take care of."

"Business? What kind of business do you have to take care of at this time of night? Huh? Are you and Peter discussing the Asian markets? Making plans to *cripple* Japan?"

His eyes reacted to the word cripple just as I hoped.

"You don't know what you're talking about. You need to go to bed. *Go.*" He stepped aside and motioned for me to leave the room.

I left the game room, but instead of heading upstairs, I walked into his office. I startled the hell out of Peter, who was playing with a glass paperweight on Edward's desk, causing him to drop it. It landed on the wood floor with a thud but didn't break.

"Isabella! I see you got all dressed up for me," Peter said with a devious smirk.

My cheeks burned, but I would not be deterred. I sat down on one of the chairs.

"Go to bed, Isabella," Edward commanded, storming in after me.

"No. I want to hear what you guys are talking about. From what I heard outside the door, it sounded fascinating, really."

"Oh man, wait until you hear how we fucked with Hunter's credit and ATM cards," Peter replied, laughing and falling into the seat next to me.

"Peter, shut the hell up!" Edward's eyes were glowing with rage. He was a completely different man than the one I had spent the evening with. "Isabella, if you don't go upstairs, I will have Tyler take you upstairs."

I stood up and looked at the other men in the room. "You both need to leave. I need to talk to Edward. *Alone.*"

They both wore shocked expressions, but neither one moved.

"Go!" I shouted, pointing at the door.

Peter stood up and grabbed his bag.

"Sit the fuck down, Peter," Edward growled. Peter started to sit.

"Go, Peter! Don't you even think about sitting back down," I snapped. He froze, hovering above the seat. He was completely confounded.

Edward strode over to me and pointed a finger in my face. He spat his words at me. "He works for me! He will do what I say!"

"You might be able to tell him what to do, but you will *not* tell me! If they stay, I

stay." I was not backing down even though my heart was pounding so hard in my chest I was sure that they could all hear it.

We played a horrible game of chicken, both waiting for the other to jump out of the way. I was afraid we were both stubborn enough to allow a catastrophe to occur, but it was Edward who stepped back first.

"Tyler, take her upstairs and see to it that she stays there."

My eyes flew to Tyler's. I could see him wrestling with his emotions over this.

"Sir, I-"

"Unless you are planning to finish that sentence with *will do whatever you say*, don't bother finishing it at all! Take her upstairs!"

"I can't do that, Mr. Masen," Tyler said obviously pained by having to disregard an order. "I won't put my hands on her if she doesn't want me to. I can't, I'm sorry."

I exhaled in relief. I wanted to run over and hug him for that. Unfortunately, Edward was on the brink of madness.

"What?" He paused as if he needed a minute to comprehend the fact that Tyler was defying him. "You're fired. You! Are! *Fired!* Go pack your fucking bags and get the hell out of my house, immediately!"

Then he turned to me and lifted me right off my feet, carrying me upstairs himself. When we got to the room, he tossed me on the bed.

"Don't you *ever* talk to me like that in front of employees! Do you understand me?"

"Or what? What, Edward?" I scrambled off the bed. He thought I was going to try to leave, so he placed himself between me and the door.

"Or nothing. You will show me respect in *my* house, in front of *my* employees."

I approached him carefully, even though I wanted to sock him right between the eyes. This was the darkness at its worst.

"What are you going to do? Have Peter hack into my computer? Have him cancel my credit cards? Are you going to kill me, Edward?"

His chest heaved and his hand clawed at his hair. "You don't know what you're talking about. How dare you eavesdrop in my house."

"Your house? So, I'm just a guest. Is that it?"

Edward was pacing now, like a lion ready to strike. He was absolutely lethal looking. He stalked over to the side of the bed and knocked everything off the nightstand. He picked it up and threw it across the room with Hulk-like strength. His temper could be terrifying, but I knew he was mad at himself.

"I'm trying to protect you! I'm trying to keep you from getting hurt or..." He swallowed down the last word. "You need to forget what you heard. You need to leave it alone."

I moved closer to him but kept a safe distance. "Don't do this. Don't let him provoke you into doing something you're going to regret, something that could ruin your life. *Our* life."

His life was mine and mine his. If something happened to him, I would never forgive myself for not trying to stop him.

"I'm doing this to save your life, Isabella. Don't you understand? How can you not see? It has come down to me or him. This will not be over until one of us is dead. He'll never kill me. He will instead kill *everyone* I care about. I need to end this!"

"No! You aren't a killer, Edward. You can't plot and execute someone's murder and think that it won't come back to haunt you!" I wasn't only speaking of the legal ramifications. I wasn't what anyone would consider religious, but I did believe there was a God. Thou shall not kill was one of His very specific rules.

Edward crouched down, clutching his bowed head with both hands. I dropped to my knees beside him.

"Please come to bed with me. Please stop this. Let's work with the police. Let's hire a hundred more bodyguards. Let's buy that private island in Fiji and move there permanently. Anything but this. Please."

We stayed there, both frozen for a few minutes until he stood up and helped me to my feet. He shut off the light and, without a word, took my hand and led me to the bed. I lay down with him, my back to his front, his arms wrapped around me tightly as if I might leave if he loosened his grip. I couldn't deny that I felt the same worry. I held onto his arms, praying he would give up all these crazy ideas of revenge and

murder.

"I need you to promise me. Promise me you won't do anything that can get you in trouble."

He was quiet for a long time. "I promise I won't get in trouble."

He was a master at manipulating words. I rolled over so I was facing him. I touched his face with the tips of my fingers.

"Promise me you won't kill anyone." Even in the darkness of our room I could see his anguish.

"No one deserves to die more than him," Edward replied coldly.

"No one deserves some peace more than you, but killing him is not going to do that for you. I know you think it will, but it won't. It will destroy you. It will destroy us."

His eyes closed, and he inhaled deeply. "I wish you had stayed in bed."

I exhaled sharply causing him to open his eyes and see how serious I was about this. "Promise me."

"Will you accept a promise that he won't die at my hand?" Again with the manipulation. He was so damn stubborn. He seemed to forget that when it came to stubborn, I had him beat.

"You can't ask Tyler to kill him either."

"I fired Tyler."

"You'll hire him back tomorrow."

"I won't ask Tyler to kill him. I promise."

He thought he had me, but I wasn't done. "You can't ask, order, demand, beg, or tell anyone to kill him."

There was more silence. I knew he was cursing me in his head. "I'll think about it," was his only reply.

I should have been grateful that he didn't lie to me and then go do what he wanted anyway. It didn't make me happy, but at least he was being honest.

"What would Alec say if you told him this was your plan?"

Edward grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand away from his face. "Don't, Isabella. Don't."

Landmine. Looked like we had a fresh new crop. He knew I was right. Alec would object to this wholeheartedly. Alec was probably the reason he had never attempted taking James out of the picture before.

"I love you," I whispered, knowing this conversation was officially over. I rolled back the other way. He wrapped his arms back around me.

I choked down my tears, knowing it would kill him to have me sobbing in his arms. I felt so utterly defeated. I thought we had made a breakthrough tonight. I thought we had reconnected and had started digging him out of his deep despair over Alec's loss. I had foolishly allowed myself to feel hopeful. I had been ignorant to what a ferocious grip his fear had on him. I had been blind to how well the fear had fed the darkness.

Saving Edward from himself was going to be my greatest challenge yet.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

A little dark, a little light, a whole lotta lovin'. Our tricky little billionaire thought he had some great plans. Bella and the annoyingly tricked out penny charm foiled them for now. She doesn't want him to be a murderer. She's trying to save his soul. (Oh, hi Stephenie Meyer, yeah, I totally stole that from you, kthanxbye). Oh, poor Tyler. Don't worry. Bella's right, Edward will hire him back in the morning. I won't let anything happen to Tyler. I think... *scans outline* For now.

Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for her help and suggestions. To my new and old friends on Twitter - keep tweeting ladies. To the FB Pennyward Support Group - BEST GROUP EVER. Words fail me.

Come join the fun. Links on my profile. Lots to say on the blog. Happy Friday!

Did you ever try to hide from someone and get caught? Have an interesting song as your ringtone? Whose going to wow their friends with their knowledge of the vowelless word cwm? This could be entertaining...

Chapter 20

Chapter 20

Friday, October 29th at noon

"Bella, come on. Stop this," Emmett pleaded as he attempted to take *out* the things that I was throwing *in* the box on my desk.

"Stop taking things out of the box!" I shouted, unable to control the emotion coming out of me. My hands were shaking, and I could barely see through the mess of tears that were flowing from my eyes.

Emmett grabbed me by the wrists as I struggled to put stuff back in the box. "I hate seeing you so upset. Just sit and calm down a second. You're too emotional to be making decisions. You're going to do something you regret. Stop, sit, take some deep breaths."

"Well, thank you very much, Dr. Drew, but I can't stay here. I can't work here. I mean, I never really worked here!" The truth behind those words forced more tears and sobs to break free.

I never really worked at University Prep. Aro had not come across my resume and called me up to interview for a posted position. I had not competed against other qualified people for the job. I had not won anyone over with my charming personality during my interview or with my fabulous recommendations. No, my job was bought. Paid in full by one Mr. Edward Masen, Jr. The thought of it made me want to throw up.

My phone rang, but I ignored it. I wiped my face and continued to pack up my personal belongings.

"You can't ignore his call. He's gonna freak out. You're supposed to be at lunch right now," Emmett said, looking at his watch to confirm the clock on the wall was correct. It was just after noon.

I was not answering the phone because if I did, I was going to break up with him. I was going to tell him I hated him for humiliating me and making me feel like the biggest fool that ever walked through these doors. I was *not* answering the phone. The call went to voicemail.

Emmett's phone began to ring a couple minutes later. He answered it immediately. I could hear someone shouting but couldn't make out any words in particular. I knew exactly who was behind the yelling and was glad he was pissed off. He was soon going to find out how pissed off I was.

"She's still here...I don't know, I assume Liam's still in the parking lot. She...well...something happened and...well...she's kind of upset," Emmett tried to explain.

I snorted at his choice of words. I was more than upset. Upset didn't even begin to describe how I felt.

Emmett held out his phone to me. "He wants to talk to you."

"I don't really give a flying fuck what he wants right now!" I shouted down at the phone in his hand so Edward could hear me loud and clear.

Emmett lifted the phone to his ear and rubbed his forehead with the other hand. "She said- Yes, sir. Well, she found out you had something to do with her getting this job and..."

I sat down at my desk and started typing up some sub plans. I didn't know what they were going to do with my classes. They could probably just add the kids into the other sections since my sections were created due to a generous financial contribution and not because they were actually needed. Aro all but admitted that when I confronted him.

He had tried to lie at first. *"I don't know what Ms. Nelson told you, Miss Swan, but I'm sure she is mistaken."*

Jane was not mistaken. Jane would not have come at me the way she did if she was mistaken.

"Somebody told her," Emmett continued to explain. "She went to Aro, I guess. He told her it was true, and she quit."

I liked Emmett, but I wanted him to get the hell out of this classroom. I wanted him to go have this conversation somewhere far away from me. I wanted to be alone.

"He wants to know who told you."

"What part of I don't give a-

Emmett raised a hand to stop me. "She won't say." He listened to Edward. "He wants to know if it was Jane."

I ignored him.

"He says if you don't answer, he's taking that as a yes."

"Tell him that if he does anything to Jane, I will never forgive him. She might be a bitch, but at least she had the balls to tell me the truth! Which is more than I can say for him!"

Emmett grimaced. "Did you hear that?" he asked Edward, who obviously replied affirmatively.

Jane was a bitch, but at least now I understood why she disliked me so much. I had been thrust upon her with no warning, for no good reason except that a rich and powerful alumni was looking to placate his girlfriend. My mind wandered to our confrontation earlier in the day.

I had finished teaching my three classes and was talking to Kim a few minutes after class. She had written a beautiful story about a girl who could turn into a bird and fly away whenever things became too heavy in her life. When she was a bird flying high in the sky, the world and her problems seemed to shrink under her. I had cried when I read it the first time. Maybe it was because it hit so close to home after the last few weeks of my life. I loved it and wanted her to publish it in our school's literary magazine.

Jane came bursting through my door. "I can't believe you! All this time, you've acted all sweet and innocent, but you really are a spoiled brat, aren't you?"

Her words stung and stupefied me. I had Kim leave, not wanting to subject her to Jane's completely unprofessional behavior. Once Kim was out of the room, I shut the door and turned to face Jane the Pain.

"I don't know what has you so fired up right now, but I don't appreciate you coming into my classroom when I'm talking to a student and yelling at me."

"Oh, well maybe you should run along and go tell on me again. Maybe you can get me fired this time," she spat.

I shook my head, totally confused by her accusation. "Jane, I don't know what you're talking about."

Jane scrunched up her mousy little face and crossed her arms in front of her chest. "Now you're going to lie about it? It's one thing to let your sugar daddy fight your battles, but it's another to pretend you don't know it."

"My sugar daddy?"

Jane threw her hands up. "Oh, give me a break! I know, okay. I know you're Edward Masen girlfriend."

I was flustered and confused. "Who I have a relationship with has nothing to do with what goes on here at school. I really don't appreciate bringing my personal life into this."

"I'm not the one who mixed business and pleasure, Bella!" Jane's face was flushed. She was glowering at me with such hate.

I took a deep breath. We were experiencing a true failure to communicate. "I don't understand what you're talking about. I really want to understand why you're so angry. I do. But you aren't making any sense."

"Aro put a reprimand in my file. A permanent record of unprofessional behavior, claiming I belittled you in front of other staff members at department meetings. This is low, even for you, Bella. I can't help that I think the way you got this job is completely inappropriate and unethical, but I have dealt with it. Truth be told, I was beginning to believe you might actually be a decent teacher. I was working hard to overcome my distaste for your manipulation of the system, but this, this pushed me right back where we started."

If I thought I was confused before she explained, I was now completely confounded.

"My manipulation of the system? I don't understand why you think I manipulated something. I interviewed for this job just like everyone else."

"Ha! Everyone else?"

My voice got smaller with each exchange. "Aro called me to... interview... like he interviewed other people."

"Oh god, stop playing dumb! Edward Masen gets whatever he wants. We both know that."

"What in the world does my job have to do with Edward?" I asked almost afraid to hear the answer. A giant knot was forming in my stomach.

Jane stopped and stared hard at me. She tilted her head slightly and narrowed her eyes. "You don't know, do you?"

My throat was dry; the words would not come. I shook my head, fighting the tears of embarrassment that were perched in the corner of my eyes.

"Oh shit," she said with a humorless laugh. She sat down on one of the student desks. "You have no clue what how you got this job. He never told you."

The knot turned into a rock that was going to help me sink to the bottom of the ocean when I jumped off a cliff. I was so stupid. I shook my head again.

She sighed and shook her head. "That's why they took down his portrait in the library," she said more to herself than me. "You don't know Mr. Masen is our most famous alum, do you?"

Edward was an alum of University Prep. He never mentioned it. Ever. On purpose, it appeared. I suddenly felt like the room was spinning and sat down on one of the chairs next to Jane.

"Great. I just got myself fired," she mumbled. Smoothing out worry lines on her forehead, she turned to me. "Edward Masen is the reason we have that fantastic library, two state of the art computer labs, SMART boards in every classroom, and technology other schools probably won't see for another decade. He donates more to this school in a year than all the other alumnus combined. He came to Aro this summer and offered an extra fifty-thousand dollars in donations if a part-time English position could be created for a friend of his. I only know about it because I had a fit about needing to create new sections of students for you to teach."

Edward bought me a job. He bought me a job and didn't tell me. He let me work here for the past two months, thinking I had earned the position on my own merits. He had let me walk around oblivious to the things I was sure were being said about me behind my back by those who knew.

My head fell into my hands. Never in my life had I felt so humiliated.

"Bella, did you hear me?" Emmett asked, returning me to the present. "He said he's not going to allow Aro to accept your resignation. If you don't talk to him, he's going to send Tyler to come get you."

My phone rang beside me; Edward's face filled the screen. I picked up his little tricked out iPhone and carried it over to one of the classroom desks. I set it on the floor and then lifted the desk leg over it. With all my strength, I slammed the desk down on the phone over and over until it was cracked and no longer ringing.

"Great," Emmett muttered, his big head dropping in defeat.

I went back to my desk and finished writing my sub plans. Emmett's phone rang.

"She smashed her phone...mmhmm...I'll tell her." Emmett hung up and sat on the edge of my desk. "He's sending Tyler to come get you."

"I'll be gone before Tyler gets here."

"Good, you two need to talk about this face to face." He pulled out his phone to text Edward.

"I'm not going to see Edward. I'm going to Jasper's where I'm going to spend the weekend deciding whether or not I ever want to see Edward again."

Emmett's shoulders slumped, and he tapped on his phone, canceling the text he had begun writing.

"Bells, come on. This job is a sweet deal for both of us. I know it wasn't right of him to not tell you, but is it really that bad? He helped you get a job, a job you're good at. People use their connections to get jobs all the time."

I could feel my blood boiling. Emmett was not going to sit there and defend what Edward had done.

"Connections? Connections help you get a foot in the door. Connections hand over your resume to the right people so you can get an interview. Connections introduce you to people. Connections do not *buy* you a job. They do not offer someone money to create a pretend job. This was not me using my connections. This was bribery. It was wrong. It was..." I couldn't even come up with the word for how devious what he did was.

Emmett sat and thought about what I said for a minute. "I'm sure he just wanted you to do what you love. His intentions were good; I'm sure of that much."

I wasn't ready to listen to that kind of reasoning yet. I was in bad shape emotionally and physically. I hadn't slept through the night in over a week. Ever

since the big murder plot was uncovered, my nerves were fried. When Edward wasn't in my direct line of sight, I worried that he could be doing something that could get him in trouble. I couldn't sleep peacefully at night for fear he was going to get up and make a plan to kill James while I was in dreamland. I made him come to bed with me every night but would find myself jerking awake repeatedly, reaching out for him to make sure he was there with me. All this Masen madness was killing me, breaking me.

It was time to take a step back. I was going to go to Jasper's. He would take me in. That was the deal we made. My name was still on the lease for a reason. I needed to figure out what I was going to do, especially since I was currently unemployed.

There was a knock on my classroom door. It was a very tall man, dressed in a black suit, black shirt, and black tie. Emmett got up and opened the door.

"I'm here to collect Miss Swan for Mr. Masen," the man said with a thick accent.

"He told me he was sending Tyler," Emmett replied warily.

The man looked confused. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" Emmett shot back.

It didn't matter who he was. I was sure Tyler told Edward the same thing he told him last week. He was not going to touch me if I didn't want him to. We were friends. Tyler was not going to do that to me. It almost cost him his job last week, but I had a feeling he wasn't going to bend this time either.

"I'm having Liam drive me somewhere else. You can tell Edward I'll call him when I'm ready to talk to him," I said, stapling my sub plans together.

"Liam cannot drive you. He has left. You will come with me, Miss Swan."

Emmett and I both exchanged a look. Liam never left. He certainly didn't do anything without telling me. Of course, I had broken my phone, making it a little difficult for him to call me.

"Let me borrow your phone," I said to Emmett, who handed it to me right away.

I texted Liam, asking him where he was.

It's Bella. I broke my phone. Where are you? Big dude in black says I'm

supposed to go with him.

"Mr. Masen does not like waiting. I need to take you now," the man stated roughly.

I thought about telling this guy how much I cared about what Edward liked or didn't like. He was scary, though. About a minute later, Liam texted back.

Had to go. Go with Felix.

Typical Liam. Direct and to the point. No *why did you break your phone?* No *are you okay?* All business, that was Liam

"I take it you're Felix?" I looked over at the man who practically had to duck to get through the classroom door.

"Yes, let's go."

"Felix?" Emmett said, looking as if he was running through a rolodex of names and Felix's wasn't popping up.

It was unlikely that I was going to get Liam to do what I wanted if Edward wanted me to come to him. It was certain Felix couldn't care less what I wanted with Edward's order given. I grabbed my bag and my box, striding past both bodyguards. Once I got to where Edward was, I would have Tyler take me to Jasper's. He would do that for me. If not, I would take a cab by myself without any damn bodyguards. Fuck bodyguards. Fuck James Hunter. Fuck all this.

"Maybe you should wait a second, Bella," Emmett said, hurrying after us.

I didn't stop walking. It was pointless to fight when Edward had sent someone to collect me. I knew this guy was not going to leave without me. His loyalty, like everyone I was surrounded by these days, was to the almighty Masen.

"Liam said to go with him. It's fine. I don't need to be carried out of the building kicking and screaming. I've had enough humiliation for one day."

There was a car waiting just outside the front doors. It was running and there was another man in the driver's seat. Edward must have been really worried I was going to resist. I must seem tougher than I felt if he thought I could get past Felix.

I noticed my car parked where Liam usually waited for me. *Where the hell did he*

go without my car? I started walking over to it.

"This way, Miss Swan," Felix said.

"I'm not leaving my car here. If we're going, we're taking my car."

"You need to get in this car," he demanded.

I set the box down so I could reach in my bag for my set of keys. "Listen, Felix. I'm coming with you even though it's pretty much the last thing I want to do. I am taking my car so that when I am done letting Edward know I'm not talking to him, I can leave. You can either let me follow you or I'll happily let you drive. I really don't give a shit anymore, but I'm taking my car."

He thought about it for a second and then snatched the keys out of my hand. He motioned the other guy in his car. The man pulled the car into a parking spot, turned off the ignition, and got out. They exchanged a few words in another language. The other bodyguard looked upset with my request as well. They were definitely arguing. After a glance back at the front doors and Emmett pressing buttons on his phone in the breezeway, they both made their way to my car and got in. I guessed they didn't want Edward knowing there was going to be any delay. *Whatever*. I didn't care as long as I was going to be able to leave once I told Edward off.

I tossed my stuff in and climbed in the backseat. Both men exchanged looks as I settled in. I stared out the window as we drove through the city. This was not the way I wanted to live my life anymore. I loved Edward, but he was killing me. He was right all along. If we kept at it like this, he was going to kill me. I was living this life that no one in their right mind would ever willingly choose for themselves. Yet, that was exactly what I was doing. There had to be other choices. A weekend with Jasper was what I needed. I needed to clear my head. I needed to sleep. I needed to talk to someone who didn't work for Edward.

We drove city block after city block. I had no idea where we were headed. Since I had refused to talk to Edward, we hadn't decided on a lunch spot. I assumed he already had a place in mind. He always called the shots. Always.

Felix and his friend were about as talkative as every other bodyguard that worked on Edward's security team. I had never seen these two before, though. I thought it was strange but not unimaginable. I had no idea how many people worked for Edward. I had no idea that I basically worked for Edward up until a few hours ago.

He *bought* me a job. Aro had offered me that job back in August. Edward and I had only been dating a month at that point. I was such an idiot. I thought about how I couldn't remember sending a resume to University Prep. I remembered the look on Alec's face when I told him about my job, the way Edward was acting all strange that day. Alec knew. I was so naive. I just never thought Edward would or could do something like manufacture a job for me. I bet Aro never even saw my resume. It was so unbelievable but so Edward.

We were driving through an area of town I didn't recognize. I was about to ask where we were going when "The Glory of Love" started playing from Bodyguard #2's coat pocket. My heart stopped beating for a moment as the man began fumbling to turn off the phone. Felix eyed me through the rearview mirror. I was sure he saw my expression change. Immediately, he hit the door locks.

These were not Edward's men. I had gotten in a car with two men who did not work for the devilish man I was in love with but for the devil himself. I looked around, trying to orient myself, figure out where I was. Nothing looked familiar. I caught a couple street signs, but they weren't much help.

I tried to appear relaxed. I didn't want to send them into a panic and cause them to do something to hurt me. I sat back and tried to seem unaffected by the fact that Liam's phone went off when he had supposedly just texted me that he was gone. I was anything but unaffected. *Where was Liam? Did they hurt him? Did they kill him?* A million thoughts ran through my head, each one worse than the last. If someone else died, I was not going to be able to deal.

I started making a mental checklist. I didn't have my phone or my keys. I foolishly handed over my keys to the bad guys. Thanks to my temper tantrum, my phone was broken and in the garbage back at school. I was in the backseat and the panic button was in the front. I was going to have to do something to get to that button. If I could hit it twice and disable the car, I could possibly get away if we were in a populated area.

"Would you turn up the heat back here, please? I'm freezing."

Felix looked at me through the mirror. I smiled kindly. The other man began to push buttons and turn dials. We were getting close to a stoplight that was red. This was going to be my chance. As soon as Felix slowed the car to a stop, I leaned forward.

"You're pressing the wrong button," I complained. "Hit that one with the X on it two times. It'll let me control the heat back here myself." It was as good a lie as I

could come up with.

The man hit the button once and then again. All the controls went dark. The doors automatically unlocked and the alarm started beeping. I pushed opened the door and jumped out. I was in the middle of the road and trapped by the car and some traffic coming from the other direction. Felix and his buddy were so shocked, it took them a minute to react, but I knew that when they got their wits about them, they'd be after me. I was just about to run across traffic when I heard Emmett's booming voice.

"Bella! This way!" He was two cars behind us. "Get in here!" I sprinted towards him.

Felix was out of the car and so was the other guy. Emmett made sure I was in his car before he went to take on Felix. The guy in the car between us was honking until he saw how huge the two men were. Emmett landed a quick punch, and they began to wrestle dangerously in the middle of the city street.

Cars were stopping, and Fake Bodyguard #2 came running up to Emmett's car. He didn't hesitate; he kicked at the window until it broke. I screamed as he reached in to open the door. I started hitting him, trying to stop him. He grabbed my hands in an attempt to pull me through the window, cutting my arm on the broken glass. I tried to fight back, but he was much stronger than me. Emmett came up behind him and punched him hard in the head. Emmett continued to hit him until I heard the police sirens.

It wasn't long before two squad cars pulled up. Felix was nowhere to be seen, but Emmett had the other guy knocked out at his feet. I was shaking and bleeding, but I was safe. For the moment, I was safe.

Harborview was the closest hospital to the scene of my rescue. I was sitting in an ER exam room, waiting for a doctor to stitch up my arm. I had two small cuts, but they were deep. The police had interviewed Emmett, who now waited with me, holding an ice pack over his black eye. The detectives were waiting for me to receive my medical treatment before asking me questions about what happened. I wasn't sure what had happened. The whole thing was completely unreal.

I heard a loud commotion and someone shouted, "You can't go back there!"

I knew right away who was going to come exploding through the fabric curtain

any second. The swishing sound of the metal rings on the bar holding the curtain was louder than I expected and made me jump. Edward looked crazed, wild, like he was a man on the edge of sanity.

He nearly tackled me as he wrapped his arms around me in a desperate embrace. I held my injured arm out and hugged him back with the other one. His voice was saturated in fear and rage. "If they had succeeded, I don't know what I would have done. I just don't know."

"I'm fine, thanks to Emmett." Had Emmett not followed us, who knew what would have happened. Felix and his friend could have easily caught up to me on foot. I would be eternally grateful for his presence today.

"Well, somebody important must be in this room," Carlisle said kindly, rolling in a suture tray. "I hear someone needs some stitches."

Edward released me with such sadness still dwelling in his eyes. All the anger I felt a few hours ago evaporated. I wanted to ease his pain and promise him I was going to be fine. No amount of reassurance was going to help Edward right now, though. He was beyond my reach.

"Hi, Dr. Cullen," I said quietly.

"Sounds like we had a little too much excitement for everyone's liking today, huh?"

"Something like that." I glanced at Edward, who was clawing at his hair.

Carlisle looked at Edward, too. He saw the same thing I did, but controlled his expression and tried to keep things light. "Son, I hope you weren't too rough on the nurses out there."

"They'll get over it," Edward replied unsympathetically.

"First thing they teach you in medical school is to be nice to the nurses. You never want a pissed off nurse. They're really the ones who run this place," he said to me with a wink. He grabbed my arm and pulled away the bandage. "Let's see what we got here."

Edward looked over Carlisle's shoulder. I could see him wince and shut his eyes for a second. It could have been so much worse; but of course, I wasn't going to say that right now.

"Looks like they were right. You need a couple stitches in each of those cuts," Carlisle said, putting on some gloves. "Did you talk to the police yet?"

"Not yet. They wanted to wait until I got my stitches."

"I heard they got one of the guys. That's good news."

"Yeah," I answered, looking back up at Edward as Carlisle gave me a shot to numb the area he was going to sew up.

Edward was pacing behind his uncle. He was going to kill James. He was going to kill James *tonight* if given the chance.

"Mr. Masen?" One of the police officers who talked to Emmett joined the already overflowing exam room. "Perhaps we could have a word with you?"

Edward nodded and came around Carlisle to place a hand on my face. "I'll be right back. Don't go anywhere." He pressed a soft kiss on my lips.

It sounded sweet, but I knew he meant it wholeheartedly. He was prepared for me to leave. I was sure he thought that if the job fiasco wasn't enough, my attempted abduction definitely tipped the scales in favor of leaving him.

Once he left the room with both Tyler and Emmett, Carlisle looked up at me with serious eyes. "He hasn't been sleeping, has he?"

"Neither one of us has been sleeping very much. I'm thinking what happened today isn't going to help things."

"No, it probably won't," he said sadly. "I'm so sorry, Bella. He cares about you so very much, but I know this is a lot for anybody to deal with." Even Carlisle was prepared for my leaving.

"Hey, how many people can say they were almost kidnapped? If you can even call it that since I gave the guy my car keys and got in the car with them willingly," I said in a weak attempt at making light of the situation.

Carlisle paused. "Don't you dare do that." He clarified quickly, "Don't blame yourself."

He waited for me to nod before he went back to work sewing me up.

"I know it's not my fault. I just feel bad that I didn't figure it out earlier. I could have saved Edward some worry."

Carlisle snorted. "I think when it comes to you, there is nothing that can be done to reduce that man's worry."

That was very true. Carlisle finished one cut and moved on to the other.

"Is this going to cost extra?" I asked. He stopped to look up at me. "I have to believe that it costs a pretty penny to have the Chief of Surgery put in a few stitches."

He chuckled. "Every time I have a chance to be around you, I see what my nephew enjoys about your company." He shook his head, still smiling but getting back to work. "I charge a special friends and family rate."

"Good to know," I replied. Seeing as how I quit my job today, I believed that made me uninsured as well. This ER visit, along with the ambulance ride was going to cost me a fortune.

I glanced at the opening in the curtain, wondering what Edward was telling the police. Would he not mention James so he could kill him tonight without being suspected? That was a terrible thought. I would be sure to tell the police that I thought those guys worked for James. I was not going to let Edward do anything crazy.

"An hour ago, I was so pissed at him. I was planning to stay with Jasper all weekend, hoping to cool off enough to have a rational conversation with him that didn't end in me telling him I was finished with him. Now, I just want to take him home and hug him all night long."

Carlisle cocked an eyebrow at me. "Dare I ask what he did to make you so mad at him?"

It seemed like a million years since I had my chat with Jane. Carlisle seemed like someone who I could trust. I wondered if he knew about my job.

"If you found out that you were Chief of Surgery not because you earned it, not because you were the most qualified or the best man for the job but because your nephew paid the hospital to give it to you, what would you do?"

Carlisle stopped pulling the wiry thread through my flesh. His eyes once again

met mine. "Oh, please tell me he didn't do that to you." I looked down and away. "I thought perhaps he pointed you in their direction because of his history there, but I had no idea he had a hand in getting you the job. Bella, I'm...I'm so sorry."

"No," I said, making eye contact again and desperately wanting him to take back his apology. "You kind of have to look at me and wonder what the hell I'm thinking half the time. What school pays a second-year teacher \$45,000 to teach three classes? My naivete was at an all-time high with this one."

He finished tying off the last stitch and took off his gloves. He grasped my hands and took a deep breath.

"I have known Edward since he was this five year old boy, who thought the sun rose and set with his mother. I brought him into my home when he was a very damaged fifteen-year-old, who survived an attempt on his life by his deranged father. I have watched him grow into a man with more money and power than I ever thought possible. He is one of the most intelligent people I have ever known, but when it comes to knowing how to navigate matters of the heart, he is still that little boy. If he could give you the world, he would because you are his world. I hope you know he never would have done that to make you feel small or unworthy. He did it simply because he could."

My bottom lip trembled as I nodded in understanding. Edward loved me. How could I be mad at him for being clueless about how to show it after everything he had gone through in his life?

Carlisle finished bandaging up my arm. I wiped an escaped tear with the back of my fingers as Edward walked in.

"They found Liam," he reported to my extreme relief. "He was tied and gagged in the trunk of the car they left in the parking lot at the school. The car had been reported stolen this morning. Another thing they can hold over the guy they have in custody. Perhaps the more they have on him, the more likely it'll be that he'll turn on James."

"Thank God Liam's okay. He is okay, right?"

"He going to fine," Edward reassured me. "I guess he has a nice bump on the head, but he should be fine."

"So, he'll be back on the job in no time, right?" I hoped that Edward wasn't going to fire him for getting jumped by two of James' henchmen. Felix was one big dude.

Edward picked up on my meaning, but didn't answer. He didn't like to lie to me when I asked him things straight up. I was going to have to fight for Liam. The guy could have died for me today.

He ran a hand through his hair. "The police want to ask you a few questions. Then, I guess you and I need to talk about a few things."

I nodded, glad I would get a few minutes to figure out what I was going to say to him. Two detectives walked into the exam room. Carlisle rose from his rolling stool and patted my leg.

"I'll be back to check on you before you go."

"Thank you. For everything."

He nodded and gave me a small, tight-lipped smile.

Edward stayed in the room. I wasn't sure if that was a good idea or not. I hadn't thought about how I wanted to tell him what happened. I wasn't sure if it would be exactly the same story I would tell the police. Luckily, one of the detectives spoke up first.

"Mr. Masen, we'd appreciate the chance to talk to Miss Swan privately."

I didn't protest, which didn't go unnoticed by Edward.

"Of course," he said to the detective before looking at me. "I'll be just out here. I have to call Peter anyway."

Peter. It really didn't matter what I told the police in private. If they had to write up a report that went into any kind of computer, Edward would have access to it thanks to Peter.

"Miss Swan, we just have a couple questions for you. We understand you've had a rough afternoon," the first detective said. She was a middle-aged woman with short brown hair. She looked tough enough to take down her partner, who was a younger and well-built man. I could tell you didn't mess with her.

"I'll answer all the questions you have if it will help put James Hunter behind bars."

"Now, maybe you can explain to me why you think James Hunter had anything to

do with these men coming for you?"

"James hates Edward. He has told Edward he will do whatever it takes to make sure I leave him. The man has a sick obsession with Edward. He's made me feel very uncomfortable on several occasions."

"Has he threatened you in some way?"

I shook my head. "He's followed me around, tried to tell me that he wants to *save me*."

"Save you from what?" the detective interjected.

"He claims he's trying to save me from Edward. But I know Edward, I know he would never hurt me."

The detectives exchanged looks and not the good kind.

"James Hunter wants you to be afraid of Mr. Masen?" the male detective asked.

I shifted on the hospital bed and crossed my legs. "Yes. He wants Edward to be alone so he's been trying to convince me Edward is dangerous. James has been stalking me."

"He's stalking you?"

"Well, he came to the Four Seasons just to tell me he was going to make sure Edward didn't hurt me, and he showed up at a club once and at the restaurant we were eating lunch at, too. Each time, his purpose was to tell me lies about Edward."

"He told you things about Mr. Masen that were meant to frighten you?" the female detective took over questioning again.

"Yes," I replied, shakily.

"What did he tell you about Mr. Masen?"

They both stared at me expectantly. I could feel my chest rising and falling faster. "What does this have to do with today? What James thinks about Edward doesn't matter. The fact that he sent people to come get me today, to kidnap me, that's what's important."

The female detective put a hand up to stop me. "Miss Swan, we're not trying to upset you. We're just trying to understand."

"No, you guys don't understand. James hired people to take me. He hired people to run Edward's car off the road a couple weeks ago and ended up killing Edward's assistant and friend! But you want to know what James said to me two months ago?"

"We're just trying to get all the information. That's all. Please, try to relax."

This was the same way I felt when we went to the police after the car accident. No one wanted to listen. No one wanted to believe James Hunter was behind all this. I tucked my hair behind my ear and tried to calm down.

The male detective started up again. "Did Mr. Hunter say why you should be afraid of Mr. Masen?"

"He said Edward uses women. He said that when Edward was done with me, he would get rid of me."

"Get rid of you? Break up with you?"

"He was trying to scare me. He was trying to imply Edward would kill me. Edward loves me. He would never hurt me. James doesn't know anything about Edward or our relationship."

"Why do you think Mr. Hunter meant Mr. Masen was going to kill you?"

"I don't know," I lied. I knew, but I wasn't going to say anything about Bree. Something told me if I opened that door something bad was going to happen.

"No idea? He didn't say anything else or tell you about something to give you that impression?"

"No. I told you. It was just the way he said it. He was trying to scare me."

Again, they exchanged looks. I was starting to get frustrated. I wished Edward had stayed.

The female detective spoke slowly. "Tell us exactly what the men said to you today when they came to pick you up."

I sat up straighter, glad we were moving on. "The one guy, the guy who got away,

he came into school and to my classroom. He said Edward had sent him to get me."

"He identified himself as someone who worked for Mr. Masen?"

"Yes, but Edward had told Emmett that he was sending Tyler. So, at first that didn't make sense, but then I figured Tyler maybe refused to come."

"Tyler? Tyler Crowley, Mr. Masen's head of security?" the male detective asked. I nodded. "Why would he refuse to come get you?"

Shit.

"Edward and I were in the middle of a disagreement. I was mad at him and was refusing to talk to him."

"So, he sent Tyler to come get you because you were refusing to talk to him?" the female detective asked.

"It's not like that." *Okay, it was exactly like that.*

"Does he do that often? Send his people to collect you when he wants to speak with you, regardless of what you want to do?"

I slid off the bed. "I'm done. I think I need to go home now."

"Miss Swan," the female detective said stepping in front of me. "We can ask you these questions here or we can ask them at the station."

She was threatening me? Why did I suddenly feel like I was the bad guy?

"Listen, I don't know what crazy ideas you have running through your heads right now, but I get the distinct impression that you are barking up the wrong tree. James Hunter is trying to hurt my boyfriend."

"You believe that because Mr. Masen told you that's what Mr. Hunter was doing, correct?" she asked me with the spark of a challenge in her eyes.

"I believe it because it's true."

"If I told you that the man we have in custody swears he works for Mr. Masen, what would you say to that?"

"I would say he's a liar!"

"Has Mr. Masen ever put his hands on you, Miss Swan? Has he ever been physically aggressive with you before?"

This was unbelievable. The police thought Edward was behind this?

"No," I tried to say as surely as I could. "Edward loves me."

"Is that what he says after he hurts you, Miss Swan? He's a powerful man. He spends all day telling people what to do. I bet they all do what he says, too. But not you. You don't always do what he says, do you? Maybe he doesn't like it when you don't want to do what he wants. Maybe he feels like he needs to make sure you do what he wants by creating this common enemy. Maybe Mr. Masen wants you to be afraid of Mr. Hunter so you'll be more dependent on him, so you'll be more *compliant*."

My hands were at my sides and balled up in tight fists. This was the biggest load of crap I had ever heard in my whole life. I had never wanted to punch someone so badly.

"You have no idea what you're talking about," I said through clenched teeth.

"Did the men who came to pick you up ever mention Mr. Hunter?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"No," I answered, glaring at her with pure hatred.

"Did they do anything different from anyone else who works for Mr. Masen?"

"They don't work for Edward! I'm sure he told you that! Why would Edward send Emmett after us if he sent those men to get me? Why would he have a GPS device planted on me if he was the one who was going to take me?"

"Mr. Masen planted a GPS device on you?" the male officer said as his eyes widened in surprise.

God, I was screwing this whole thing up. I needed to shut up. I needed to *shut the hell up*.

"I'm done. If you have more questions regarding what happened today, contact my lawyer." I didn't actually have a lawyer, but they didn't need to know that. I pushed

my way through them and out of the exam room.

Tyler was standing just outside. The look on his face told me he heard everything that went on. Edward was by the nurse's station, talking to Carlisle.

"Can we go home?" I asked Tyler.

He shrugged and his eyes held as much sympathy as I had ever seen from him before. "You okay?"

I shook my head, sure I would start crying like an idiot if I tried to speak. Everything I said to the police made them think Edward was behind this. I somehow helped confirm their ridiculous assumption that he was psychotically controlling and abusive. I knew how controlling Edward was, but he was not psychotic. I never thought about how our relationship could look from the outside. No one knew him the way I did. They knew the man he let them see. They did not know the real Edward. The same could be said for James. He let them see a side of him that was harmless. He was far from harmless. He was the psychotic one.

"All done?" Edward asked as I approached.

I nodded, the lump in my throat still too big.

"Let me sign off and have the nurse give you your discharge papers," Carlisle said, grabbing up a chart and heading off to find my nurse.

"Everything all right?" Edward reached up and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"I just want to go home."

The back of his fingers brushed my cheek. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Did he know what the police thought? Did they tell him the man they had in custody swore he was hired by Edward?

Carlisle, thankfully, helped speed everything along. We left, and I worried how our conversation would start. I had no idea where to begin. Once in the back of the Hummer, Edward leaned his head back and closed his eyes.

"I should have told you about the job," he said with his eyes still closed. "Alec warned me, but I didn't listen."

Hearing Alec's name made my heart clench. "I don't care about the job. I mean, I care about the job; but right now, we have bigger issues."

He lifted his head and opened his eyes. They were misty. He was working very hard not to cry, which triggered my own waterworks.

"I was so stupid to get in the car with them. I should have waited for Emmett to check with-"

Edward didn't let me finish. His lips slammed into mine, pushing me back a bit. He kissed me like it was the last time he was ever going to get the chance. His intensity made the tears flow even more freely.

His hand cradled my cheek as he pulled back. "You have to let me end this."

"How? By letting you kill him? You can't kill him. The police already doubt that James had anything to do with this. They think you had me kidnapped to scare me into submission."

"What?" He sat back and dropped his hand from my face.

"You can't go after James. I don't know what he told the police or how he managed to get his men to point the finger at you, but things are so messed up. They're looking at you. You have to be careful. You can't go setting crazy plans of revenge into motion. That's probably what James wants. He wants you to come after him. That would be the ultimate revenge, to have you rot in a jail cell."

Edward pressed his fingers against the bridge of his nose. "Now my questioning makes so much more sense."

"I wasn't able to convince them they were wrong. I tried. I'm sorry."

"Put your seatbelt on, Isabella."

I did what he asked as he pulled his own down and around him. He turned away from me, staring out the window.

"I love you." I grabbed his hand that rested on the seat between us. "I love you even though you do fucked up things like buying me jobs and sending Tyler to get me when I won't talk to you. I love you because you want to have lunch with me every Friday because that's how we met. I love you because you're so damn smart and you know things like the only vowelless word in the English language. I love you

because you have Charlotte buy the kind of ice cream I like without me having to ask. I love you because you want to keep me safe. You do keep me safe. The panic button in the car kept me safe."

He didn't say anything but squeezed my hand in return. Tyler made eye contact with me in the rearview mirror. I could tell he was trying to offer me what little comfort he could provide. I looked out the window and noticed we weren't heading towards the estate. We were heading the opposite direction.

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you to Jasper." Edward's voice was small and so sad that the sound of it made me feel like I was going to die.

"Why? I want to go home."

"You can't come home, Isabella. I need to get you out of the city for a while. I need you to be somewhere James can't find you. Jasper has agreed to take you somewhere."

"No! I'm not leaving you!" I argued.

"You trust me to keep you safe after what happened today?" he snapped. "Do you?"

I flinched at his anger. "Yes," I said quietly but firmly.

"Well, I don't!" he shouted back. "I need you to be away from me. He's going to assume that I will keep you close. I need to do the opposite. And, if what you say is true about the police, it really is best that you're away from me. If they think I'm trying to control you or keeping you away from other friends and family, we need to show them you are free to come and go."

"Can't I leave tomorrow. Can't we go home tonight?"

"I need you to go now. If you come home, I...I won't let you go." It visibly pained him to admit that.

We turned onto Jasper's street. I hadn't realized we were so close. He was right. James would be expecting a lockdown. In addition, I had screwed everything up with the police. If I spent the next few days locked in the estate, it would look like their version of Edward had gotten his way. I feared he had other reasons for wanting me

out of town, though.

"You have to promise me you won't do anything." He didn't answer me. "Edward, look at me," I demanded. Tortured green irises found my face. His eyes were windows to his broken soul. I wanted to wrap myself around him, heal him, save him. "You have to promise me. Do not kill him. Do not order anyone to kill him. Please."

His eyes dropped, and he stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. "I promise."

Instant relief flowed through my body. "You, too," I said to Tyler. I pushed on his seat with my free hand.

"You have my word, Bella."

We pulled up in front of Jasper's apartment building. Tyler jumped out. I undid my seatbelt and crawled onto Edward's lap. I held his face in my hands.

"I love you. I'm coming home as soon as it seems like things have cooled off with the cops." I kissed him softly, and then a little deeper. I could feel his tears hit my hands.

"Go. He's waiting for you," Edward whispered hoarsely when I pulled back.

I looked up and saw Jasper standing outside the car. He had a black duffle bag slung over his shoulder.

"Promise me you won't fire Liam."

Edward pushed my hair from my face. "You always amaze me. All the time, without fail."

"Promise," I demanded.

"I promise."

"I love you." I kissed him one more time because I needed it. I needed to feel his lips on mine. I needed to feel his love for me.

"Go," he encouraged dispiritedly.

I slipped off his lap and got out of the car. Tyler handed me my things, and even though he was probably going to be mad, I hugged him.

"Please take care of him. Don't let him do anything bad. Please."

"I promise," Tyler whispered, patting me on the back. I let him go and fell into Jasper's waiting arms. I couldn't bear to watch Edward drive away.

"Thank God you're okay," Jasper said, his voice thick with emotion.

I let him hug me a little longer before I asked him where we were going.

"We need to stop at Edward's condo, so you can pack a bag. Then, you're dad is expecting us for dinner," he replied, pulling me towards his car.

Forks. Something told me seeing my dad was just what I needed.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Okay, the job bomb exploded. Of course, a whole lot of stuff exploded this chapter. For clarification sake - the police are not working for James. Bella is not going to Forks forever, just until Edward can come up with a plan.

Thanks to momof4lurvntwisaga for helping with this chapter. Kisses and hugs to the ladies on Twitter and FB. Thanks for all the support :) I was a complete review reply fail this week. My goal is to reply to everyone this week because I can't even believe how many reviews this story has gotten. Blows me away.

Ramblings on the blog. I'll try to explain what these two are thinking. Come on over if you want to know. Ah, two more things - FaN was picked as one of the fics of the week over at The Lemonade Stand and was given a lovely review by Chicklette, who is so very, very kind and wonderful. . FaN is also up for two Inspired Fanfic Awards for Best Bella and Best Villain. So very awesome! If you feel like voting go here - .

To get through the hard times, I am looking to post another outtake on Tuesday. Outtakes are now being posted in a separate story. Check my profile under My Stories!

So, yell at me if you must, but aren't you glad James didn't get her? That's good, right?

Chapter 21

TF doesn't recommend reading this at work or in a public place if you have teared up any other time during this story.

Chapter 21

Friday, November 5th at noon

I slammed the door of the truck shut and waited for Jake to walk around to my side before walking toward the diner. I could see Seth already standing inside, waiting for us. I pulled my phone out one last time to see if Edward replied to my text. I had sent him a message to let him know I was thinking about him - **It's Friday at noon, miss you.**

"Would you put that thing away?" Jake squawked, tugging on my arm as he headed for the diner door. "You've checked that thing a million times in the last five minutes. I bet it rings when you get a message."

"It's a new phone. I don't know that I set it up right. I think I accidentally put it in silent mode," I lied, slipping the phone in my pocket.

The distance between Edward and I wasn't just physical this week. I had talked to Alice and Charlotte more than him. He was inconsistent with replying to my messages and sometimes my calls went to voicemail.

Jake rolled his eyes. "Whatever you say, Bella. This lost puppy routine is getting old, though. Just so you know."

"Nice. Your compassion and understanding are so appreciated."

He stopped walking and turned towards me. He put one hand on each of my shoulders and looked me in the eye. "You're tougher than this. You know you are."

"You don't get it, and I can't explain."

"You're right. I don't get it, but I don't have to get it to know that you will survive whatever happens between you and Mr. Moneybags. You need to believe it."

"That's what you're not getting. It's not me that I'm worried about."

Being in Forks had helped in some ways and made things worse in others. I needed the break. I didn't want to come here but was glad I did. That didn't mean I was happy about not being with Edward. I missed him terribly, more than when he had gone away on business. Not knowing what he was doing with his free time was the hardest. Charlotte said he spent his evenings in his office at the condo. He ate dinner, but she never saw him go to bed. I could only imagine how he was torturing himself. I texted him in the middle of the night a couple times, telling him to go to bed and dream about the things I would do to him when I got home. He never answered those. He probably wanted me to believe he was asleep. I knew better.

"You can't control the things you can't control. You've got to let it go," Jake said, dropping his hands and grabbing mine. He pulled me to the door. "Let it go and eat." He smiled, waiting for me to smile in return. He made a mad face, and I let out a small giggle.

"Finally!" Seth exclaimed as the bell on the door chimed behind us. "I was going to sit at the counter and eat without you guys if you made me wait much longer."

"Jake had to check his hair a million times and kept asking me if he should change his shirt. You know him. He's such a girl," I joked.

"God, you are so hilarious. Now your out-of-work ass can pay for itself," Jake grumbled, swatting at my butt with the menu he snatched from Cora. She led us to a booth in the back.

Seth laughed. "I'll buy you lunch, Bella," he offered. "Consider it payment for the entertainment you've provided me this week. Jake hasn't taken a beating like this in a while."

"Thank you, but I can pay for my own lunch. I'm not that broke."

My return to Forks had afforded me one luxury - normalcy. I hung out with old friends, teased and got teased back, paid for my own lunches, and stopped at the grocery store whenever I wanted. There were no silent bodyguards following me around. No constant looking over my shoulder. Edward only asked that I not be alone; a request my dad thought was more than reasonable given the failed abduction attempt. I spent my days helping out at Jake's garage. He had me organizing his files, which were in complete disarray. I wondered how he could run a business with his lack of organizational skills. He was in desperate need of an office manager.

My evenings were spent with my dad or in La Push with the Clearwaters. My dad

had kept his cool about all of this. I had prepared myself for the worst. I expected him and Jasper to gang up on me and tell me I needed to leave Edward. To my surprise, neither one of them suggested that, though. The suspicious part of me couldn't help but think they were playing some kind of mind game with me, reverse psychology or something like that. There was one time last weekend, I caught them talking without me and falling silent when they noticed me there. I felt like they knew something I didn't, but they weren't going to tell me.

The bell chimed above the door again, as Leah pushed her way in. She spotted us and slid in next to Jake. They weren't back together officially, but Jake had let it slip that they had made out a couple times. Leah told me they did more than make out, but they were trying not to put labels on their relationship right now for fear that it would mess everything up. They were so going to get back together. Their two ornery asses were made for each other.

"You guys didn't order yet, did you?"

"Nope, we've been too busy busting Jake's balls," Seth said with a snicker.

A playful smile swept across Leah's face. "You better leave his balls alone, little brother."

They were so back together.

Jake's eyes went wide. "Can we not discuss my balls at lunch? Please?"

"I second the no balls talk," I said, raising my hand.

We looked over the menu quietly for a minute.

Seth couldn't let it go. "What did Cinderella say when she got to the ball?"

I held my menu up between him and me, so I could pretend he wasn't really sitting with us. Jake and Leah just shook their heads.

He started making a horrible gagging noise and then burst out laughing. "Get it? The ball? Not the dance. The-"

I set my menu down and put my hand over his mouth. "We get it, Seth. Can we please not discuss anyone's balls, including Prince Charming's?"

Everyone at the table began laughing, even me. This was the good part of being

home.

We ordered and ate. We laughed some more and enjoyed our time together. I couldn't remember a Friday lunch that had been so relaxed.

"Was everything good?" Cora asked, before handing us the bill.

We all nodded and let her know everything was fine.

"It's good to see you, Bella. Your dad must be happy to have you around after everything that happened last week," she said. I didn't get the feeling she was prying into my business.

"It's good to be home for a little bit."

My escape from James' men had made the national, not just local, news. We had caused the shutdown of a whole city block. Not to mention, I was Edward Masen's girlfriend. The press was referring to it as an attack, not a kidnapping attempt. The police charged the man who was caught with felony criminal destruction of property for breaking the car window and a misdemeanor battery charge for hurting me. Edward and my father were extremely unhappy. The DA's office explained that he could not be charged with kidnapping because I willingly got in the car with them. There was also no proof that he had not been hired by anyone other than Edward, even though Edward vehemently denied it. Liam only recalled Felix as his attacker. He never saw the man they had in custody. Therefore, they could not charge him for what happened to Liam.

I looked over at Jake, who all week had promised not to comment on my current troubles. It was the only way I would agree to hang out with him. He had done a good job of not attacking Edward so far, even though I knew it was killing him not to. It was easy to blame Edward, but he was not at fault. He was the true victim in all of this. James was getting exactly what he wanted. Edward was more alone than he had ever been.

After we worked out who owed what for the bill, my phone pinged. I pulled it out to find a message from Edward.

Come to Charlie's.

I stared at the words on the screen for a minute. He was here. I could feel my heart beating in my chest. I stood up, and a huge smile broke across my face.

"I need someone to drop me off at my dad's."

Jake offered to drive me. My leg was bouncing anxiously the entire five minute drive. I swore my heart swelled in my chest when I spotted the Hummer in the driveway. He was here. He was here to get me.

"It was nice having you around, you know. Don't be a stranger again, okay?" Jake said as we pulled up.

"I promise that I won't. You guys should come to Seattle, stay with us for a weekend. You can have the guest house at the estate. It's nicer than any hotel you've ever been to, I swear."

Jake snorted and shook his head. "From digging in your wallet for enough change to pay for your lunch to talking about your guest house. What a strange life you have now, Bells."

I did have a strange life, but it was my life. It was a combination of this world and Edward's world. I could have a foot planted in both.

"Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for not making me choose."

"Well, I'm no dummy. I could see you'd choose him. Just be careful."

"I will." I hugged him goodbye and jumped out of the truck.

Tyler was out of the Hummer and opened the door for Edward, who stepped out of the car in jeans and a white button down shirt. His hair seemed longer, even though it had only been a week since I had seen him last. I flew right past Tyler and jumped into Edward's arms, wrapping both my arms and legs around him. He was here. He was here to get me.

"You're here," I gushed, clinging to him for dear life.

He didn't say anything but I felt his grip on me tighten. I pulled back and held his face in my hands. He looked horribly tired but as beautiful as ever. I kissed him long and lovingly, and he kissed me back with equal fervor. I wanted to tell him how much I missed him, how much I loved him, but I could not bring myself to stop kissing him. He was here. I had missed him more than I thought possible this week. I missed kissing him, touching him. When I was old and grey, I was going to want to kiss this man from morning until night. Always.

"Isabella," he said against my lips.

I didn't want to stop, but I was probably getting heavy.

"I missed you," I professed, pulling back just enough to speak. My nose brushed against his.

"I missed you more," he replied, covering my mouth with his again.

We were never going to get home if we didn't stop this. I pulled back again, my smile threatening to split my face in two. Having him here made me feel complete. When we weren't together, I felt like I was missing part of myself. He had my heart. I had left it with him last week. Now, we were together and what was missing was found. He was here to get me.

"I love you," I said with a sigh as he set me on my feet. "Let's go get my stuff."

I pulled him around the Hummer only to notice his car was not the only one in the driveway. Hidden behind his tank was Jasper's car. Jasper and Alice were sitting inside it. I waved and took a step toward the driver's side, but Edward pulled me back.

"Let's go in the house first," he said, tugging me away.

I looked at him and then back at the two in the car. Jasper gave me a little wave as if to say go.

"They can come in, too," I said as my confusion mounted.

"I need you alone for a few minutes, come on."

My eyes narrowed, but I followed him. He wanted me alone. Oh, *alone*. I reached in my purse for the keys and opened the door for us. Once inside, I quickly shrugged out of my coat.

"Now, Mr. Masen, I know it's been a little while since we had some alone time, but I really hope you can last more than a couple minutes." I arched a brow at him and reached to unbutton his shirt. I kissed under his sexy jaw and then went for his mouth. Kissing was fantastic, but making love to him was going to be a million times better.

Edward stepped back and grabbed my hands, stopping me from getting his shirt

off. "Isabella, don't," he said quietly.

"Usually, I would listen to you Mr. Bossy, but I missed you too much." I crossed my arms and grabbed the hem of my shirt pulling it over my head in record time. I let it fall to the ground and reached around to unhook my bra.

Instead of getting himself undressed, Edward bent over and picked up my shirt. "Please stop taking your clothes off," he said with a grimace. He looked truly pained.

"You want to do that part, too?"

"Please, Isabella. I need to talk to you. We can't..." He shook his head and handed me my shirt.

He wanted to talk. He was here. He was here to get me, but he wanted to talk first. We probably had to discuss some new security details. I knew he didn't fire Liam, but that didn't mean he was going to be my bodyguard. I ignored the burn of my blush and slipped my shirt back on.

He was buttoning his shirt back up and his jaw was so tense. I pulled my hair out of the shirt, letting it fall in waves down my back. I tucked some behind my ears. He reached up and stroked my cheek.

"It's not that I don't want you like that. It's just... I need to talk to you. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"You're here. I don't care what we do." I leaned into his touch and let my eyes close. It really didn't matter. I could sit and look at him and be happy. Edward didn't look happy, though, and it was starting to concern me.

We moved into my dad's small living room, and I sat on the couch. Edward did not; he paced in front of me with his hand in his hair.

"We're going to need more security, right?" I asked, knowing he was fretting about what he had to tell me before we could go home. "It's fine. I'll do whatever you need me to do. If I need to have two bodyguards all the time, that's fine. I'm not going to question whatever you've come up with. Stop worrying."

He shook his head and sat down beside me. "I'll never stop worrying."

I leaned in to kiss him again. It felt like our week apart was more like a year. Perhaps, my need to be with him was amplified by our current situation. I didn't

know. I only knew I loved the way he smelled and tasted. I wanted to experience all of him. He obliged me, kissing me back until I was ready to start taking clothes off again. I rested my head in the crook of his neck, inhaling his scent, nuzzling my nose against his neck.

"We really need to talk," he said, breathing into my hair and rubbing my back.

"I know," I replied, feeling resigned to the fact that we weren't going to be taking our clothes off any time soon. "First, you need to know that I will be finding a new job because going back to University Prep is not an option, no matter what you told Aro. I can't go back there."

"You don't have to go back to University Prep if you don't want to. I don't know why I did that. I shouldn't have done that to you." He sat back, moving away from me so I could see his face. He looked so much older than he really was, this last week aged him years.

"You wanted me to have a teaching job, but you wanted to have lunch with me every Friday. You're weird like that." I bumped him with my shoulder, trying to get a smile out of him. It didn't work.

"I missed you. More than I have ever missed anyone," he said, staring down at his hands. His elbows were resting on his thighs and his hands were clasped together.

I ran my fingers through the hair above his ear. It was getting really long. He hadn't gotten a haircut since the week we were broken up. That seemed like a very long time ago.

"I missed you, too. Just tell me what you worked out. I can handle it. I'm tough, remember?"

He sighed and still wouldn't look at me. I put a hand on his leg. Surely whatever he needed me to do wasn't as bad as he thought. Maybe I was going to have to have an entourage. It didn't matter to me, though.

"Maybe it's a good thing I don't have a job right now. I can just stay at the condo or the estate. It'll make Liam's life a little easier," I said, trying to ease his worry.

"You would live locked away forever, wouldn't you?"

I laughed, even though I knew he wasn't trying to be funny. "You aren't going to have to lock me away forever. Someday James is going to screw up, and the police

are going to catch him."

His green eyes were full of a hurt I couldn't place as he looked back up at me. "And if he never screws up? If he keeps coming after me, after you, would you just continue to live like a prisoner?"

"I'm not a prisoner," I said, feeling confused about why he was focusing on this.

"You are, Isabella. You have been living like a prisoner since you moved in with me. Look me in the eye and tell me you haven't felt secluded or suffocated. I know you have."

I wanted to disagree, but I couldn't. There were times I had felt that way. Lately, things had been more lonely than usual. It wasn't his fault, though. It was James' fault. My hesitation made him look away.

"I've been so unfair to you," he said with another melancholy sigh.

I offered up my own suggestion for how to handle this situation since he wasn't letting me in on his plan. "What if we move away? Somewhere away from Seattle. Make James work harder for it. Maybe out of sight, out of mind?"

Edward scrubbed his face with his hands. He looked back up at me, our faces were inches apart. He looked so damn sad. He placed his hand on my face and kissed me so gently, slowly deepening it until his tongue was coaxing mine to join him. He was here. He was here to get me. It didn't matter where we went. I would follow him anywhere.

He stopped and pressed his forehead to mine. His eyes were closed. His fingers stroked my cheek as his thumb grazed my bottom lip. I went in for another kiss, but he pulled back. Edward's eyes looked into mine, and I saw nothing but complete adoration. It was as if all the love I felt for him was being reflected back at me. It was tangible between us. He put both hands on my face, cradling it like I was precious.

"I love you."

He was here. He was here to get me. And he loved me! I thought I might explode with joy.

"I am in love with you, Isabella. Completely and irrevocably in love. I never thought I could feel this way about anyone. I was absolutely certain I was incapable

of it. But, I know now that I would do anything for you. You are more important to me than anything in this fucked up, crazy world."

I kissed him hard, my arms pushing through his to wrap around his neck. His hands moved to my lower back, holding me to him as we reveled in his declaration. I climbed onto his lap, straddling him. His body was so warm and inviting. My hands drift down to his chest, his heart pounding so hard I could feel it through his shirt. I did that to him. He loved me.

Edward Masen, the man who never apologized, who believed emotional attachments were for the weak, who loved nothing and no one, loved *me*. I knew he loved me. I saw it in the way he looked at me. I felt it in the way he touched me. I heard it in all the other things he said. But, I couldn't deny that hearing those three words come from his mouth meant the world to me. It represented his belief in love. It meant that he was no longer afraid that he wouldn't do it right.

He turned us and pushed me down on my back. My hands moved up to his face. My fingers brushed the day's worth of stubble on his jaw. His kisses were desperate; I could feel his need and desire on top of the love that I knew for sure we now shared. I was sure we were going to get naked now. I couldn't wait to make love to him while he whispered those words over and over in my ear. My entire body flushed at the thought.

Edward lay heavily on top of me, and then in a flash, he was gone. He was almost on the other side of the room when I finally could focus.

"What's wrong?" I asked, fixing the wild mess my hair had become during our love tussle.

Edward's fists were clenched almost as tightly as his eyes. He pounded one fist against his forehead.

I started to get up, but he stopped me. "Don't come over here, Isabella. Please, just stay over there. I can't...I can't touch you and tell you this."

I sat back down and now nervously played with my hair. What more could he have to tell me? He looked like he was having a nervous breakdown. It was killing me to sit on this side of the room while he was over there suffering.

He took a deep breath, one that made his chest heave. "I'm leaving the country. Just me. By myself."

"What?" was my stunned reply.

"I love you too much to put you through this anymore." He ran his hands through his hair. "I let this go on for so long because I wanted you, I needed you. It was selfish and stupid. I never believed you would feel the way you do about me. I thought you would leave, but you didn't, you wouldn't. You should have walked away from me. I should have made you."

I couldn't breathe. I was really trying. I wanted the air to go in and out of my lungs, but the pain in my chest was making it nearly impossible. I had dreamed about the day he would tell me he loved me. But not this way. Not attached to a goodbye. Not as part of some "I'm no good for you" speech.

"That's why I haven't been able to say it," he continued. "I thought it so many times. I knew you wanted to hear it, even though you never asked. You never demanded it. Because you're fucking perfect like that." His voice cracked and his eyes began to fill with unshed tears. "You are perfect for me. More than what I want, you give me what I need. You're willing to walk away from everyone who loves you to be with me. It's not right, Isabella. You shouldn't have to give up everything so I can have what I want."

The tears were falling from both of our eyes. I stood up and walked over to him. He stepped away from me as I advanced on him. We walked around my dad's coffee table.

"You don't get to control this. You don't get to tell me how to feel about you or what I should or should not do because of how I feel. If I want to be with you, that's my choice. Mine. Not yours. Not James'"

"You don't get it. I'm going to kill him. I want to kill him." He stopped moving, and I plowed into him.

"No! You can't! That's exactly what he wants you to do. He wants you to do something stupid."

He tried to push me off him. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. Please, sit down. I can't touch you. Please."

I sat back down, now breathing quite hard.

"If I stay with you, I will kill him. I'll have no choice. It's me or him. Most likely, it will be you or him. It's all I've thought about since we buried Alec. It's why I can't

sleep. I either dream about killing him or finding you dead. I can't do it anymore. I can't wrestle with this monster inside me while your head is on the chopping block."

"Who says he's going to leave me alone if you break up with me? That's what you're doing isn't it? Breaking up with me?"

Edward wiped his face streaked with tears. "He'll have no use for you if I make it look like I have no use for you."

No use for me. Like all the other women who have been in his life. When he was done and had no use for them, he tossed them aside, never looking back. Was it going to be that simple for him to do that to me?

"I thought I was different. I thought you needed me." My voice was small, and I hated it. I hated that I was allowing him to run away from me.

"God, Isabella, of course you're different! Are you not listening? I love you, but there is a part of me that still only knows how to possess you. You have no idea! No idea how hard it is not to take you away and keep you all to myself! I need to find some peace. As much as I want to be with you, as much as you make me feel loved, I will never find peace while trying to protect you from James. He feeds the obsession, the possessiveness, the overprotective monster."

"I said I would go wherever you want to go. We can move to the other side of the world. I don't care! I want to be where you are because I love you. If you loved me, you would want to keep me with you!" I was spitting my words now. The anger, fear, and despair were all molding into one ugly emotion.

He put both hands on his head. "Being able to let you go is the reason I know that what I feel is love. *Real* love, not some fucked up obsessive love. That's why I can finally say it. The selfish me would take you with. The selfish love would tell me to do what I want in spite of what's best for you. I've always been very good at doing what's right for me. For the first time in my life, I want to do what's right for someone else. I want to do what's right for you because I am in love with you."

"I don't get a say? It doesn't matter that I want to be with you?"

"That's what you want? To live on the run with me?"

"Yes!" Was he insane? Of course that was what I wanted.

"Really?" His voice was laced with despair and doubt. "Think about it. Stop and

think about it. You're caught up in all this emotion right now. You aren't thinking about it clearly."

I was thinking just fine. He was trying to tell me I was better off without him, and that was a load of crap. He was trying to control me. Telling me how I feel, telling me what was best for me. Nobody decided what was best for me but me. I took a couple deep breaths and let my head fall into my hands.

He kept talking as I tried to calm myself down. "A week ago today you didn't even want to talk to me. You told Emmett you were planning to stay with Jasper, and you were going to think about whether this was the life you really wanted. If you had been given that chance, if James' men hadn't come for you, I wonder what you would have decided. Part of me thinks that without all the drama of last week, you would have stayed with Jasper longer than the weekend."

Was he right? We would never know. It didn't matter now, did it?

"I love you," I stated as firmly as I could muster. "I get to decide if I want to go with you or not."

Edward knelt in front of me. I had never seen him cry so many damn silent tears, and it was killing me.

"I know you love me. So, I'm asking you to let me go. I have nothing but all this blackness inside me right now. I need to find a way to get rid of it without sucking the life out of you. If you come with me, I'll depend on you to make it all go away. You'll end up hating me. I can't do that because I love you. You deserve better."

I shook my head. I deserved him. I deserved to go with him if I wanted to go. I deserved to let him suck the life out of me if I wanted to give it.

"Don't shake your head at me. I've heard you crying at night. I've seen you walk around the house like a ghost. I know what I've been doing to you the last few weeks. That's not the kind of life you should have. You're a beautiful, smart, vivacious twenty-four year old woman. You should be having the time of your life. You shouldn't be trapped in this miserable world of mine."

I wanted to tell him he was wrong. I wanted to tell him he was imagining things. I wanted to tell him he was totally delusional.

But he wasn't. The last few weeks in Seattle had been the bleakest of my entire life. *Damn him.*

"So, we're going to break up?"

"I'm leaving Seattle, so yes," he confessed.

"Where are you going to go?"

"Away. Far away. I might start in South America and then work my way east to Europe, Italy perhaps. Alice wants me to meet her in some African village in a couple months."

My heart dropped. "A couple months? How long do you plan on being away?"

"As long as it takes, Isabella. I have so much damage. I can't imagine I can repair myself overnight."

Forever. He was leaving me forever.

"And how are you going to convince James that I'm not important enough to bother with?"

"If I put on a good enough show, he'll believe it. He truly believes me incapable of love. It would take a heartless son of a bitch to know one. I was one for so long. Until you."

"So that's it? You're going to make some grand gesture to prove you don't love me, so James will buy it and leave me alone? Then, I'm supposed to go about my life like you never existed?" My voice was shaky at best.

Edward stood up and wiped more of his tears away. "Sounds about right."

"And if I don't want to pretend? If I can't pretend?"

He reached for my hand and lifted me to my feet. He pulled me close and ran his hand over my wet cheek. "You have always been so much stronger than me. You will survive this better than I will, I'm sure. Out from under my thumb, you are sure to flourish."

I rested my weary head on his chest. I didn't feel strong. Not right now. I felt broken. Completely broken.

He wrapped both arms around me, and I did the same.

He was here. He was here to leave me. I had no choice but to let him go.

Neither one of us wanted to let go. We must have stood in my father's living room for twenty more minutes, just holding one another, saying goodbye without words. There were no more words. All the words had been spoken. I was the one who broke the embrace. Perhaps, I was the stronger one.

Outside, Tyler stood beside the Hummer. I saw Jasper kiss Alice before she opened her door and got out of his car. She didn't say anything to us but offered me a sad, sympathetic smile. Tyler opened the door to the Hummer, and she hopped in. Alice wasn't here to visit. She wasn't here for me. She was here for Edward. She was the one who would take care of him when they drove away.

Jasper got out of the car. He was here for me. Edward had brought me my best friend when I was going to need him the most. A fresh batch of tears began to prick at the corners of my eyes.

We were holding hands, but I knew we were going to have to let go. I knew I was going to have to let him go to the car and leave. Jasper kept his distance. Edward turned and brought our hands to his lips. He kissed my knuckles.

"I'm still a little selfish," he said before leaning in to kiss me one last time. He let go of my hand and held my face in place until he was done and I could no longer hold back the sobs.

He let me go and forced himself to run toward the Hummer. Jasper's arms were around me as the heartbreak had its way with me. *Screw being strong.*

"You need to eat something, Bella," my dad said in his best parental tone.

I lifted the slice of pizza off my paper plate and took a bite. I let the rest drop back on the plate. I gave him the wide-eyed look that said, "Happy?"

The food had no taste. It was warm and would fill my belly, but it was meaningless. Pretty much like everything else in my world at the moment.

"We could go to the range tomorrow. You could shoot some targets. Maybe putting a few holes in something will make you feel better," Dad offered. Sometimes his uncertainty over how to deal with an emotional woman was comical.

Maybe I could find some pictures of James online and print those up. I might enjoy shooting at that.

"I brought your ski jacket. We could go for a hike tomorrow," Jasper added as an option.

"I heard there are some good movies coming out this weekend. We could drive into Port Angeles," Dad suggested.

Jasper got all excited. "Oh, that movie about the guy who had to cut his own arm off comes out today. We could go see that. I heard it's good."

"Oh my God, you two!" I lost any shred of self-control that I was trying to maintain. "Can I have twenty-four hours to fucking wallow? Can you just let me be sad and not try to cheer me up? I don't want to go hiking. I don't want to go to the shooting range. I don't want to go see a movie about some idiot who got himself trapped in the mountains and had to cut off his arm! I want to be sad. I want to lie in my bed upstairs and cry. Less than five hours ago Edward cut my heart out, and you two are ready for me to pick up and move on! I can't do it!"

I stood up and threw away my plate of food with a little overdramatic flair. They both sat in stunned silence as I made my way up the stairs and to my room. Once the loudest of the sobbing ended, my dad knocked on my door.

"Can I come in?" he asked, sticking his hand in and waving his white handkerchief in surrender.

I sat up and rubbed my face. I was sure I looked like a complete mess.

"You can come in, Dad."

He pushed the door all the way open and took a tentative step inside. "Jasper and I played rock, paper, scissors to see who would come apologize first."

He offered me his handkerchief but I gave him that look. Blowing your nose in one of those things was gross. I reached for the box of Kleenex on my nightstand.

"You lost, huh?"

He stuffed his handkerchief back in his pocket. "I won, thank you very much."

"Really?" I asked skeptically.

He took a seat next to me on the bed. "Really," he replied sincerely. "Listen, honey, we weren't trying to belittle this situation. I know better than anyone what it's like to love someone but have to let them go because it's what's best for them."

"I never realized how hard that must have been for you when Mom left."

He let out a guffaw. "When your mom left? Baby, that was bad, but what was worse was she took you with her. I lost the two people I loved the most in the world the day your mom left. I know all about having your heart ripped out."

At least I knew he wasn't trying to cheer me up. He was causing a new round of tears.

"But I survived. I missed you like crazy, but I learned to live without your mom. I cherished my time with you when you would come to visit. I survived just like you will. It's going to hurt like hell, but you'll survive."

"I don't want to survive. I want to be happy. Right now, I can't imagine ever feeling happy again. Mom left because she wasn't in love anymore. Edward left because he is in love with me. That's so screwed up."

I pulled my knees up to my chest and buried my head under my arms. Dad rubbed my back as the next wave of emotion swept me away.

"Can I tell you something as someone else who loves you?"

I turned my head and flipped my hair out of my face so I could see him while my cheek rested on my knees.

"I'm glad he loved you enough to do what was right. This situation with that Hunter guy was not making me happy. You were almost kidnapped, baby. Who knows what they were planning to do if you hadn't gotten away."

"But I did get away!" I sat up.

"This time. This time, you got away. I don't know that I could have handled waiting to see what this guy was going to do next. I think I would have had a hard time not making Mr. Hunter the hunted."

I blew out a long breath. "That's what Edward said. He said if he stayed, he was going to kill him."

"I don't doubt that's true, sweetheart. I think he would have crossed some lines that would have ended up ruining what you two had in the first place."

I didn't doubt it either. If Edward stayed, the desire to kill James would have driven him mad. "I don't want him to be a killer."

"So, you let him go. I didn't want your mom to be miserable in a small town. So, I let her go. That's what you do when you love someone."

"Love sucks," I grumbled.

He wrapped his arm around me, and I let my head fall on his shoulder. "Sometimes it sure does," Dad agreed.

"You knew he was going to do this, didn't you? You and Jasper knew. That's why you didn't tell me to break up with him."

My father was good at many things, lying was not one of them. He didn't try to cover anything up. "He called to make sure he didn't need to send you with a bodyguard. He and I also discussed what the best way to legally deal with James Hunter was, which wasn't very satisfying." He scowled at the thought of dealing with James in any way that didn't end with him on a concrete slab. Then, he sighed. "He might have brought up the need to separate himself from you – for his sake and yours. I didn't know for sure what he was going to decide, though. He respected me enough to let me in on what was happening, so I figured I'd keep his confidence. I'm sorry, honey."

Edward talked to my dad about breaking up with me. *Unbelievable.*

"I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at Jasper. Your best friend is supposed to tell you that kind of information."

"I heard that," his voice called from the hallway.

He pushed the door open and frowned. "Everything I had was secondhand information, not to mention there was absolutely no confirmation that this was his plan until I got the call this morning from Alice."

Dad stood up but leaned down to plant a kiss on top of my head. "I think I'm going to go downstairs since I'm in the clear. You can take the heat on this one all by yourself," dad said, patting Jasper on the back as he went to leave.

"Thanks, Charlie. Big help." Jasper sat down next to me and kicked off his shoes before stretching his long, jean-clad legs out on my bed. He wrapped an arm around me, and I let my head settle on his shoulder.

"He didn't even tell Alice until this morning. She thought all week long he was making plans to get you both out of the country."

I closed my eyes, hoping that would keep me from crying again. I couldn't help but wonder if he at least considered that option. I would have gone with him. He had to know I would have gone with him.

Like he was reading my mind, Jasper gave me kiss on the head. "He knew you would go if he asked. We're all a little surprised that he wasn't selfish enough to take you." I lifted my head and narrowed my eyes at him. He backpedaled quickly. "You know what I mean. If you went with him no one else would have ever seen you again. You two would be on a yacht somewhere, sailing into port late at night so no one could track you."

I sighed and let my head fall back on him. He was right. We would have lived our life together but alone, surrounded by the likes of Tyler and Liam forever and ever. I would have gotten homesick eventually. I was never the free spirit my mother was. I needed a homebase. I needed my family and my friends. It wasn't fair that I had to pick them or Edward. I wanted both. I needed both.

"He told Alice this morning that he wished he knew how to shut the feelings off. I do believe he did this because he loves you, Bells. He wants you to have a normal life. He wants you to be able to walk the streets without bodyguards. He doesn't want anyone to ever hurt you."

No one was going to hurt me now because Edward had done it for them so I could have a *normal* life. What was a normal life anymore? How would I ever have a normal life when I was hollow? That was how I felt. Hollow. Not normal. Never normal.

"We should be landing in Rio a little after noon, sir. I was able to fly above the storm, we shouldn't be off schedule after all," Griffin announced over the speakers. "The WIFI should be up and running again as well."

That was good news. I looked at my watch. It was almost midnight in Seattle. I opened my laptop and waited for it to spring back to life. I opened the browser and

saw I had a connection again. That was good. I typed in the address and my passwords; then, I waited again.

The map came up, and I tapped on the pad to zoom in on Washington State. There was the tiny blinking light. I tapped again to zoom in closer. There was the town of Forks. I tapped one more time. The map displayed Charlie's street name in between the two thin blue lines that represented his street. The blinking light was like a beacon on this dark night. It was my beautiful siren calling out to me, but I was moving away from it instead of toward it.

She was there, most likely tucked in her bed upstairs at this ungodly hour. I had hoped she would get some rest after what I put her through today. I knew sleep was not something I would indulge in anytime soon, but I hoped she would do better than I. She was always stronger. Always braver. Always better.

My finger touched the blinking light on the screen. *Goodnight, my love. Be safe.*

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for helping with this one and holding my hand when I hit add a chapter.

I'm ready to hear it. I sorta, kinda, a little bit did a New Moon. BUT - he did not make up some dumb lie. He told her the absolute truth. I try to make sense of it all on the blog, actually Pennyward himself explains why he did what he did in an exclusive interview (gotta lighten things up somehow!) .

Don't you even think about flouncing on me people. We jump ahead a few months next chapter. There will be no drawn out wallowing. There will be no falling in love with Jake. No, no, no.

Chapter 22

Chapter 22

Friday, June 3rd at noon

"Bella, can you help me with this?"

I turned around and saw Angela trying to balance one too many plates on the tray. Since she had been moved from hostess to server, she had dropped food twice. Rosalie was ready to send her back to the hostess stand. I had been trying to help her because she needed the money. She and Ben had accidentally killed the rabbit. They had a little nudger due in a little less than six months. I was sympathetic; Rosalie was not.

I grabbed a couple plates of food and helped her deliver them to Table 10. Being back at Eclipse was surreal. Working here sometimes made it seem like none of it ever happened. Other times, being here helped remind me it was all very real. I needed that reminder every once and a while. I had my penny charm, my earrings, and a necklace that I was never ever going to be able to wear again, but Eclipse reminded me there was more than just an exchange of tokens. There was this real and undeniable love affair that started when I spilled some very expensive wine on some even more expensive pants.

Eclipse was once again my in-between-jobs job. After subbing here and there in a few districts for the rest of the school year, I had secured a real teaching job with Northshore School District for the fall. It was a little surprising that they offered me the job since my paranoia was in full effect during my interview. The HR guy looked at me like I was crazy when I started asking him all these questions about Edward Masen and Masen Corporation. He came across as completely baffled, so I took that as a good sign. I still asked Alice to make sure there was no funny business before I accepted the job. I wasn't taking any chances.

I had only been working at Eclipse since the end of December. I didn't think about a job until I realized I needed to pay my bills again, and Eclipse was a consistent paycheck in comparison to subbing. Working helped me not think about my heartache. Working kept me around people and stopped the feelings of loneliness that sometimes could overwhelmed me without notice. It gave me a reason to get up everyday and go on. I had to go on, everyone who cared about me would not let me stop living because of a broken heart. My friends and family were some of the most

amazing people in the world.

After Edward left, I didn't think about much except how miserable I was. When I returned to Seattle and found all of my things had been brought to Jasper's apartment, I had a mini-meltdown. It was as if I had never moved out in the first place. I knew I was going to have to move back. I hadn't expected that it had been done for me. I booked a flight to Florida to see my mom after drowning in my own tears for over a week. Jasper thought it was a good idea. Mom thought it was a great idea. I thought it was better than doing nothing but feeling sorry for myself.

It was at the airport that I saw *the magazine*. If I hadn't gotten to Sea-Tac so early, I might never have seen it. I was wasting time in one of the little shops, grabbing a bottle of water. There was another woman standing by the magazines, flipping through the latest People. I had a strong aversion to gossip mags since the Life and Style fiasco. People Magazine always seemed a little more reliable than the others, though. I found myself looking over her shoulder. Big mistake. There he was, and he wasn't alone.

I felt like I had set off one of my very own land mines. I grabbed a copy and purchased it along with the overpriced bottle of water. I chose a seat at the gate as far from other humans as possible. I carefully flipped through the pages until I found the one with Edward plastered all over it. There were three pictures of him. Three pictures of him with three different women. Three pictures of him and three different blonde Brazilian goddesses, each one more attractive than the next. The tiny blurb attached to them stated billionaire Edward Masen was vacationing in Rio after his recent breakup. An inside source reported that Masen and his waitress girlfriend (my name was no longer important) had split up after he was caught cheating. That theory was all but confirmed when Mr. Masen had been spotted all over Rio getting friendly with not one, not two, but three lovely ladies for the past two weeks.

I almost missed my flight because of the crying jag that ensued behind the bathroom stall door minutes later. He had said he was going to put on a show. I had no idea the show was going to include other women. I had sworn off all information regarding Edward and his whereabouts since then. On the upside, I had not heard anything from one Mr. James Hunter since then either.

"Thank you so much, Bella," Angela said after I helped her serve Table 10.

"Don't try to do everything on your own," I reminded her. "You can ask anyone here for help running food."

She nodded and went to check on another table. I walked to the kitchen, passing the stairs to the private dining room. My chest ached like some sort of Pavlovian response. I had one condition when I was rehired. I would never have to work the private dining room, *ever*. I could not and would not go up there. Rosalie was fine with that, which was surprising since she wasn't fine with much the last seven months. Edward had taken Emmett with him. I was relieved he had two bodyguards with him but was surprised that Emmett was one of them. She had it a little better than I did. Emmett called her all the time. Edward had not called. Not even once.

"Ah, mia bella Bella."

I fought a smile and gave Jared the stink eye. He was always calling me that. Jared had been hired when Emmett quit. We were the same age and came to find we had the same exact birthday. I was actually two hours and forty-seven minutes older. Jared thought this meant we were soul mates. Little did he know I already met my soul mate, and it wasn't Jared. He had been trying very hard to date me since I started back before Christmas. He had no idea he was on mission impossible.

Angela was his biggest supporter. She had arranged several "group outings" that surprisingly turned out to be more like double dates. Jared was nice. He had blonde hair and deep blue eyes that in some light looked almost grey. He had that look like he grew up on the beach. Hot surfer dude. There wasn't a day that I worked with him that he didn't make me laugh. Still, venturing into something that was more than friends wasn't something I could do yet.

Jared came up behind me as I started putting plates on a tray. His mouth was dangerously close to my ear. I could feel the heat creeping up my neck.

"Now, this might make me look like the biggest dork in the world, but the new X-Men movie comes out today, aaaaand I was thinking that since you were born on the same day as me that this means maybe you're equally as dorky as me and might want to come with me?"

"This is the pickup line you're going with? You're calling me dorky?"

He laughed and grabbed my hand to help spin me around to face him. He was always touching me. It was never inappropriate groping, but he was always making contact in little ways.

"Nothing else seems to work. I've tried telling you how beautiful you are, I've tried to entice you with promises of the best burgers in town, I tried to persuade Angela to ditch us once on a group outing. I'm desperate here."

"It's a big night for my roommate. I don't know if I should be out." It was the best excuse I could come up with on short notice.

He tilted his head. "He's proposing to his girlfriend. I'm pretty sure they don't need you around for that."

"Why do I tell you things?" I grumbled. "I just want to be available when they want to call someone with the good news."

"Fine, we won't go to a movie where you have to shut your phone off. We'll do something else."

I started to move away, causing him to step in my way.

"Come on, Bella. You know you want to. You know you like me just a tiny bit," he said holding up his finger and thumb an inch apart.

"It's not a date, though. It's going out together as friends."

"Can I kiss you goodnight?"

"No."

"Can I hold your hand?"

"Nope."

"Can I hold open the door for you?"

"If you get to the door first, yes."

"Can I buy dinner?"

"You better. I'm broke," I said with a smirk. "Now, I need to get this food to Table 5 before I lose my tip."

I grabbed the tray and walked past Jared and his giant, I-just-won-the-lottery smile. I was only agreeing to going out as friends. That was it. That was all I could handle.

I walked home from work since it was a nice day and I had no car to speak of still. I was working on it, saving some money to purchase something used but reliable. I couldn't bring myself to take the car Edward had bought for me way back when. Too many bad memories attached to it. Jasper was kind enough to lend me his car whenever I needed to drive somewhere public transportation couldn't take me. One of the many reasons the man was still my best friend.

I hoped that the fresh air could help my cluttered head. As I waited at the corner for the traffic light to change, I couldn't help but notice a black Audi with tinted windows parked on the street. The familiarity of it made me pause. It wasn't that I knew anyone who owned one; it was more that I had seen it before. I felt like I had seen it outside Eclipse before, outside my apartment, around town. *Was someone following me?* I scolded myself for the paranoia. There was no one following me. James had completely forgotten about me because Edward had done the same.

I crossed the street and noticed the Audi pull out into traffic. I tried to ignore it but I found myself trying to catch a glimpse of the driver as it passed by. No luck. It headed west while I headed north. Obviously, I was imagining things. No one was following me. The worry was a by-product of the life I used to live. Being guarded twenty-four seven because a psychopath was after you will do that to a person.

I walked and texted Charlotte.

Remind me that I am just being paranoid when I see black cars with tinted windows.

She was the only one I talked to about that kind of stuff. We had dinner together once a week. Edward had left her behind for me. At least that was what I told myself. He had once promised me that she was mine forever. She was my west coast mom, always treating me like I was one of her own.

Jot the license plate down. Never a bad thing to be on the safe side. I know someone who could check it out for you...

I did not want her to pass anything along to Edward. He was off healing himself. Hearing that I was possibly being followed was not going to help with that process. Before I could respond to her text, she sent me another message.

I meant Peter. Not the other.

The other. I smiled and rolled my eyes. She was so careful around me. We didn't talk about Edward often, and we never said his name. It was stupid, but it made it

easier.

Peter would probably offer to follow me around. No thanks. I think I'm just imagining things.

Peter was a piece of work. I got an email from him after Edward left, letting me know he was always here for me if I ever needed anything. Something told me he had some wild idea that there could be hugging involved. I hoped Edward left strict instructions upon his departure that the no touching rule was still in full effect.

There was a time I worried Peter was maintaining an unhealthy interest in me. Jake called me a couple months after Edward left, all pissed off about me not responding to some emails he sent me about getting together. When I said I never got any emails, he made some joke to give me a hard time. *"What happened, Bells? Someone hacked into your computer and erased them?"*

I sent Peter an email, letting him know if he was hacking into my emails, we would have a serious problem. He wrote me back immediately, claiming he had no idea what I was talking about. He offered to look into who was possibly doing such a thing. I didn't need him to look. If it wasn't Peter, it could only be one other person. I didn't have an email address for Edward, so I wrote an email to my own account, figuring if he was spying on me through my emails, he would read it.

To: Bella Swan

From: Bella Swan

Subject: Stop hacking into my emails

Jake has my phone number and address. He can find other ways to contact me. I want all the emails he sent me. If you have deleted anything else, please return it. The one who leaves doesn't get a say in how the one left behind carries on.

It was no surprise when seven emails from Jake appeared in my inbox the next morning. There were also two fairly old emails from Peter asking me to join some online game site, so we could "interface." That was not happening. Ever.

The mad-hacker must have been Edward. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I would have to admit it was kind of nice that he cared enough to check up on me even if it was through completely inappropriate yet totally Edward methods. There was no message of apology or one letting me know how he was doing. He just did as

I asked and returned the deleted messages.

Every once and awhile I would send myself a message that was really intended for him. I wrote about stupid things like something funny I saw on TV or about dinner with Charlotte, telling him about what she cooked or where we went. Sometimes it was more serious stuff, like when my grandma got diagnosed with cancer. She lived about an hour from my mom and presently wasn't doing well. I had been glad I got to spend some time with her when I visited my mom after the break up. She hadn't been diagnosed yet, and we had a really wonderful time together.

Then there were the times I just wrote I miss you, but those were back when I was still having more bad days than good. The last email I sent was about Alice and Jasper. I told him about how I went shopping with Jasper to find Alice's engagement ring. I said it was the most beautiful ring I had ever seen. I knew she was going to say yes and that they were going to be really happy together. They both deserved it. That was almost a month ago.

Maybe he read them. Maybe he didn't. He never responded. He never acknowledged them. I would never know. After the one about Alice, I had decided not to send anymore. It wasn't helping me heal and move on. It was me holding on to something that wasn't mine anymore.

My phone buzzed in my hand as I shook away the thoughts of Edward and emails.

Just be careful. XO, Char

I typed a quick reply, something my dad always said to me when he would leave for work and I would tell him to be safe.

Always am.

I slipped my phone back in my pocket and stopped at the next intersection. I looked left and right before checking behind me one more time. No black Audi. I was fine. My imagination was obviously just out of control.

"How do I look?" Jasper stepped out of the bathroom in his dress pants, shirt, and new navy blue tie. His blonde locks were perfectly coifed on top of his head. He looked like one damn fine man.

"Like you're about to be engaged to the woman of your dreams," I replied,

jumping at him to give him one more hug. I was so happy for him. This was the biggest day of his life.

I had helped Jasper plan the evening. They were going to Edward's estate, the site of their first unofficial date. I cleared it with Charlotte, who cleared it with Edward. She offered to prepare the house and make them dinner. Jasper's idea was they would have dinner on the rooftop patio. Then, they would have a billiards rematch. Win or lose (although we all knew Jasper was going to lose), he would present her with the ring.

Alice was going to flip. She couldn't be getting a better guy than Jasper. He loved her unconditionally, just as she loved him. There was no drama between the two of them; their life would be easy. Normal. I was so damn jealous.

"You better call me. I need to hear her at her happiest," I said, releasing him from my embrace.

"I will." He was smiling like she had already said yes. "I don't know why I'm nervous, but I am. She's going to say yes, right?"

"I'll kick her ass if she doesn't."

Jasper laughed. "Good to know. I'll use that if it starts to go south on me."

"She's going to say yes. Knowing Alice, she'll probably say yes multiple times, while jumping and clapping."

He nodded with a knowing smile. "Thanks for being so cool about this. I know-

I put a hand over his mouth. "Don't. My baggage is not your baggage. This is a great thing. I am so happy for you. For both of you."

He gave me a quick kiss on the forehead and left it at that. We didn't need to discuss how he was marrying Edward's sister. Or how my life would now forever be intertwined with the man I couldn't be with as long as Jasper and I were friends. I could survive. I would survive.

"Have fun on your date tonight," he said putting on his suit coat.

"It's not a date," I corrected him.

"It's just you and Jared, right?"

"It's not a date."

He put his hands up. "Not a date. Have fun on your not-a-date."

"Call me," I reminded him as he headed out the door.

He was out and then back in. "Shit," he huffed snatching the ring box off the counter. "Don't want to forget this."

Poor, nervous Jasper. He slipped the box in his coat pocket and was off. I smiled at the door for a minute, forcing myself not to think about the small stab of pain in the center of my chest. I let myself feel it for a minute and then got ready for my not-a-date.

"Is it okay to sit outside?" Jared asked me before answering the hostess.

"It's fine." I smiled. It was a pleasant evening. Sitting outside in the fresh air sounded lovely.

The hostess took us to our table. It wasn't too crowded this time of night. We sat next to another couple and an empty table. There was a constant flow of traffic on the street and a few people walking the sidewalks.

Jared looked over the menu. "I eat here a lot, so if you have any questions or want some suggestions, just ask."

I scanned the menu. "Everything looks good."

"You look good," he complimented.

I peeked around my menu at his smiling face. "Thank you."

"I'm going to warn you now that I totally plan to get you drunk so you'll change your mind about kissing me at the end of this date."

I set the menu down and narrowed my eyes at him. "This is not a date, and there will be no kissing. No matter how drunk you get me."

He put his menu on the table and leaned forward. "Why is that, Bella Swan? What are you so afraid of? Are you afraid you might like it?"

"I'm not afraid of anything," I scoffed, leaning back in my chair. I didn't appreciate the heavy come on. This was supposed to be a couple friends going out for a meal. Jasper and I did it all the time. Jake and I managed it once a month. There were never any sexual overtones. I didn't want any sexual overtones.

"If I didn't think you liked me, I would totally leave you alone, but I can tell that liking me isn't the issue."

Liking him was most definitely not the issue. Being in love with someone else was. I turned my head towards the street just as a black Audi drove past. I turned my head, trying to catch the license plate number, but there were too many people on the sidewalk right at that moment.

"You all right?" Jared voice was shrouded in concern.

I shook my head, reminding myself that I didn't need to be so paranoid anymore. Jared's gaze was troubled. I apologized, "Sorry, I'm fine. I just keep seeing this car. It's nothing."

"You turned white as a ghost for a minute. You sure you're okay?"

"I'm sure. Just like I'm sure I only want to be friends. It's all I have to offer right now. If you're hoping for more because I agreed to this dinner, I'm sorry for doing that to you. I'm really not ready for anything else."

"This ex-boyfriend of yours really did a number on you, huh?"

I picked up my menu, deciding to ignore anything that had to do with Edward. Talking about him wasn't going to make me love or miss him any less.

"So, what's better - the grilled chicken sandwich or the chicken club wrap?"

I heard Jared let out a frustrated breath. "The wrap is good. I like it better than the sandwich. Of course, I love anything you put bacon on."

I looked over the top of my menu and smiled. Quickly, things went from awkward back to normal. We ordered our food, talked about his fascination with X-Men, and enjoyed a nice meal. We ordered a couple more beers and laughed over Jared's story about the worst customer he ever served.

"In the end, the guy tipped me fifty-two cents. Fifty-two. He actually took the time to dig in his pocket for the extra two pennies! The dude was a total prick."

I swallowed down my beer. "I can top two pennies. I once got tipped in nothing but pennies."

"What?" His eyes went wide. "How many?"

Before I could answer, my phone rang. My stomach fluttered when I saw Jasper's name.

"Hello?"

"It's official. She said yes."

"Oh, Jaz, that is so, so great!"

Jared gave me the double thumbs up. He had met Jasper twice in passing. He knew Jasper was Rosalie's brother, and I think that caused him to be unnecessarily afraid of him.

"It worked out perfect. We played a game of pool. She beat me and walked over to me ready to collect. I told her I didn't have any cash but wondered if she'd be willing to accept something else in exchange. I dropped to one knee, and she practically started screaming yes before I even asked her."

"Oh, it sounds perfect. Honey, I am so happy for you. Can I talk to her?"

"Yeah, hold on a sec. She's calling people, too. Thanks for everything, Bells. It's been a perfect night. Really."

"Good." I smiled. Jasper and Alice deserved this perfect evening.

"And, for the record, I called you after I called my mom. Don't tell Rosalie."

I chuckled. "No problem. As far as I know, you called me dead last."

"There you go. Okay, let me get Alice."

I could hear her talking a mile a minute in the background. I figured she was filling in Esme. *"It was perfect. Wait until you see this ring. You know this means you'll have to come home...I know, you can't say no to me. I like it that way, big brother."*

My heart stuttered in my chest, and I held my breath. She wasn't talking to Esme.

"All right. I have to go...thanks...I love you, too."

She loved him, too? *Too?* That meant-

"Bella!" Alice yelled into the phone. I couldn't breathe. My whole body was responding to the fact that he was on the phone with her a moment ago. It was almost like being in the same room with him...but not.

"Bella? Are you there? Can you hear me? She's not there, Jaz."

I needed to pull myself together. What the hell was wrong with me?

"I'm here. Congratulations!" I recovered.

"Oh, Bella! Thank you."

"Were you surprised?" It was never easy to surprise Alice. She had like this sixth sense about things.

"Completely. When he got down on his knee, I almost fainted. This is the best day of my entire life."

"I'm glad," I said genuinely. "Charlotte has some champagne for you, don't let Jasper forget."

"Yeah, we got it. Thanks for helping put all this together, Bella. Jasper told me you were a huge help. That means so much."

"Anything for you guys. You know that."

"If it weren't for you none of this would be possible. Jasper and I probably would have never met." She was getting sentimental, and I really didn't want to start crying.

"Well, I'm sure you have more people to call with your news. I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Absolutely," she said. "Love you!"

"Love you both. Bye."

I hung up and set the phone on the table. She was talking to *him*. He was coming

home because he could never say no to her. Was he coming home soon? Esme would most definitely have an engagement party. Maybe he wouldn't come until the wedding. That could be a year or more away. So very far away. She said she loved him, *too*. Was it possible that Edward said those three words first? That he ended a phone conversation with his sister by telling her he loved her? The Edward I knew would never, could never, *had* never.

"Good news, huh?" Jared asked, his curiosity piqued by my strange reaction.

"Yeah, good news. They're officially engaged."

He picked up his beer. "And you're happy for them? Your roommate is just your roommate, right?"

I was obviously confusing the hell out of him.

"My roommate is my best friend. We're just friends. I'm really happy for them."

He drank his beer and tried to figure me out. I decided to clear up the misunderstanding.

"He's engaged to my ex-boyfriend's sister."

Jared's head tipped back in understanding. "Ah, now I see."

We drank and sat in silence until we were both ready to go. He drove me home, and I debated whether or not to invite him in. It could give him the wrong idea. He did walk me to the door.

"Thanks for dinner." I took a step up on the stoop, making us almost equal in height.

"You're very welcome," he replied, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"I guess I'll see you at work on Monday."

Jared ducked his head and kicked at the step I stood on with the toe of his shoe. "Sounds good."

I turned to go into the building.

"He's an idiot, by the way," Jared said, stopping me short.

"What?"

"Your ex. He's an idiot. He's got to be to walk away from you."

I really sucked at handling this kind of compliment. It was the kind that made me want to defend Edward and his decision, even though I hated that he left.

"You're sweet. I'm the idiot."

"Don't be an idiot," he challenged me. He stepped as close as he could get without joining me on the stoop. "Invite me in. Let me in, Bella."

He made it sound like it should be so easy, like I could switch these feelings on and off. I should let him in and push Edward out of my head, out of my heart. I had spent the last seven months trying. It wasn't that easy.

"Jared," I began.

"Come on, mia bella Bella." He took his hands out of his pocket and moved to touch my face.

Over his shoulder, I looked at his car parked on the side of the street directly in front of my building. He should go. If I invited him in, I would regret it. I stared into his pleading sea blue eyes. I wanted to be normal, get lost in those pretty eyes of his, run my fingers through the hair on the back of his head, kiss his lips, let him show me some affection. But, deep down I knew I couldn't do it. I knew I would only be able to think of the green eyes I missed so much, that wild mess of bronze hair, those soft lips that I once believe were made for me, and the affection I hadn't felt in seven months.

My eyes drifted to the other side of the street for a split second, but that was all it took for me to see the black Audi. I took off, practically sprinting towards the car, leaving Jared off-balance and completely bewildered. I could hear the engine start up and saw the headlights go on. He was trying to escape. Not this time. I darted out into the street and slammed my hand on the hood of the car just as it started pulling out of its parking space.

My eyes met those of the man behind the wheel. He sank back in his seat, let go of the steering wheel, and gave me a wave. He *waved*.

"Holy shit! Are you okay?" Jared was at my side, trying to make sense of my recklessness. "What the hell are you doing?"

"I need to have a conversation with someone. I'm sorry, Jared. I really am. I had a great time tonight. I have something I need to deal with, though."

I looked back at the driver, who shifted the car into reverse and returned the car to its parking spot.

"You know this guy?" Jared asked, still not sure what to think.

"I do. I really need to talk to him, too." I grabbed his hand and gave it an apologetic squeeze. "I'll see you on Monday."

He wanted to argue with me, but with one more look at the driver, I could see him talk himself out of it. "Good night, Bella."

Jared crossed the street and jumped in his car. I walked around to the passenger side of the Audi. I pulled on the handle, but it was locked. I eyed him through the tinted glass until I heard the soft click of the locks and pulled again. I swung the door open and sat down in the passenger's seat.

"Bella."

"Tyler."

"I knew I should have switched cars. I could tell you picked up on me." He shook his head as he internally chastised himself.

"What are you doing here?" Was it possible that Edward was already home and even Alice didn't know about it? The thought of him being so close made me want to fold into myself.

"I'm always here."

"What do you mean you're always here?"

Tyler shut off the engine and sighed. "I've been guarding you since Mr. Masen left."

My jaw dropped. I closed my mouth only to have it fall open again when I really thought about what he said.

"You've been guarding me this whole time?"

He nodded.

"You haven't been all over the world with Edward and Emmett?"

He shook his head.

"Why not? You're his bodyguard. You're the best at what you do. Why didn't he take you with him? Don't you think he needs more than one bodyguard?" The questions were popping in my head faster than my mouth could spit them out.

"You thought he would leave someone else in charge of protecting you while he was a million miles away?"

I didn't think he had left anyone in charge of protecting me. I thought Edward needed to stop protecting me, so he could take care of himself. He had left me Charlotte *and* Tyler. I let my head fall back against the headrest. He left me the two people who took care of him the most. Tyler had been here the whole time. The entire seven months.

I sat up and started punching him in the arm.

"Why." Punch. "Didn't." Punch. "You." Punch. "Tell." Punch. "Me?" Punch.

Tyler had himself pressed against the door and tried to block my blows. "Damn, woman! Stop hitting me."

I stopped my assault. "How could you follow me around for seven months and not once think you should tell me?"

He sat back up, rubbing his arm. "I do what I'm told, Bella. You know that. I was told to watch you but keep my distance. He doesn't want any part of his life to intrude on yours."

I barked out a laugh. That was a good one. "He doesn't want to intrude on my life?"

"He wants you to be happy. *And* safe," he added with a tad bit of annoyance. "He's changing all the rules on me now."

Happy and safe. Was I either?

"Where is he?"

"Right now? He should be in London for some business."

"Do you report to him about what I'm doing? Do you take notes when you're spying on me?"

Tyler rolled his big brown eyes. "I'm not spying on you. I'm *guarding* you. As long as you're safe, there's nothing to report. He's never asked me to divulge any information about what you do with your time or with *whom* you spend it, thank God."

I frowned at him. "Don't say it like that. I can go out with whoever I want to go out with. I'm free to date. He left, and he didn't ask me to wait for him." Not to mention the fact that he didn't seem to be waiting for me. He jumped back into his playboy lifestyle without a second thought.

"I didn't say anything."

"It was your tone. Don't think I didn't pick up on your implication. Jared is a friend. I go out to dinner with friends all the time. I suppose you're well aware of that, 007."

Tyler laughed and put his hands back on the steering wheel, gripping it gently. "*Jared* seems to be popping up more and more, that's all I'm saying."

I closed my eyes and sunk into my seat. "I'm not talking to you about Jared."

The car got very quiet. I could hear the occasional car drive by us.

"You seem to be doing okay, right? The last couple of months you've looked fairly happy when you're out and about."

I turned my head and looked at him. His expression was one of genuine concern. I hadn't realized how much I missed him until he was sitting here right in front of me.

"I'm surviving."

He smiled. "You're tough like that."

"So, you've been following me around every day, watching my every move?"

"Sometimes I follow you, sometimes I just monitor you electronically," he said, glancing down at my hands in my lap.

I turned my wrist over, exposing the penny charm. I never thought about him keeping track of me through this thing. I was still Naïve Bella, completely clueless.

"I followed you on the date tonight because I wanted to make sure this guy treats you right."

"It wasn't a date," I corrected him, my tone petulant.

"Looked like a date."

"It was dinner. We're friends."

"Friends who were about to make out on the front steps."

I punched him as hard as I could on the arm. "I was not going to kiss him! I was telling him why I couldn't kiss him. I'm not talking to you about this!" I was flustered and so embarrassed. "Don't talk to me about Jared."

"Fine. Stop hitting, and I'll stop talking."

"So, is there anything I should be worried about?" I wondered if there were any signs of trouble. I hadn't been bothered by James but was that because Tyler was taking care of me?

"This assignment has kind of been a little too easy, to be honest. Hunter apparently fell for Mr. Masen's act. I haven't picked up on anyone trying to get near you. Well, except for some paparazzi."

"Paparazzi?" I perked up.

"Couple times, right after he left, you had some photogs trying to get some shots. They were easily persuaded to hit the road. In fact, one might have hit the road quite literally."

I couldn't help but laugh. "I never knew."

"That was the idea," Tyler replied with a grin.

"So, James must have read the same magazines I did."

He shook a scolding finger at me. "I wanted to shake you when you bought that damn thing at the airport."

"You were at the airport?"

"Of course I was at the airport," he said like it was a stupid question. "As soon as you ran off to the bathroom, I knew you believed the lie. I couldn't believe you of all people doubted him that quickly, so easily."

"The lie? There was clear photographic proof that he was in Rio with *three* different women," I said defensively. Tyler had no right to judge me. Edward had put on a show for all to see. I had a right to feel bad about having to see it, too.

Tyler scowled at me. "Now, I'm taking into consideration the fact that you couldn't know all this, but one of those pictures was old, from like three years ago. We had someone submit it to beef the story up. Likewise, one of those women is his second cousin. We were banking on gossip magazines not being very thorough with their fact checking. Lastly, I know you have no idea what that man went through the week before he left, but it would *kill* him to know you thought he could do something like that for real."

I let my head hit the headrest three times. It was all a big hoax. Of course it was. Edward needed James to believe he didn't care about me, so they fabricated the whole mess in Rio. I knew that deep down, but the pictures had triggered my doubt and insecurity.

"I was a little emotional back then. Cut me some slack."

"I didn't know you were such a girl," Tyler teased. I could tell he was no longer mad at me.

"A girl who could still kick your ass in Call of Duty."

"This is true." He chuckled just the way I remembered, and it caused my chest to tighten a little.

I grabbed the door handle. "Well, you better come inside. I'll let you play video games while we talk. I always get more out of you when part of your brain is occupied."

Tyler followed me into the building and my apartment. Twenty minutes later, he was engrossed in Black Ops and had told me how his mom was giving the people at the assisted living place a hard time lately. His sister had called him, saying their mom was becoming more agitated and verbally abusive to the workers. I could tell he had no idea what to do with that information. Knowing his mom was only going to

get worse, never better, was so frustrating to someone like him. He liked to know what the problem was and attack it. Take care of it, eradicate it. He couldn't fight Alzheimer's, only watch it win.

It was obvious he had played this game before. He was flying through missions.

"I take it you own this game?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm male, aren't I?"

I giggled at his retort. "Do you stay at the estate with Charlotte? Does she know you've been guarding me?"

"I live one floor below you, Bella. We're neighbors."

Again, he was full of jaw-dropping information. I nearly fell off the couch. "You live in *this* building. How does one so big hide so well?"

He was leaning forward, resting his arms on his thighs as he played the game. "What can I say? You aren't the most observant person on the planet."

I shoved him on the shoulder. "I figured out the black Audi was following me. Thank you very much."

"Seven. Months. Later," he said mockingly.

I swatted him this time since pushing Tyler was like trying to move a mountain.

"How do you monitor me with this," I asked, pressing the penny charm between my fingers. I wore it every day, never thinking about the tracking device inside of it.

Tyler paused the game. "You want to see?" he asked, looking at me over his shoulder.

"Uh, yeah. I'm Bella, aren't I?"

He shook his head while he got out of the game. "My imagination could never do your snark justice. I'm actually glad you figured me out. Watching from afar was not nearly as entertaining."

His admission made me blush. He missed me, too. Tyler pressed some buttons on the controller to get into the PS3's web browser. Before long, there was a giant map

of the world on the screen. Tyler punch in some passwords and two blinking lights appeared on the map.

"There you are," he said, pointing to the light on the left. I was blinking in Washington State. "On a computer I can zoom in all the way to street level. I can get exact coordinates if I need them."

"What's the other blinking dot over there?" I asked, pointing to the right side of the screen.

Tyler sat back and eyed me carefully. "That would be Mr. Masen."

Oh.

I stared at his blinking light, taking note that it was indeed flashing in Great Britain. He was in London, like Tyler had said earlier. I couldn't tear my eyes away. We were the only dots on the screen, as if we were the only two people on the planet. Our two lights flickered on and off at the same time. So far apart but still one. Two people, one beating heart. He had taken mine with him when he left.

"You monitor him, too?"

"Old habits die hard," Tyler said with an unabashed shrug.

I stood up and walked over to the television. My finger touched the spot on the screen where Edward's light blinked. *Hi. I miss you. All the time. Do you ever miss me?* I closed my eyes and tried to imagine what he was doing right at this moment. Was he in bed? Was he with someone? I tried not to imagine both happening at the same time. *Why can't it be so easy for me to let you go?*

I dropped my hand and slipped them in my back pockets. "Well, there's one really good thing about knowing you're guarding me."

"Yeah? What's that?" Tyler was ready to be amused.

"No more public transportation. You get to drive me to work from now on. Yay me." I raised my fists in the air like I was cheering.

He laughed through his nose and shook his head. "Yay you."

Charlotte wasn't going to believe it when I told her Tyler was coming to dinner next week. It would almost be like old times. Almost.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Let me start by saying you guys kick ass. The last chapter got almost 600 reviews! Are you kidding me? I was blown away, especially because you were all nice to me! *hugs you all in giant group hug*

So, no Edward, but she got some Tyler time and a few answers. She's been hanging in there, not too mopey, but not making out with Jared (who I picture looking like the guy from I am Number Four/Beastly, yum). Our Bella will resist, though. She has her very own blinking light to talk to now. Will she keep talking to it? We'll see. She won't need the blinking light forever. Someone's coming back to Seattle SOON.

Thanks to Raum for putting Google Translate to shame and making sure my Italian was correct. You would think a sentence containing three words would be simple, but nooooo. Thanks momof4, Twitter and FB gangs. I'm having way too much fun getting to talk to so many of you all over the place. Thanks for making this such a great experience!

On Spring Break this week. Should still be able to get the blog posted for Tuesday teaser if the internet gods are looking over me when I get to our final destination! Will definitely post next update on Friday.

Don't forget to donate to the Fandom for Tsunami Relief so you can get the compilation of stories from so many great writers. There will be a Chapter 12 outtake in EPOV. Fiji. Lemons. Lots of lemons. Did I mention Fiji and lemons? Links on my profile.

***jumps in minivan with sign that says FL or bust!* What are you doing for Spring Break?**

Chapter 23

Chapter 23

Friday, June 10th at noon

My phone buzzed in my pocket for the fourth time since my shift started. I was so busy, though; there hadn't been a second to check it since the first message came through. That one had been Charlotte, asking me to call her ASAP. Seriously, the woman usually had more patience. Sometimes when she cooked me dinner, like she was going to tonight, she'd call me once or twice to ask if I wanted this or that. She'd never called me four times in an hour, however.

I worried it might also be my mother. Gran had been in grave condition the last few days. I was expecting Mom to call anytime and tell me she had passed away.

I went back towards the kitchen and leaned against the wall next to the swinging door. I was about to pull my phone out when Jared walked up and put a hand on either side of my head.

"A little help?" His chin dipped towards his chest, and he gave me those puppy dog eyes.

I swallowed hard. His face was so close to mine, and his body almost blanketed mine even though we weren't touching. I let the phone fall back in my pocket.

"I got food up for a party of six. Can you run it with me?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, my voice unsteady.

"Thanks." He took a step back and allowed me to regain my composure.

"I want some of this tip," I said with a smile, grabbing a tray to help him out.

Jared hadn't brought up last week's almost kiss nor asked me anything about Tyler's odd appearance. I think he was a little scared of my humongous friend/bodyguard. That fear didn't stop him from letting me know he was still interested. Tyler's presence had reopened a few wounds I thought were healing, however.

Tyler gave me the necessary passwords to look at Edward's blinking light, which I did every night and sometimes during the day after work. I was turning into some sort of psycho blinky stalker. Peter would probably be proud. I watched Edward's little light move around the streets of London. I watched his light sit still. When we were together, I'd watch him read his morning paper over breakfast, noting how his hand would unconsciously run through his hair or how his lips pursed while he read something that caught his interest. I used to watch him get dressed, meticulously tying his tie, always in a perfect Windsor knot. All his shirts needed cufflinks because they were all custom made. He'd take his time, putting them on and making sure his cuffs were also perfect. I missed the way he'd always look back at me through the mirror, giving me that lopsided smile. Staring at the stupid light was clearly not the same but all I had.

My voyeurism triggered something, a shift in my thinking. How long was I going to sit around waiting for someone who wasn't coming back? The more I stared at the light, the more I could feel him forgetting me. Just like I used to feel his fear and worry about losing me, I could now feel him coming to terms with the fact that I was lost. I was the one holding on to something that wasn't there. I hung out with Charlotte and was happy to see Tyler because they were a part of him. His blinking light wandered around a city where no one knew me. My presence would never be felt. My name would not cross his mind. I needed to accept that I was no longer part of him. Our time had come and gone.

Jared's hand touched my elbow when we finished serving his table. Jared was here. Jared wanted to be with me. Jared thought about me all the time.

"Thanks for the help," he whispered near my ear. His proximity making me feel something, something I couldn't put my finger on.

I smiled and was about to walk away when I noticed Angela serving a table with a tray that was much too full. One of the plates was perched dangerously on the edge of the tray. I headed over there, scolding her in my head for not asking for someone to help her run food again. She pulled another plate off the tray, causing the precariously balanced plate to tip. I sped up, trying to catch it but failing. The plate broke as it hit the floor and Nantucket Bay scallops scattered everywhere.

Rosalie was going to fire her.

"Finish serving," I told her sternly as her eyes filled with fear.

I crouched down, trying to clean up the mess. Jared was suddenly there with me. His hand grabbed mine before I picked up a piece of the broken plate. I felt my face

flame at his touch.

"Let me get that, mia bella Bella. I don't want you to cut yourself."

"Please don't tell Rosalie," I begged.

A pair of very expensive-looking leather shoes appeared in front of me, and the person dropped to one knee with a napkin in hand.

"Rosalie should be sufficiently distracted at the moment."

His voice awakened a part of my heart that was covered in a thick layer of dust. It burst back to life, beating to a rhythm that made me feel more alive than I had in a long time. I lifted my eyes to his verdant gaze.

"Emmett's back there with her," he explained.

I couldn't speak. I couldn't move. Jared took the napkin.

"Thank you, sir. We've got this," Jared said politely as if it might send Edward back to wherever he came from.

Where did you come from?

Edward's eyes never left mine. We were both crouched down over a broken plate of scallops, polenta, and truffles. He looked the same but different. Younger. Gentler. Almost nervous.

"Isabella," he said, his mouth turning up in a shy smile. I hadn't heard my full name since the last time he uttered it. No one called me Isabella. I told Rosalie I wouldn't go by it at work no matter how damn sophisticated it sounded.

Still no words fell from my dumbfounded mouth.

Where did you come from?

I stood up, and he followed me like a mirror image. He was thinner than I remembered. His hair was shorter and not as manhandled. He had on dark grey pants, a light yellow shirt and a grey jacket. No tie. He looked different but the same. Statuesque. Other worldly. Breathtaking.

Where the hell did you come from?

The shock and disbelief began to fade and allowed me to regain motor control. Without a word, I stepped around him and bolted out the doors of Eclipse, searching for the Audi. Tyler jumped out of the car, which was parked a few spots down on my right.

He raised his hands up defensively. "I didn't know until he walked in, I swear."

I didn't need to tell him why I was out there. Of course, he watched the door like a hawk. His answer was not satisfying. How could he not know Edward was coming back to Seattle? This seemed like information the head of his security would need to know. I found myself on the edge of hyperventilation. I needed to calm the hell down. Someone had to have known he was back. This could not have been his first stop.

I pulled out my phone. Four messages from Charlotte. Three texts and one voicemail. The last text said it all.

Why haven't you called me back? He's home. Call me!

Charlotte knew. I had misunderstood the urgency behind her calls.

"You're freaking out. Are you freaking out?" Tyler looked at me with serious concern. "Are you all right? Do you want me to take you home? I don't know what to do," he admitted nervously.

I shook my head. I still had no words. I couldn't walk out in the middle of my shift. I put my phone away. My trembling hands scrubbed my face. I had no idea what I was going to do, but I wasn't going to run away. Pulling on my ponytail, I turned on my heels and walked back into the restaurant.

Jared was standing by the host stand.

"Are you okay?" He lowered his voice as I got closer. "What the hell is going on?"

I stepped past him, looking out into the dining area. Edward was seated in my section, sitting alone and pushing his hair back. He looked over, noting my return with a half smile. I stepped back out of sight. I pressed my palm against my forehead as if to check for a fever.

Edward was here. He was back. For how long, though? Did he come home because of Alice's engagement or was he back for good? Was he here because of me or because Emmett wanted to see Rose?

There was only one way to find out.

"Bella!" Jared grabbed my arm. "What's going on? Do you know that guy?" He was worried and perhaps feeling a tad bit protective.

"Yeah, I know him."

Well, I *knew* him, past tense. That was all I was going to share for now.

I walked back into the main dining area and checked on another table before going to Edward. I could feel his eyes on me; it was unnerving and strangely comforting at the same time.

"You're back," I managed to spit out when I approached him.

He looked away for a second and then resumed his intense stare. "I'm back."

"Because of Alice?"

"Because I was ready to come home," he said like he hadn't considered the other option and was surprised I had. His hand drifted towards me but stopped before reaching the end of the table. His fingers curled into his palm. "Alice's engagement is a good reason, too."

"I'm surprised to find you down here. I'm sure the private room is available."

His face fell slightly. "I never want to eat in the private dining room again."

I nodded, feeling bad about bringing it up. Of course he wouldn't want to eat up there. "I don't ever go up there. Too many..."

"Memories," he finished for me.

Exactly.

"I was going to say too many boring business lunches, but memories works, too."

My joke made him snort. "God, I missed you."

The lump that formed in my throat would not allow me to respond. He missed me, but this was the first I had heard from him since the day he left. How much could he have really missed me?

His expression turned serious. "I shouldn't have said that." He sighed and sat back. "I'm sorry."

I shook my head, trying to give the impression that it wasn't a big deal. Even though, it was a very big deal. He had no idea how hard it was to only be someone he missed.

"Maybe I should just order a drink, huh?"

I smiled tightly. I needed to do my job. He was here to eat lunch. "What can I get you?"

His dark eyelashes nearly touched his cheeks as he closed his eyes for a second. "Grey Goose and tonic."

I nodded.

"Thank you, Isabella."

My knees weakened. *What the sound of my own stupid name did to me!*

I went to the bar and placed his order. I headed back to the kitchen to check on an order for another table. Jared was back there, glowering at me.

"What?" I asked as he forced me to brush past him to get to my order.

"That's him. The ex. Isn't it? Angela says it is."

I didn't answer. He had no right to be pissy with me about it. I didn't invite Edward to come eat here, and even if I did, it wasn't Jared's business.

Jared continued his interrogation. "That's the billionaire? He doesn't look like a billionaire."

"What exactly does a billionaire look like?" I queried with a frown.

Jared shrugged. "I don't know. Flashier. The guy's not even wearing a tie. He's just... a guy."

Edward would never be *just a guy*.

"Well, surprise, surprise. Billionaires are people just like you and me!" I said,

patting him on the chest as I moved past him again to get to my table.

I checked the bar for Edward's drink and brought it to him.

"I should have told you I was coming. Emmett wanted to see Rosalie first before we did anything else. I should have given you some warning."

My heart sank. He was only here because Emmett wanted to see Rose. I knew it.

"Bella, Bella, Bella!" *Speak of the devil*. Emmett's friendly greeting was accompanied by a lift off my feet. His big burly arms wrapped around my waist and hugged me close until he set me back down. "Can you believe we're finally back?"

I really couldn't believe much of anything at the moment. Emmett looked exactly the same. Maybe he was a little tanner, like he'd spent some time in the sun.

"It's good to see you, Em. I bet Rosalie's thrilled."

"She was happy after she clocked me in the jaw. Remind me of this..." he pointed to the red mark on his jaw "...the next time I think that surprising her is the way to go. And here E was all worried about how you'd react." Emmett sat down across from Edward. "I tried to tell him you've always handled things way better than Rosie ever could."

I suddenly felt the urge to run back outside and have Tyler shake me to make sure I wasn't dreaming because this was all too much. Before I could even comment on the fact that Emmett called Edward "E" and was sitting down to eat lunch with him, Jared walked up and placed his hand on the small of my back.

"Rosalie wants a moment when you have one," he whispered, his hand drifting around to my hip before leaving my body.

"Do you guys want to order or do you need a few more minutes? Can I get you something to drink, Em?"

Edward's fiery eyes followed Jared as he walked away. He tossed back his drink and then slammed the glass down on the white-clothed table. Tension tightened his jaw. "I need another drink."

"Just some water with some limes for me," Emmett replied before giving Edward a questioning look. "I thought you weren't drin-"

"You can be quiet," Edward snapped. Emmett didn't say anything but shook his head.

I left them to put in the drink orders and then to find Rosalie, who was sitting in her office.

"You needed me?"

Rosalie gazed up at me with those icy blue eyes. "Close the door."

I did as I was told and moved further into the room.

"Do you want me to tell Emmett they need to eat lunch somewhere else?" she asked as if she really meant it.

"Huh?" was my eloquent reply.

"They came here to see us, but that doesn't erase the last seven months. I also know this is a lot tougher on you than it is on me. I already punched Emmett for not giving me any warning. I'm going to assume you showed more self-restraint in front of a dining room full of customers."

"I didn't punch him, if that's what you're wondering." I didn't want to punch him. I wanted to kiss him, and that made it even more painful.

"Say the word and I'll tell Emmett they need to go."

I was shocked by Rosalie's consideration of my feelings. For the first time, I could see the relation to my best friend.

"You don't have to kick them out. It's fine. I can handle it."

"You don't have to handle it; that's what I'm saying." She was becoming slightly exasperated by me.

I really did appreciate her concern more than I could say. I wasn't going to chase them away. With Jasper and Alice together, I was going to have to face Edward every now and again.

"Don't worry, I got it. Thanks, Rosalie. Really."

She shrugged. "I had to offer. Jasper would never forgive me if I didn't at least

offer."

I laughed. She could blame it on Jasper all she wanted. Rosalie Hale had a heart in there somewhere.

I went back out to bring them their drinks and take their orders, only to find them in a heated discussion.

"I suggest you keep your mouth shut."

"I'm just saying -"

"I know exactly what you're saying. Now, I want you to shut up." This was the Edward I knew, and well...loved.

I set the drinks down as Edward began his assault on his hair. It made me smile, seeing how I had thought perhaps he had given up that habit. Guess not.

"You two ready to order?"

They ordered, and I went back to work. Every once in a while, I caught Edward watching me. I couldn't really help watching him either. It was like he and Emmett weren't employer/employee but friends. Tyler certainly was never invited to sit down and eat with Edward before. Emmett did most of the talking whenever I came over to the table until I brought the check.

"So, any exciting plans this weekend, Isabella?" Edward asked as his fingers tapped rapidly on the table, almost as if talking to me made him nervous. That was probably me just projecting my nerves on to him, though. The Edward I knew didn't get nervous.

I noticed Emmett cover his mouth with his hand, but his eyes were smiling.

"Come to think of it, I think your being here ruins my plans," I replied.

Edward's expression changed quickly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Tonight's my dinner night with Char, but you're home, so..."

"You have plans to go to dinner with Charlotte?" His eyes seemed to light up.

"She was making me dinner, actually."

There was no way I could go to the estate knowing he was there. My plans absolutely needed to change.

"You don't need to cancel because of me," he objected.

I shook my head. "You're home. I don't know that I should go to the estate now that you're back."

He appeared dejected. "Please don't cancel. You shouldn't change your plans with your friend because of me. Please. I insist," he said more forcefully.

I relented slightly. "We'll see."

"I'm glad you and Char are close, that you remained close. That's what I wanted."

"I love Charlotte. I could never give her up." As soon as the words left my mouth, I knew how he'd take them. I would have given anything to take them back.

"Right," he said with a sigh and a heartbreaking grimace.

I hadn't meant to make him feel bad. He told me he loved me and left. He needed to leave for his own well-being, his own sanity. I didn't think his leaving meant he didn't love me back then.

"I - I just mean, she's here, I'm here. There was no reason to not see each other. You know, I-"

He waved me off. "I get it." He pulled out his wallet and removed his American Express card. "Like I said, I'm glad you two are friends."

I left them to run his card, feeling like a total buffoon. This was not how I imagined our reunion. I had imagined him coming to the apartment and immediately declaring he couldn't live without me one more second. I would refuse him for a minute or so because a girl can't seem too eager. Then, we'd kiss passionately before he made love to me, whispering his undying love for me over and over. This was not that. This was a disaster.

I brought back the check, and we said our goodbyes. Edward looked unhappy and frustrated. He was probably thinking I needed to get over myself. We were together four months; that was barely over half the time we had been separated. It wasn't like we had been married years and years. It was ridiculous I couldn't get past it.

"It was really good to see you guys again," I said as cheerfully as I could. "I hope you'll come back again if you stay in town for a while."

"We're back for good," Emmett said with a smile. "Fridays at noon belong to Eclipse, right, E?"

"We'll see," Edward returned cautiously. "Have a good weekend, Isabella."

"You, too." My heart beat against my sternum like it was trying to break me open.

They both stood, and Edward headed for the exit. Emmett hung back for a second and put his giant paw on my shoulder.

"Every day, Bella. Probably more times than I could count."

My forehead creased in confusion.

"Em!" Edward snapped when he noticed Emmett was not following him.

"We'll see you soon, Bella." He scampered off, leaving me more confused.

Every day? What was that supposed to mean? There was no time to decipher Emmett's parting words. I had work to do and needed to come up with a way to get out of going to the estate for dinner tonight. Something told me that wasn't going to be easy.

"She says she's going to be mad, but you know her. She isn't going to be mad," Tyler said as we walked to his car.

"She'll be mad. Her sons are here. She'll be mad if I don't make the effort to see them."

"She'll be disappointed, but she'd get over it."

He unlocked the car, and we both got in. The engine purred as he pressed the ignition button.

"Just drive and stop trying to talk me out of something I spent the last hour talking myself into," I said with a sigh.

He shook his head as he pulled the car out into the street. "That's exactly what I'm saying. Why do something you have to spend an hour talking yourself into doing?"

"He's not even going to be there, so it doesn't matter."

"Right, I'm sure he'll hide in the city when he knows you're at his house. Keep telling yourself that, Bella."

I gaped at him for a moment. "Seven months, buddy. He stayed away for seven months. I'm pretty sure avoiding me is not a problem for him."

Tyler shook his head. "You are so blind sometimes."

"Keep it up and I'll uninvited you to this dinner," I threatened, crossing my arms in front of me.

Charlotte would not hear of me canceling dinner. Both her sons had surprised her with a visit, and she was demanding I come have dinner with the three of them. Edward's pilot and her eldest son, Griffin, hadn't been in Seattle since Edward left. They had stopped in LA to pick up Caleb, her other son, on their way in from London this morning. Caleb was on summer vacation from school but was working near campus all summer long. I had met Griffin when Edward and I went to Fiji and spent some time with Caleb over the holidays; but other than that, I didn't know them very well. Charlotte was difficult to resist when she was in mother mode.

We pulled up to the estate, and Tyler punched in the security code to open the gates. We parked and entered the house unannounced. It was my usual way of doing things. Charlotte was always busy in the kitchen. As we made our way back to the kitchen, I heard their laughter.

"Show them the picture of me with all the kids dangling from my arms, E. That one is hilarious," Emmett's voice rang out.

Tyler's mouth curled up in an I-told-you-so smile. I rolled my eyes and refused to acknowledge him. Sure enough, Charlotte, her sons, Emmett, and Edward were crowded around the kitchen table, looking at Edward's laptop.

"They all thought Emmett was some kind of super hero. They seemed fascinated by my hair, but Em was by far the favorite. It was so annoying," Edward complained.

"Look, I got eight kids hanging on me at once. I am a super hero," Emmett responded proudly.

It was Edward who noticed my arrival first. Our eyes locked like we were in some awkward staring contest. Neither one of us dared to look away. Charlotte noticed Edward's change in demeanor and looked up at me. She brightened immediately.

"You're here! Tyler, too."

"*Mr. Crowley, bah, bah, bah, bah. What went down in your head? Mr. Crowley,*" Emmett began singing. Ozzy Osbourne had better watch out.

I was the first to give. I turned my attention to Charlotte, who had come to give me a hug.

"Edward and Emmett were showing us some pictures from when they were in Africa back in April. You should come look."

I smiled when she released me, but my lips were pressed together tightly. She knew I was going to kill her for the setup.

"Your dinner guests are here. We should get going back to the city," Edward said, closing the laptop swiftly. He looked anxious and ready to leave.

"Oh, Mr. Masen! I made so much food, you two have to stay!" Charlotte demanded.

Edward's gaze fell back on my burning red face. Char was trying to kill me. It was bad enough I broke up their moment; but now, she was trying to force him to eat with me.

"I promised Isabella I wouldn't intrude."

"Intrude?" Charlotte turned on me.

I felt more off-balance than I did a moment before. I never intended to make him feel like an intruder in his own home. I never imagined he wanted me to ask him to join us.

"You can do whatever you want, Edward. I didn't mean to make you feel like you had to leave. I was the one who didn't want to intrude." I was the outsider, not him.

"Intrude?" Charlotte said again. "Well, no one is intruding. Everyone is going to stay and eat. I made enough to feed you all twice over. Of course, Tyler and Emmett can probably make a liar out of me, given the size of their appetites."

Everyone laughed, and Tyler made his way around to where Edward was standing. He extended his hand in greeting.

"Good to see you again, sir."

"Good to see you, too, old friend." Edward shook his hand as he put his left hand on Tyler's shoulder. "It's been too long."

"You look good."

Edward's lips curled in a playful grin. "I meditate now. Works wonders. You should try it."

Tyler snorted. "Meditation? I think I'll pass. I got other ways to relax that don't include me sitting like a damn pretzel, pinching my fingers together like some kind of fruitcake. With all due respect, sir."

Edward laughed. The sound liquefied my insides. I had never heard him sound so free, so young. "I don't sit like that either, you asshole."

"Well, you did with the Dalai Lama," Emmett chimed in.

"That was because I was sitting with the fucking Dalai Lama!"

"E, a huge ass group of Buddhists, and the Dalai Lama, sitting crisscross applesauce, mediating. You should have seen it. I should have taken a picture of that!" Emmett said with a snicker.

I was certain I had just entered the Twilight Zone. What the hell was going on? Who were these people and where did they take the real Edward and Emmett?

"Show us some more pictures before we eat, come on," Charlotte encouraged. She was not to be denied by anyone tonight.

Edward sighed and opened his computer back up. On the screen was a picture of Emmett with eight little African children dangling joyfully from his two big arms. He was all smiles with his big dimples showing. Edward clicked on the pad, and the next picture came up. It was of the same eight children, Emmett, Edward, Alice, and some other older gentleman. Edward was crouched down, with a little boy's arm roped around his neck and the most brilliant smile on his face. He was wearing cargo shorts and a t-shirt with a picture of Count Choccolua on it. *What the hell?*

I couldn't even focus on what Edward and Emmett were saying about the pictures as they continued to click through them. Edward handing out laptops to children at a school. Emmett and Alice making weird faces at the camera. Edward and Alice standing in front of what I decided was a hospital. Edward, dressed in khakis and a button down shirt and Alice cutting a giant red ribbon that hung in front of a door. A picture of a sign that said "The Elizabeth Masen Women's Health Center" in bright white lettering. Picture after picture of Edward, Emmett, sometimes both of them with various people and groups of children, who looked like they were meeting rock stars.

The thing that struck me the most was the fact that Edward looked happy. Well, maybe not in the picture where their jeep got stuck in some mud, but in almost every picture, he wore a contented smile. There was a lightness in his eyes, they shined a soft green. The darkness that had shaded them almost the whole time I knew him was missing. Edward had moved on and made peace with himself. It was what I had hoped for him, but at the same time, made me feel slightly disappointed. It was a completely selfish feeling and one I would deny if anyone ever called me on it. Still, I felt the tug of remorse that I couldn't do that for him. He had to leave me to find it.

"Go online so we can look at the pictures I took when we were in Switzerland," Emmett said, turning the laptop towards him and pushing on the mouse pad. He closed the photo application, and I let out a quiet gasp.

The wallpaper on the screen was a picture of me sleeping in what looked like the bed in Fiji. I was on my side, my hands tucked under my cheek like a child. My nose and cheeks were pink from the sun. My lips were curled in a tiny smile, as if I knew someone was taking my picture or maybe just having a wonderful dream. I was also *naked*. Well, you could tell I was naked. My shoulders and stomach were bare; but luckily, my arms shielded my breasts from view. There was a sheet draped over me at the hips.

Edward slammed the laptop shut and seriously turned more red in the face than I imagined I did.

"We can look at more after dinner. I need to make a phone call. I'll be right back." He avoided making eye contact with me as he snatched his computer off the table and headed out of the kitchen.

My heart thundered in my chest. He had a picture of me that he saw every time he turned on his computer.

"Boys, come and help me pick out a wine," Charlotte said to her sons, leaving me with the two bodyguards.

"Busted," Emmett said with a chuckle.

I looked at him and then at Tyler. Was it possible? Did he not completely forget about me even though he ignored me for seven months?

"He's going to kill you, you know that, right?" Tyler said to Emmett. He sounded serious.

Emmett shook his head. "One thing I learned about E is that he's all huff and puff. Give him some time to cool down, and he's fine. He meditates now," he said, winking at me. His hand landed softly on my shoulder. "Like I told you Bells, every day."

Emmett exited the kitchen, calling for Edward. "Edward? E, man, where'd you go?"

I looked at Tyler, who looked at me cautiously. He was probably afraid I was going to start crying. *Every day*. Every day, Edward thought about me, missed me. I sat down, not able to stand without feeling like I was going to topple over.

"You want some water?" Tyler asked.

I shook my head. This didn't change anything. He told me he loved me before he left. He might still love me, but it didn't mean we could be together. The main thing that tore us apart was still out there. It wasn't as if the threat James Hunter posed had magically disappeared. Tyler's presence in my life was evidence of that. It didn't change the fact that I couldn't take the darkness away.

"Maybe you should talk to him," Tyler suggested.

"Now you want to give relationship advice?"

He tipped his head and narrowed his eyes at me. "Suggesting you talk to someone is hardly relationship advice." He sat down at the table with me. "I will say that I do know something about ruining everything by not being honest."

I sat up a little straighter at this confession. "Do tell, Mr. Crowley."

He shook his head. "You'd need to get me very drunk while playing Black Ops to get that story out of me."

"Hmm, I'll remember that," I said with a smile. The momentary distraction from the awkwardness of my situation was just what I needed to carry on with the evening.

Charlotte and her sons reappeared. We got dinner ready and took everything outside. We were eating on the patio since it was a beautiful summer night and the sun was still out.

Emmett and Edward reemerged from Edward's office and joined us. We ate, drank, and Emmett entertained us all with a few more stories from their travels. Charlotte and her boys caught up. I sat at one end of the table, while Edward sat at the other. There were a couple times we stared at one another while the people around us chattered. I got the weird feeling that this was what it was like for my parents when we all got together for big family events. They were both attached to one another through me, forced to act like there were never any hurt feelings. The people around the table were not our children, but Edward and I were each attached to them in our own way. However, the longer we sat there, the reality of it all set in. They were all Edward's - Edward's security, Edward's house manager, Edward's pilot. I had grown to care deeply for a couple of them, but they were not mine.

I did not belong here anymore, no matter what picture he had on his computer.

I stood up and gathered the dirty dishes around me to take in the house.

"Bella, honey, you don't have to do that. I'll get it," Charlotte protested.

"Sit and enjoy your company, please," I insisted. I could not look at Edward for fear I would begin to cry. Tyler stood up and grabbed things from the other end of the table.

I went inside and dropped the plates by the sink. I opened the dishwasher and heard someone else follow me in.

Without looking up, I began, assuming it was Tyler, "We need to go as soon as possible. I can't stay here another second."

"Did I do something?"

It wasn't Tyler. I looked up to find Edward, holding a bunch of dirty dishes, hurt emanating from his eyes. Tangled emotions kept me from answering. Guilt, anger, insecurity, sadness; each weighing me down in their own way.

"I didn't mean to spoil your evening with Char. I had every intention of leaving before you got here," he said, carrying the dishes to the counter.

I shook my head. "This is your home. You aren't the one who doesn't belong." My voice cracked at the end, giving away my lack of emotional stability.

"Is that what you think? That you don't belong here?" He began to move around to my side of the counter.

I turned on the faucet and rinsed a plate off with a shaky hand. I placed it in the dishwasher rack beside me. I reached for another plate, but Edward grabbed my wrist.

"Answer me, Isabella. Is that what you think?"

I couldn't think. Not with him touching me. I pulled my arm away.

"This house, those people - they're yours. I'm not. Not anymore."

It seemed to pain him to hear me say it out loud.

"No, I suppose you aren't," he mumbled. He watched me rinse off a couple more plates. "The boy at Eclipse, the blonde one, who kept putting his hands on you, he's more than someone you work with, isn't he?"

He was asking me about Jared? As if Jared had anything to do with this.

"Jared? Jared is a friend."

Edward let out a small laugh. "You and your friends. Do you have a problem with women friends that I'm unaware of?"

I grabbed another plate and rinsed it off as my heartbeat kept up its frantic pace.

"I have girl friends," I said defensively.

Edward was no longer smiling. "I don't think Jared wants to be your friend."

"How would you know anything about what Jared wants, Edward?"

"You can't know Bella and not fall in love with her," he said softly, repeating the words Seth had said to him so long ago.

I felt lightheaded. His words and his proximity made me a complete mess. He had no idea how he affected me.

"Why did you come back?" I needed some answers as much as he did.

"I told you. I was ready."

"It sounded like you and Emmett were having the time of your lives."

He cocked his head to the side and his eyebrows pinched together. "The time of our lives?"

"I saw the pictures, heard the stories. I could see how being away made you...happier. Emmett's some sort of miracle worker." I kept moving, rinsing plates and putting them in the dishwasher.

"I did a lot of work on myself before I met up with Alice in Nigeria. I have come a long way, and I'm proud of that," he said in a clipped tone, as if I had offended him.

I stopped what I was doing and shut off the faucet. "I didn't mean for it to come out like it was a bad thing."

"The entire first month away from you was not pleasant. I was drunk off my ass. I basically did nothing but drink until I passed out. Over and over. Being numb was my only objective because feeling was torture. I would have probably drunk myself to death if it weren't for Emmett, who decided to be my friend first, employee second."

"Oh," I barely whispered. Of course, this wasn't a detail they would have shared with everyone. I felt like such an ass for assuming everything had been so easy for him.

He continued speaking as if he was angry at me. "He helped me find ways to channel all the darkness. He pushed me to look at the world in a completely different way, participate in it differently as well. Emmett McCarty probably saved my life."

"Oh," I said again. Nothing more intelligible could come out. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I never thought I would be jealous of Emmett, but I was. I had tried to save Edward over and over and failed miserably.

"He and I had some amazing experiences. I did a lot of soul searching. It all led

me back *here*. Do you not understand that or does it not matter anymore? I'm having the hardest time reading you. If Jared has taken my place, I think you owe it to me to be honest."

I felt kicked in the gut. My shoulders tensed, and the anger emerged. He was treating me like I cheated on him or something.

"I owe it to you? You left me. You broke up with me and gave me no indication that you were ever coming back. Then, you show up, and I'm supposed to understand your motives? I'm supposed to be clear about where you're coming from? I'm supposed to tell you whatever it is you want to hear?"

Both of his hands clawed at his head. "Oh my God! You are so fucking frustrating!"

"I'm frustrating?"

"Yes! You are *extremely* frustrating!"

"Well... so are you!"

"Um," Charlotte's voice stopped us both cold. "I have some more dishes." She stepped further into the kitchen and came around to deposit them on the counter.

I was breathing heavy and on the verge of tears again. I kissed Charlotte on the cheek. "Thank you for dinner. I need to go home. I'm not feeling well. I'll call you tomorrow."

She pulled me into a hug. "Don't go."

"I need to," I whispered.

She patted my back and gave me one more squeeze. "I'll call *you* tomorrow."

She let me go, and I walked past Edward without making eye contact. I thought I needed to go outside to find Tyler, but he appeared out of nowhere, ready to go.

We drove back to the city in silence. It wasn't until we were parking in front of the building that Tyler spoke.

"Tonight we play Black Ops at my place. I've got a bottle of tequila, some limes, and a story to tell."

He got out of the car and slammed the door shut. I sat in the passenger's seat, surprised by his invitation. I was so surprised, I didn't get out fast enough for his liking. Tyler came around and opened my door.

"I thought you were all about being nosey. I offer up a story and you just sit in the car?"

"I'm coming. The shock temporarily incapacitated me." I jumped out. He shut the door behind me, and we crossed the street. "So, what was her name? I need a name."

"Drunk, Bella, I need to be drunk. We're going to do some shots; then, I'll tell you her name."

"Fine, but I've had two glasses of wine. I'm only doing one shot with you. I want to be able to remember this conversation in the morning," I said, following him down the hall to his apartment.

"I need to be drunk. You don't," he replied, opening his door and holding it open for me.

Tyler's apartment was not what I expected. I imagined it would be more like a security office, full of TV monitors and computers. It looked kind of like Edward's condo; very monochromatic, lots of black and white, a zebra print rug on the floor under the couch. He even had artwork on the walls. Tyler Crowley was full of surprises.

"Did this place come furnished?" I asked, looking around.

Tyler walked over to the kitchen and reached down to open one of the cabinets. "No."

"This place is all you, huh?" I picked up a picture on the end table. It was obviously Tyler, his sister, and his mom. They were younger, perhaps it was taken before his mom got sick.

He set the bottle of tequila on the counter and moved further into the kitchen, grabbing limes out of the refrigerator and a couple shot glasses out of another cabinet. "This surprises you?"

I shrugged. "Nothing should surprise me anymore. When I lived with Edward, where did you live?"

He pulled out a knife from a drawer and began slicing up a lime. "I lived at the estate or stayed in my condo, depending on where Mr. Masen spent the night. Where did you think I lived?"

"I had no idea. Sometimes I think you're a robot. Like the Terminator or something. It was like you never slept. You were there whenever we needed you."

"That's my job," he responded with a snicker.

"I know, but it was like you just appeared out of thin air sometimes. I never imagined you having your own space to just be you."

"Charlotte and I have our own spaces at the estate. It was almost like having my own apartment. Charlotte has her own, too."

I lived there for over two months and never explored the whole house. I had never ventured into the staff quarters. It felt off limits to me.

"I have a two bedroom condo in the same building as Mr. Masen, one floor below him. When I took over guarding you, it made sense to stick close. So, he got me this place. Made it easier. To be totally honest, I think he might have bought the building. He wanted to make sure nobody got in here that shouldn't."

I walked over to where he was working on our drinks. "Edward bought this building?"

"To be on the safe side, he talked about it. I don't know for sure he did, but that seemed to be his plan."

"He bought this building so he could control who lives here?"

"So he could make sure no one who worked for Hunter tried to get close to you."

I grabbed the bottle of tequila and poured some into one of the shot glasses. I threw it back and snatched a lime from the pile Tyler was cutting. I wasn't a tequila kind of girl, but Edward's amazing ability to control my life without even being present was making me want to drink the whole bottle of tequila.

"I probably shouldn't have told you that," Tyler said sheepishly.

"No, it's good to know. I love that he tells me he's going to leave me alone but then doesn't. He's so confusing and infuriating and annoying and controlling and..."

I ran out of words as I began to feel the warmth of the alcohol take effect.

Tyler poured himself a shot. He licked his hand between his thumb and pointer finger and sprinkled some salt. A quick lick, shoot, and suck later, he was refilling our shot glasses. "He loves you. It's not an easy emotion for him. You know this. He left to get better. That didn't mean he was going to be able to stop caring about you. If anything happened to you while he was away, he would have never forgiven himself."

"He doesn't get how unfair that is. For him to keep an eye on me but not allow me to do the same. That's just not fair."

We both salted our hands and took another shot. I sucked on the lime, cursing myself for having two shots instead of one. I was going to become the only one with loose lips if I wasn't careful.

"Mr. Masen doesn't always think about fair."

No, Edward only thought about what he felt was best. It didn't matter what I thought.

"All right, stop distracting me. You have a story to tell. Start telling it. What was her name?" I asked as he poured himself another shot. After drinking it down, he made his way out into the living room with the bottle and shot glass in hand. I grabbed the little bowl of limes and salt shaker. He turned on his Xbox and the television.

"Terry. Her name was Terry."

I joined him on the couch and settled in for my glimpse inside my favorite bodyguard.

"Tyler and Terry. I like the sound of that."

He laughed and shook his head. He got his game started. "Pour me another one."

I obliged him, knowing that without the help of the liquor, I wasn't going to get anything more than a name. He drank it down without the salt or the limes.

"Terry was the girl I was going to marry until I decided to enlist."

"She didn't want you to enlist?"

Tyler poured another shot. Goodness, at this rate, he was going to pass out before we got much further.

"She always knew that my intention was to join the Marines right out of high school. There was no other way I was going to be able to afford college. She knew that."

"So, what happened?"

"She was afraid. She was afraid that if I left, I wouldn't come back. Terry thought we should go to college, get married, and start our life together. She asked me to choose."

"Whoa." I sat back and pulled my legs up under me. "You chose the Marines, huh?"

"No, I chose her. I couldn't afford to go to school, so I got a job where she went to school. We got engaged, and she was happy."

"She was happy, but you were..."

"Miserable." Tyler poured another drink. This time he sucked on a lime and tossed it on the table when he was done.

"Why? You were with the woman you loved."

"True, but I needed to be a Marine. Being a Marine was something I had dreamed about since I was a kid. I knew I would be good at being a Marine. I was one of the best, you know."

That I believed, no doubt.

"Terry had our life planned out. We were going to live in Atlanta, she was going to be a lawyer, she wanted me to find a nice nine to five career, we were going to have two kids, and live happily ever after. It all sounded great, to her."

"You aren't much of a nine to five guy. You're more of a twenty-four hour kind of guy," I acknowledged.

He looked at me out of the corner of his eyes. "You could say that. We were so young. We really didn't have a clue. We were so afraid of being apart. We never thought about how important it was to discover ourselves before becoming a

couple."

I shifted in my seat, so I was completely facing him. "What do you mean?"

"I was just beginning to figure myself out when I had to choose between the two things that meant the most to me. When I was eighteen, I needed to be a Marine. That's who I was, Bella. I was good at it. It gave me purpose. Just like you're a teacher, a good teacher. You're also someone who needs a home and your friends and family. You don't just make friends, you welcome people into your life, into your family."

He paused the game and set the controller down. He turned and looked me straight in the eye.

"I'm telling you my story because you're mad he didn't let you choose him. I'm proof that all that would have accomplished is a destruction of everything that was good in your relationship. I did what Terry wanted and lived the life she wanted until I was drinking all the time, fighting with her constantly, getting fired from my stupid minimum wage job, fucking up my entire life. Instead of being honest about what I needed and finding a way to make us both happy, we ended up both being miserable."

I shook my head. "It's not the same. Our circumstances were different. James-"

"James Hunter played a big part in screwing everything up for you. I know. Our situations aren't exactly the same. What I'm telling you is I think Mr. Masen did you a favor."

I frowned at him, unconvinced.

"Bella, you were already doing what I did. You were choosing him over yourself. You two were not in a good place. He was *really* not in a good place. Mr. Masen was worse than me at eighteen. He needed to find himself. Come on, be honest. You saw a different guy tonight. The man we had dinner with isn't consumed by some horrible need for revenge or overwhelming guilt for things that happened that we know were out of his control. He isn't fueled by fear."

He was right, and it pissed me off. Edward was better. He was better and not because of me. He was better because he had gotten away from me.

"I'm glad he's better, but why couldn't he have taken me with him and gotten better?"

"Well, because besides worrying about you and not being able to worry about himself like he has been, you would have been separated from everyone you care about. You and Mr. Whitlock wouldn't have shopped for Ms. Masen's ring together. You wouldn't have spent time in Florida with your mom and grandma. You and Charlotte wouldn't have had your weekly dinners. It would have been you and Mr. Masen constantly looking over your shoulder for James Hunter. Mr. Masen needed to be free as much as you needed to be free."

I sighed and leaned my head back on the sofa cushion. "Okay, I hear that."

"He didn't ask you to choose. I wish Terry hadn't asked me to choose. I wish we could have given each other some space to be who we needed to be and not been so afraid to spread our wings a little bit. Maybe if I had enlisted straight out of high school, while she went to school, we could have found our way back to one another. Maybe not, but it would have ended better than the way it did. She ended up calling off the wedding. A lot of hateful and hurtful things were said and done. We can never take any of that back."

I saw the hurt that was still buried deep. As painful as my separation from Edward had been, it could have been worse. We could have ended things in a much uglier way. That was not the way I would have wanted it.

"He's back. He's back because he's better. Better for you, Bella. He has no idea if that matters to you or not. That's why he was frustrated with you tonight. He wants to know if he's got a chance. How could you not see that?"

"A chance? I feel like all they did tonight was talk about how great everything was without me! You didn't hear me talking about how my life is so much better without him in it." This was partially the alcohol talking. I was excessively emotional, wallowing in a little self-pity.

Tyler laughed at me, which didn't help me feel any better. "Emmett talked. Mr. Masen didn't say much at all as I recall."

True. It was Emmett and his exuberant storytelling that made it all sound so fabulous. I figured Edward agreed since he didn't dispute anything Emmett said.

"I've asked him twice why he came back. Both times all he said was because he was ready. That's it. There was no, 'I'm back because I'm all better for you now.' How am I supposed to read his mind?"

Tyler poured another shot. "Lord, woman. You make me dizzy."

"That might be the tequila."

"No, it's definitely you," he replied before swallowing it down.

"He had lunch at Eclipse today and said they were there because Emmett wanted to see Rosalie."

Tyler's head lolled forward and then fell back as he rolled his eyes. "Bella, Bella, Bella. He loves *you*. He left to get better for *you*. He got better for *you*. This was always about *you*. You, you, you. Everything is about you! God, no wonder why he started yelling at you."

"Why can't he say that?" I shouted.

"Because he's afraid! Aren't you afraid? Aren't you afraid he doesn't feel the same way about you anymore?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

"Isn't it possible he's worried about that, too?"

I was the one that was dumped. I was the one that had been clear about my feelings from the very beginning. I was in love with him. That didn't stop just because Edward decided he needed to grow up without me.

"There's no reason for him to think my feelings have changed."

"Ha! Let me guess, he saw Jared and you interact today at Eclipse?"

"What does Jared have to do with this?"

Tyler's giant hand smacked his face and ran down it. "Maybe I should video tape the way Jared looks at you. Maybe if you look at it from the outside, you'd see how bad that guy's got it for you."

"I know Jared likes me. I'm not an idiot."

"Okay, so Mr. Masen sees Jared all starry-eyed. He had to wonder if the feelings were being reciprocated. He has no idea what you've been up to for the last seven months. Like you've said, seven months is a long time. Lots can happen."

I could see how that would make Edward feel a little bit insecure. That didn't

change the biggest reason we were apart.

"What about James? How can we get back together and not think James is going to start messing with us again?"

"I can only assume Mr. Masen has thought about that. He wouldn't be here if he didn't think it was safe. I know that much. Why don't you talk to him? Ask him."

He made it sound so simple. I was in knots over this whole thing.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "If Terry knocked on my fucking door tonight and told me she still loved me, I wouldn't think twice. I could choose her now and not regret it. I'm not going to get that chance. You have that chance. Don't blow it."

I dove in for a hug because I needed one and he was drunk enough to give me one.

"Terry's not the only one who could go knocking," I whispered before giving him a kiss on the cheek.

I left to go to up to my apartment, which was unoccupied because Jasper basically moved in with Alice. He was rarely here anymore. I lay on my bed, my phone in my hand. Could I just call him and tell him I wanted him back? Would Edward really jump at the chance?

I stared at his number on the screen, letting my finger hover over the call button. Tyler had been very convincing. If Tyler thought Edward was here for me, there was a good chance it was true. I was going to give him one chance to tell me. I pressed call.

The ringing seemed to go on forever. Never in my life, did the sound of a call being made put me on edge. I began to think it was going to go to voicemail when he picked up.

"Isabella." He sounded...nervous.

Suddenly, my throat constricted and my mind went blank.

"Are you all right? Isabella?" The worry in his voice forced me to respond.

"I'm fine. Sorry. Hi."

"Hi," he replied shyly.

"I wanted to apologize for running off tonight. I didn't mean to be rude."

"I should be the one apologizing. I shouldn't have raised my voice at you. I'm so sorry."

Just like old times. Edward apologizing for losing his temper with me. The thought made me smile. Things had changed but some things were the same. Maybe other things were still the same.

"Edward," I began, not sure I'd be able to finish the question.

After a few seconds, he spoke. "What, Isabella? Please tell me." His voice was soft, vulnerable, loving.

"Why did you come back? Don't say you were ready. Tell me why you came back." The words left my mouth and caused my heart to pick up the pace and palms to sweat. He might not say it, and my fear would not let me ask again. If he did say it, I didn't know what I would do.

He was quiet. There was not an immediate answer. The pause was worse than waiting for him to pick up in the first place.

"I came back because there isn't anything more that I want in this world than to be with you. To see you, to touch you, to love you. I came back for you, Isabella, if you'll still have me. I'm sorry for not making that clear the moment I saw you this afternoon at Eclipse. It was what I wanted to say but didn't because I'm afraid I'm too late."

I closed my eyes, forcing the tears I didn't know were there to slip out and roll over my temples. It felt like my heart might burst from my chest. Tyler was right; Edward never gave up on me. I felt like a traitor for ever doubting him.

"I'm too late, aren't I?" he asked, choking on his own emotion.

I never imagined I would need to be the one to reassure him. "I don't know that you could ever be too late."

"Is that a no, I'm not too late?"

I laughed lightly. "No, you're not too late."

"That may be the best news I have ever gotten," he said with a real sense of relief.

"Maybe we should talk about what that means. There are some things we need to say, but I think we should say them face to face. I have questions only you can answer." Part of me wanted to go to him right now. I wanted to have the reunion we deserved. The jumping in his arms and kissing kind of reunion. If I hadn't had two shots of tequila and two glasses of wine, I would be begging Tyler for his keys. He definitely had too many shots to drive me himself.

"I want to tell you everything, Isabella. The sooner the better."

The alcohol was making me feel fuzzy. I would have to wait until tomorrow.
"Maybe we could talk about it over lunch tomorrow?"

"Are you asking me out on a date?" Now, I could hear him smiling. I could picture his toothy grin, making it even harder to not beg him to come over right this minute.

I smiled right along with him. "I guess I am. Would you like to have lunch with me? My treat."

"That sounds like the perfect date. I would love to have lunch with you. What time can I pick you up?"

"Eleven?"

"I'll see you then. I'm counting the hours. Goodnight, Isabella."

"Goodnight." I hung up and stared up at the ceiling. I had a date. With Edward. He was back because he wanted to be with me.

Eleven o'clock. I looked at the clock. It was just before ten. Thirteen hours. Why did that seem like an eternity?

My phone rang and part of me hoped it was Edward calling to say he couldn't wait thirteen hours. Instead the caller ID told me it was someone calling with less promising news.

"Hi, Mom."

She was crying. "She's gone, baby. Grandma's gone. When can you get here? I need my daughter."

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Oh, so close! Damn it. Well, really it was necessary since this story skips a week in time. Couldn't have them running off to lunch tomorrow! She's off to Florida, where I am right now! Woo hoo! Something tells me we might find Edward there, too. *TF starts scouring the Sunshine state for Pennyward*

Thanks to the usuals. Momof4luvntwisaga, who I actually got to meet in person last weekend! Yay! Teresa and Chrisann, who I also got to meet, thanks for your time ladies! To the Twitterers out there and the FB junkies. To everyone that reviews and comments on the blog and thread. You guys keep me going. I love you all. I love hearing your thoughts on things. Hopefully everyone is happy that Edward is back!

IggyAteMySandwichAgain - did ya like it? He's all yours baby!

I forgot to mention last week that James, our evil villain won Best Villain in the Inspired Fanfic Awards. Thanks to all of you who voted for him! He's really happy about that and promises to live up to that title here soon! *gasps* What have you done?

Okay, I'm off to pack for my trip home and to stare at the leaked BD pictures one more time. Seriously, how pissed is Summit right now? Love it.

Chapter 24

Chapter 24

Friday, June 17th at noon

"Oh, baby, come look at this," my mom called from Gran's bedroom. She was sorting through things in there while I was working on packing up the kitchen.

I walked into the room to find her sitting on the bed, holding a photo album.

"Where was that hiding?" I asked, taking a seat next to her.

"It was in her closet. It has pictures of her and Dad when they first got married. Look how young she looks." Mom pointed to a picture of them sitting together on a couch, smiling like they were the happiest people on Earth.

"Wow, I never realized how much I resemble her." I stopped her from turning the page. There was another sweet photo of my grandmother sitting on my grandfather's lap. She was smiling at the camera but he was looking at her. You could see the complete adoration in his eyes.

"You sure do, especially when you wear your hair up." She pulled on my ponytail. "God, it's so hard to believe they were so young once. They look so happy, don't they?"

I could see the tears filling my mom's eyes. This had been such a difficult week for her. Even though Gran was sick for several months and hospice had been called in the last four weeks or so, I don't think my mom was prepared for this loss.

"They're back together now. At least, I like to think they are," I said, rubbing her back gently.

Mom sniffed and wiped her eyes before smiling. "I like to think that, too. I bet it was one hell of a reunion."

My grandfather had passed away when I was ten, leaving my gran a widow at age fifty-five. She never remarried. I don't think she even dated. She spent the last fifteen years alone. She did have wonderful friends, however. I had met all of them this week at her services. They played cards weekly and had a book club, too. Gran

and the ladies also took a big trip together every year. Last year, they went on an Alaskan cruise. She filled her life with family and friends, but never another lover. Perhaps looks weren't the only thing I had in common with my grandmother. When Edward was gone, I was beginning to think I would never take another lover either.

Edward was home, though. He was back because he wanted to be with me. He had been so understanding when I called to cancel the date we had made only a few minutes before. He offered to fly me out here on his jet, but I wouldn't allow it. Griffin had only been home less than twenty-four hours. I was more than capable of flying commercially. Edward insisted that he help find me a flight since he was going to fly Tyler with me. I refused to let him pay for my ticket; but somehow, I was upgraded to first class when I checked in. His ability to not interfere was so very limited.

"I'm almost done in the kitchen. I'll start loading some things into the car," I informed my mom. I was trying to help her get as much packed up as possible before I headed back tomorrow morning. I wanted to leave this morning, but with such late notice, there were no open seats on any of the flights out of Jacksonville until tomorrow.

Mom pulled me into a hug. "I can't tell you how much it means to me to have you here, baby."

I squeezed her back. Had it not meant so much to my mom, I would have left after the funeral on Wednesday. Jasper and Alice's engagement party was tonight, and I was so disappointed that I was going to miss it. I returned to the kitchen and finished packing one of the boxes.

"What can I take to the car?" Tyler asked.

Having Tyler around had been interesting. I figured making him sit in a car outside my mom's house was going to raise some suspicion amongst her neighbors even though he had supposedly pulled it off once before. Fortunately, my mother's emotional distress didn't allow her to over-think his presence. He also had the most amazing ability to blend into the background, appearing only when I really needed him.

"These two boxes here," I replied, pointing to the two biggest ones filled with cookware. Some of the stuff was so old, but my mom insisted she wanted it all.

I grabbed the garbage bag stuffed with food we were not moving. Tyler set the boxes in the trunk, which was now full. We weren't going to be able to take much

more.

"I think we can put a few more things in the backseat, but that's about it. Mom and Phil will have to do the rest."

Tyler nodded. I went to throw the garbage bag in the large can in the garage when a car door slamming caught my attention. A dark blue Lexus was parked in the street in front of the house. Edward casually strolled up the driveway. He wore jeans and t-shirt; his hands were stuffed deep in his pockets and sunglasses shaded his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I didn't know if I should run and jump on him or faint. I was frozen in place, so I did neither.

He pulled a hand out to tug at his hair. "If I told you my sister sent me, would you believe me?"

Even with my feet cemented to the ground, it felt like I had a magnet that was embedded in my chest, pulling me in his direction.

"Alice sent you?"

He smiled self-consciously, glancing at his feet. "She can't imagine attending her engagement party without you there. So, being the best big brother in the world, I offered to come get you. If you think it would be okay to leave," he added warily. "I know you're here for your mom. We don't want to take you from her. We just thought if finding a flight was the issue, we could solve that problem for you. *I* could solve that problem for you."

He was here. He was here to take me home. For real this time.

Standing in front of me, the smell his cologne enveloped me. My entire body tingled, anticipating being in contact with him. He had been back for a week, and I still had not touched him, held him, kissed him. I couldn't wait to do those things, but my heart was conflicted. It didn't want to get broken again.

"So, it didn't have anything to do with you wanting to see me?"

He laughed. "It pretty much had everything to do with that, but I am trying to play this cool, you know."

My own laughter could not be contained. He was so adorable. The new and

improved Mr. Masen was kind of cute because he was so unsure.

"You must have left in the middle of the night to get here."

"I had some business in Chicago yesterday. Flew here this morning."

"But how did you know where to find me?"

He took my hand in his. Immediately, the rest of the world fell away and there was only me and him. He touched the penny charm on my bracelet.

"You followed my blinking light, huh?"

He looked at me curiously, obviously unaware that I knew how the chips worked.

"How do you-" He stopped and turned his gaze towards Tyler.

"I showed her how it works and gave her the passwords," he confessed readily.
"The girl has me wrapped around that little finger of hers. I'm sorry, sir."

I was worried Edward was going to be mad. The last thing I wanted was for Tyler to get in trouble. I had Tyler crossing all the lines he had once told me he wasn't comfortable crossing. He was my bodyguard, but he was my friend, too. I felt very protective of my protector.

Edward wasn't mad, though. He laughed.

"That makes two of us."

I let out a relieved breath. Edward didn't let go of my hand. I pulled him towards the house, reveling in the way his hand felt wrapped around mine. It was soft yet strong. He had long, slender fingers that were great for playing piano and even better at things like making me come undone. My ivories were definitely in need of some tickling.

"Come inside, but I'm warning you now, you are not my mother's favorite person. You need to win her over before we can go."

"Mothers I'm good at, it's the fathers who usually don't like me," he said with a smirk.

"You haven't met my mother," I replied with as much warning in my tone as

possible. My mom had seen me pretty much at my lowest point after Edward left. She was not a big fan of his. "She's a diehard People Magazine reader, if that gives you any indication as to what you're up against."

Edward's smirk faded fast. A look of panic overtook him. "That wasn't real. You know that, right?" He tugged on my hand, stopping me from moving forward.

I quickly glanced at Tyler, hoping he would not rat me out. He knew better, of course.

"You warned me that you would have to put on a good show," I tried to reassure him.

He pulled me closer and brushed my cheek with the back of his fingers. "But you know that's all it was, right? There has and will never be anyone but you, Isabella. Until the end of time, there will only be you."

It was as if the seven months we were apart evaporated in that one moment. Not only was my love for him the same, but the love he declared the day he left seemed equally real. I wanted to kiss him. I wanted him to kiss me. His head tipped down as I lifted mine.

"Good to know," I whispered, closing my eyes as I prepared for our lips to collide.

"How much more stuff can we-" My mother's voice forced my eyes wide open. "What the hell is he doing here?"

I turned quickly to face her, Edward's hand still tightly in my grasp. "Mom," I began.

"This seems to be a reoccurring theme for you, Mr. Masen. You really seem to enjoy showing up unannounced. Do you not own a phone? Can you not give my daughter the courtesy of a phone call before you just appear at her doorstep?" My mother folded her arms in front of her and scowled at Edward, whose deer in the headlights look made me worry that he forgot how to charm the pants off the female population.

"Mom," I said with an exaggerated sigh while warning her to be nice with my eyes.

"What? How did he even know where you were? Oh, let me guess. I bet the bodyguard is his little spy."

I laughed because it was funny that anyone would refer to Tyler as little and because if she knew Edward had really tracked me with a GPS device, she would probably never like him.

"He's here to get me home in time for Jasper's engagement party. Isn't that nice of him?"

"He's here to take you away?" My mom sounded more hurt than impressed.

Edward stepped forward. "Mrs. Dwyer, I wanted to express my condolences for your loss. I know all too well what it's like to bury a beloved mother. No matter how much time we're given, it never seems like enough once they're gone, does it?"

My mother's expression softened just a bit. "No, no it doesn't."

"I wanted you to know that my sister and I made a contribution to the American Cancer Society in your mother's name this week. The money will hopefully be put to good use making advancements in research and improving treatment. I'd give anything to see that this disease doesn't touch your family again." He glanced down at me and gave my hand a squeeze.

Only Edward could make donating money to charity sound so damn romantic.

Renee was slipping under his charismatic spell. She was nervously tugging on the heart charm that hung around her neck. "That's very...kind of you."

"I wish there was more I could do. Right now, though, I'm a man caught between a rock and a hard place. I know Isabella is here for you. I feel terrible asking to take her away, but my sister and Jasper want one thing from me tonight and that's to have Isabella at their engagement party since she's the woman responsible for introducing them in the first place."

He was good. He was damn good.

"Jasper has been a good friend to Bella for a long time." My mom was ready to give in. "I know she was feeling bad about missing the party."

My mom eyed Edward cautiously, contemplating if she should accept his being back in my life. She knew she didn't have much of a choice. If I was willing to take him back, she was going to have to accept it. Finally, she stepped aside so we all could come in Gran's house. Edward had successfully diffused the Renee bomb, for now.

Two hours later, Tyler, Emmett, Edward, and I were waiting in one of the buildings at a private airfield near Jacksonville while Griffin got us clearance to board and take off. There was a woman sitting at a reception desk along with a little girl, who couldn't have been over five years old. She sat in a chair beside the desk. Her dangling feet swung back and forth as she played with the blue stuffed hippo in her lap. Music from a local pop radio station was being pumped softly through some speakers overhead.

Edward was still holding my hand. In fact, we hadn't stopped holding hands except for when I packed and hugged my mom goodbye. Otherwise, we were always connected. Connected was good. Connected was something we hadn't been for far too long. It reassured me that this was all real.

The little girl occasionally looked up at us. I tried to flash her a smile whenever our eyes met. Tyler and Emmett were big guys, I wondered if she was a little afraid of them as they stood guard around me and Edward. Emmett was in "work mode" not "friend mode" today. He had addressed me as Miss Swan and Edward as Mr. Masen or Sir. It was interesting to watch them interact in this way after what I had witnessed a week ago. I saw Emmett tapping his foot to the song on the radio, though, and figured we could make the little girl laugh.

I sang along with the chorus, *"It's Friday, Friday. Gotta get down on Friday. Everybody's lookin' forward to the weekend, weekend."*

I nudged Emmett with my elbow. He didn't say anything, but his lips curved into a smile. He wanted to sing with me, I could tell. The little girl watched me with rapt attention now.

"Friday, Friday. Gettin' down on Friday. Everybody's lookin' forward to the weekend." I lifted up Edward's hand and spun under our linked appendages.

"Partying, partying, yeah! Partying, partying, yeah!" Emmett joined in.

I began to laugh and let go of Edward, so I could join my singing partner. Tyler and Edward stood with their mouths agape and eyebrows pinched together. The song was terrible, but it was making the little girl giggle.

"Yesterday was Thursday, Thursday. Today, it is Friday, Friday."

"You have to be kidding me," Edward groaned. "This has to be the worst song I've ever heard in my entire life."

I would not be deterred from having a bit of fun. *"Tomorrow is Saturday and Sunday comes afterwards. I don't want this weekend to end!"*

Emmett started rapping, waving his hands in front of him.

I went over and put out my hand to the little girl. She looked up at the woman at the desk, who nodded her approval. The little girl took my hand and danced with me for the rest of the song. Tyler pinched the bridge of his nose as if he had a headache coming on while Edward stood with his hands on his hips, looking somewhat amused and troubled at the same time.

When the song finished, I held my hand up for a high five, and the little girl obliged by giving it a solid smack. Emmett crouched down and got a high five, too. He was no longer scary.

"My name's Bella, what's your name?"

"Caroline."

"It's nice to meet you, Caroline. Are you flying a plane today? Maybe teaching some lessons?"

Caroline giggled. "No, I don't know how to fly a plane."

I tried to look surprised. "You don't know how to fly a plane? You aren't a pilot?"

She shook her head. Her blonde curls bounced around her sweet, round face.

"Caroline is here because her sitter called in sick ten minutes before I had to leave for work today," the woman behind the reception desk answered.

"Oh, so you got to come help Mom at work, huh? Fun."

"It's boring," Caroline said with a sigh.

"Work usually is," Emmett said, nodding his head sympathetically.

"It's not wise to complain about work in front of your boss, Mr. McCarty," Edward said from behind us.

Emmett stood up, smiling so his dimples showed. "I would never complain, sir. You know that."

I looked at Edward, hoping he was teasing. His eyes were soft and the loveliest shade of green I had seen in a long time.

"Give me a penny," he demanded like the bossy billionaire I remembered. He held out his hand impatiently as Tyler and Emmett dug in their pockets. Emmett pulled out one first and placed it in Edward's palm.

Edward knelt down so he was eye to eye with the little girl. He held the penny up. I hoped he didn't think giving her a penny was going to cheer her up. Kids nowadays got a dollar from the tooth fairy. A penny was so not going to cut it.

"Do you believe in magic, Caroline?" he asked. She nodded. "This looks like a boring penny, right?" She nodded again. "Ah, but with a little imagination, we can make this a magic penny. Are you ready?"

Caroline and I both nodded.

"Okay, I need you to think of your favorite place in the whole world." Edward proceeded to move the penny between his fingers and from hand to hand. "Are you thinking about that place?" Caroline nodded as thoughts of Fiji flooded my mind. Edward moved one hand over the other, and the penny was gone.

"Where'd it go?" she asked, looking at his empty hands.

"You tell me. Where were you thinking about?"

"Disneyworld," she replied.

"That's where it went. What do you think it's doing right now?"

She smashed her lips together and closed one eye, so she could think real hard. "I think it's riding the Peter Pan ride because that's my favorite."

"Should we bring it back?" Edward asked, his eyes twinkling. I was falling more in love with him by the second.

"Give it one more minute, so it can finish the ride."

Edward and I both laughed. Caroline was too much. After a minute, Edward waved his hands in front of her again.

"Okay, this time, think about bringing the penny back. Think about how much you

missed the penny while it was gone. How much you want it to be here right now."

I knew all about that feeling. How many times had I wished for Edward to return? How often did I imagine being together again? I watched as Edward reached behind the little girl's ear and pulled out the shiny copper penny. Her eyes widened in surprise as she gasped at his magic. She pulled it out of his fingers and stared at it in wonder.

"It looks like it had fun. Mom, look! I made this penny go to Disney and then come back. Look!" She scrambled behind the desk to show her mom.

Edward stood up and took my hand in his again. *Connected.*

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked in awe.

"A magician never tells his secrets, Isabella."

"Not unless you pay him two grand," Emmett said with a snicker.

Edward gave him a shove with his hand.

"You paid a magician two grand to tell you his secrets?" I didn't know why I was surprised.

Edward frowned. "I paid a man in Barcelona to teach me some tricks. It was money well spent. When we go back to Africa, the kids will all think I'm the super hero." He shot a nasty look at Emmett.

It appeared I wasn't the only one jealous of Emmett.

"Show me," I insisted.

He shook his head.

"Show me," I repeated, tugging on his hand.

"No," he answered with a giggle. I wished I could record Edward giggling. It was one of the cutest things I had heard in a long while.

"How many times did the guy have to show you that trick before you learned it?"

Edward reached up and pulled a nickel out from behind my ear. "How many of

these did you stumble across last month?" I looked at him confused. "He sent quite a few to my favorite place before I managed the trick myself." He tipped his head and whispered into my ear, "My favorite place will always be wherever you are, Isabella."

My cheeks felt warm, and my breathing hitched. *Kiss me*, I thought since I could not speak. Oh, how I wanted him to kiss me.

Griffin walked in to inform us our flight was cleared and we could board. Edward slipped the nickel into his pocket, making me wonder if he always carried it around. With hands clasped, we boarded his jet, headed home.

I took the seat next to Edward. Emmett and Tyler sat behind us and across the aisle from one another. The oversized leather seats were even more amazing than any airline's first class. I tried not to think about the last time I was on this plane. The flight home from Fiji had been spent in the bedroom in the back. Lying naked in one another's arms as we flew back to reality. Back to a world that was filled with people trying to tear us apart. Back then, I was his queen and truly believed I had a shot at healing his heart. We came back and in two short months lost everything. James won. At least, I had thought so.

"When is the last time you heard from James?" I asked, taking advantage of his undivided attention.

Edward shifted in his seat. "I was wondering when you were going to ask."

"You said you came back to be with me, but you left because of him. What's different? Why aren't you worried about him?"

"Peter and I spent some time digging into his financials and came across a few things that we thought the IRS would be interested in. Peter found a way to flag him in their system."

"Peter flagged James for the IRS? Do I want to know how he did something like that or will that make me some sort of accessory to a crime?"

Edward laughed lightly. "It's probably best that you do not know."

I nodded. It was less worrisome to be an accessory to that crime than the one Edward was plotting before he left.

"Let's just say he's currently being investigated for tax evasion by the IRS. On top

of that, Peter uncovered some evidence that James has been laundering money using a dummy internet corporation that he claimed was being run out of some ghost town in Texas. Peter got the authorities interested in that as well. But, the government doesn't always move very fast."

I tried to wrap my head around what all that meant. James potentially could go to jail. That would be good. It wasn't going to keep him in there for life. It was also going to make him even more angry with Edward.

He continued filling me in, "While he's been distracted with that and trying to find me overseas, I found a way to buy Nomad Industries right from underneath him. He's now company-less, his assets have been frozen by the government, he's most likely going to be doing time, and best of all, he's gone from Seattle and back in Chicago."

"Chicago? Is that why you were in Chicago?" The thought of Edward being anywhere near James made me cringe.

That familiar look of frustration crossed his face. He still didn't like it when, on the rare occasion, I managed to put two and two together.

"I was making sure things were going as planned. I needed to see firsthand that he was suffering."

A chill ran through me as those words sparked another familiar look in his eyes. Provoking James made him come after me last time. I did not like the idea of provoking James.

"Does he know you're responsible for everything?"

"He'd be an idiot to think I wasn't." If Edward was afraid of James knowing about his role in all of this, he wasn't showing it.

"This doesn't take him out of the picture permanently. I still don't understand how this makes him any less of a threat to us."

Edward brought my hand up to his lips. He placed a soft kiss on my knuckles. I felt like my whole hand was touched by a flame that was spreading a comforting warmth up my arm straight to my heart.

"It makes him much less powerful. Without money to hire people to do his dirty work, his reach is limited. It makes it much easier for me to protect you."

"It was never me that I was worried about," I reminded him.

The right side of Edward's mouth shot up in that crooked smile of his. "He can't hurt us anymore, Isabella. I have disabled him financially. He can't rattle me the way he used to either. I'm different. I see things differently."

Edward was different. I needed to get to know this Edward better. I had a feeling I was going to love him just as much, if not more than the old one. I had another worry, though. Was I different? Would he have to fall in love with a new me, too? What if the new Edward didn't feel the same about the new Bella? My insecurity was an annoying addition to my repertoire of feelings.

Edward squeezed my hand to regain my attention. He misinterpreted my silence. "I don't want to take over your life like I did before. I only want a chance to be a part of it. Ultimately, you decide what part I play. You call all the shots, Isabella. You always call the shots."

I had heard that before. A long time ago, he told me the same thing, but I never felt in control. My love for him caused me to relinquish all control over to him. I didn't want to do that a second time. If he let me in and then took off again, I would not survive. I had to protect myself, my heart.

"You always give me lots to think about, Mr. Masen."

He smiled at me nervously. "I hope that's not a bad thing."

I hoped not, too.

We spent most of the trip home catching up. He thought he was different and I wanted to know why. He told me about how he had gained a different perspective on life. For so long, he had been so sure his life was the most tragic, that the darkness was justified. His time away had helped put that belief to rest.

With Alice's help, their first stop after Rio was an orphanage in another part of Brazil. Alice had once asked Edward for money for this particular place after she had visited it a few years back. Alice believed that if Edward saw firsthand where his money went, it might affect him differently.

It was there that Edward met a boy named, Yuri. I could see in Edward's eyes the fondness he had for the boy when he spoke of him. Yuri was thirteen years old and had a story somewhat similar to Edward's. His mother was killed in a tragic accident and his father had abandoned both him and his little brother soon after her death.

Yuri had spent two whole months caring for his little brother unbeknownst to the local authorities. He never told anyone his father left because he thought they would arrest him for being bad and making his father leave. The night before his father disappeared, he had screamed at Yuri that he was a terrible son and that his unhappiness was the boy's fault. I knew this must have resonated with Edward. After his father left, Yuri pretended like everything was normal, hoping his father would come back if he was a good boy. He made sure he and his brother got to school every day. They lived in squalor and made due with what little food and supplies their father had left behind. A neighbor became suspicious and learned the truth. Yuri and his brother had no other family to speak of and therefore were put in the orphanage.

The thing that stood out to Edward was Yuri's spirit. His history was similar to Edward's but his personality reminded him of Emmett's. The boy always had a smile on his face and was kind to everyone he met. The director told Edward that Yuri was one of the most resilient children she had ever come across. He continued to care for his brother, but he also became a big brother to many of the other children in the group home. He was a good student and told Edward he wanted to become a doctor.

Edward was amazed that the boy did not carry any darkness with him. He had every reason to fall victim to the darkness, in Edward's opinion. Yuri had not been as lucky as Edward. He did not have a loving aunt and uncle to take him in. He did not have any money to speak of. He lived in an orphanage with little hope of ever being adopted by a family due to his age. He would most likely grow up there and then be on his own when he came of age. Yet, he told Edward he was grateful. He was grateful for the bed he had to sleep in, the food that they gave him to eat, the chance to go to school and learn. He was grateful for people like Edward, who donated money so he did not have to fear for his basic needs to be met. He was grateful that he was with his brother and would be able to take care of him for real someday.

Grateful. It was a word that Edward admitted he rarely used. He told me he realized that it was one he needed to add to his vocabulary. He had so much to be grateful for but instead spent half his life taking it all for granted.

It didn't happen overnight, but over the last several months, Edward had begun to see that not everything in his life had to be ruined by a handful of tragic events. He did not have to be ruined by those events. He could be anything, anyone. He could be happy. He could be good. He could be with me.

We talked about things I had done while he was gone. It appeared Edward hadn't been spying on me. He was happy to hear about my job, even kind of excited the

school wasn't far from his estate. We talked about Jasper and Alice. Edward admitted to reading the emails I sent myself. He swore after getting caught deleting Jake's emails, he did not read anything but the ones he assumed I was writing to him. His excuse for not writing back was twofold. One, he knew if he contacted me in any way, he would not be able to continue without me. His need to be with me never waned. He feared that need would overwhelm him if he communicated with me. He was only able to do what he did because he knew I was safe and James believed I was of no use to him. If I had joined him before James had been dealt with, things would have been bad again. Secondly, he wanted to allow me the freedom to move on. He was done holding me back. If he had written or called me, he feared I would have just waited, paused my life instead of lived it.

"That sounds so conceited, doesn't it?" he asked after he finished explaining.

"Well, the cool me wants to say that I would never wait around for some guy. But then, I've never been very cool and you have never been just some guy."

Edward smiled and laughed softly. He stared at our clasped hands. "I wanted to be well for you. I knew I had to set you free to do that. The fact that you didn't run away, even though you could have, means the world to me."

"I'm not going to lie and say it didn't hurt that you never once tried to contact me." We were now both staring at our hands. Part of me wanted to be completely wrapped up in Edward, but I needed him to know he didn't make this whole "growth period" easy on me.

Edward's face crumbled slightly. "I never wanted to hurt you. I am so sorry if you ever felt like I had forgotten you. I could never forget you. I battled with myself on several occasions. Christmas was the hardest. I have presents for you that I never sent. I wrote you. I kind of wrote in a journal like I was talking to you."

My eyebrow shot up. "You wrote me in a journal? Will I ever see this journal?"

"If you want to. You can have anything you want, Isabella. I want to be an open book."

"You? An open book? That's going to take some getting used to."

"Tell me about it." He chuckled, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

The new and improved Edward was quite an interesting fellow. I couldn't wait to learn all about him.

"Wake up, sweet girl. We're home." Edward kissed the top of my head as my eyes fluttered open. After all our talking, I had drifted off for the remainder of the flight. We were home. I was glad to hear him call Seattle home.

We disembarked the plane and there was a car waiting.

"Brady!" I shouted. I hadn't seen him since he was in the hospital. I threw my arms around him and gave him a hug. Sometimes it was easy to forget there were two people in the car the day Alec died.

"Miss Swan, good to see you again," he said genuinely.

"You look so great. You're doing well?" I asked, pulling back to look him over.

"Better than ever, ma'am," he replied with a grin and a nod.

Edward and I got in the car while Tyler and Emmett got our bags.

Edward shook his head but he was smiling. "Brady gets a hug, huh?"

"What? Should I have not done that? Do you think I made him uncomfortable?" I glanced outside the car, looking for Brady, hoping I didn't embarrass him.

"No, he's very fond of you. I'm sure he *loved* getting that kind greeting." Edward looked away.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me," I said, squeezing his hand.

"Nothing," he repeated.

"Open book, my ass," I mumbled under my breath.

Edward sighed. "Sorry. It's just that was kind of how I pictured our reunion, but we know how that turned out."

"Are you jealous that I hugged Brady?" I couldn't help but laugh.

"No," he lied.

"Your return was a bit mind blowing, by the way. I don't think I knew what to do when I saw you. Hugging was not what I wanted to do."

"No, you probably wish you could do what Rosalie did to Emmett," he said sullenly.

When did I get such a violent reputation? I didn't want to hit him. I wanted to kiss him. I let go of his hand and brought it up to his face. He was sporting a five o'clock shadow; my fingers gently touched the stubble.

"Do you want to know what I wanted to do when I saw you?"

Edward leaned closer; our foreheads almost touched. I could feel his breath on my face. "Yes, as long as it doesn't have anything to do with hitting me."

I smiled and brushed my nose against his. His eyes were locked on mine and were glowing with what I could only imagine was the same need I had. My tongue wet my bottom lip. It had been so long since I felt the soft warmth of his lips on mine.

Three car doors opened simultaneously. Emmett's large frame joined us in the backseat as Tyler and Brady took their spots up front. Edward and I both sat back. His bodyguards and driver were still capable of killing a moment. That much hadn't changed.

Our hands found one another again as Brady headed for my apartment.

We made it home with just enough time to change clothes for the engagement party. Edward dropped me off before going to his condo to get ready. He promised they'd be back to pick me up in an hour. Tyler carried my bag up for me.

I took the world's fastest shower and then stood in front of my closet for the next twenty minutes, cursing myself. If it weren't for Edward, I would have spent five minutes picking out what to wear to this thing. I would have had no one to look spectacular for. Now, I felt like I needed to go shopping for a new dress. He was going to look amazing, and I was going to show up in this damn towel if I didn't make a decision soon.

I went with a dress that I bought during the anger stage of our separation. I was tired of being sad and blue, so I went out and bought a bunch of clothes that ended up all being some shade of red. I laughed at myself when I got home, thinking my subconscious must have been behind my choice of color.

I was putting in my earrings when there was a knock at my door. The butterflies in my stomach were quick to make themselves known. Why was I so nervous?

Edward stood on the other side of the door, looking exactly how I imagined. He was the guy women wrote romance novels about. Tall, dark, and handsome. So cliché but so Edward. Before I could even say hello, he lunged at me, kissing me with an unexpected fervor. I stumbled backwards a step, but he gripped me tightly and never let his lips leave mine. I wrapped my arms around his neck once I regained my footing. My fingers played in the hair on the nape of his neck. Kissing Edward was everything I had remembered it to be. *Heaven*.

I was moaning, he was moaning, we were both a moaning mess of unresolved sexual tension. I could not imagine wanting anything more than I wanted this man. It was a frightening feeling, considering I knew exactly what it felt like to be without him. Never again. I would follow him to the ends of the Earth even if he told me not to.

Edward broke the kiss and laughed a little breathlessly. "I wasn't going to risk someone stopping that from happening again." He kissed me again, a couple quick pecks. He opened his eyes, and they melted me with their intensity. "I love you, Isabella. Every day, I love you more than I did the day before."

If the kiss hadn't unravelled me, his words would have accomplished it with no problem. I wanted to say something equally heartfelt but instead began to cry. Maybe it was the fact that I buried my grandmother a few days before. Maybe it was because Edward had reappeared out of nowhere after seven months of no contact. Maybe it was because the last time he said those words, he left, taking my heart with him. Maybe it was because as happy as I was that he was back, I was equally terrified he would leave again. Whatever it was, the emotional roller coaster I'd been on the last week finally took its toll.

Edward pulled me close and let me cry on his shoulder. He shushed me in between the kisses he planted on the top of my head. He rubbed my back and begged, "Don't cry, sweetheart. Please, you're breaking my heart."

I lifted my wet face to him. "Don't you dare break mine again, Edward Masen. I won't survive it, and I certainly will not forgive it."

"Never," he replied, wiping the tears from my cheek. "Never again. I swear to you that I will spend the rest of my life making you happy. I promise."

He kissed me again. This time it was slow and sensual. How I wanted to believe

him, to trust him. He tasted me one more time before giving me one closed mouth kiss.

"We're going to be late. My sister will forgive me because I'm bringing you, but I don't want to test her patience with me too much."

I nodded, and we were off to the party.

There were so many cars parked outside the Cullen house. Esme had invited friends, coworkers of both Jasper and Alice, and family. It looked like everyone had showed. Tyler jumped out of the car and opened the door for me and Edward. Emmett was off duty tonight but would be here as Rosalie's guest. Edward and I were sharing Tyler tonight. I knew he noticed right away that I had been crying. We were getting pretty good at our nonverbal communication. I tried to relay that I was fine. He seemed to believe me. As Edward gave Brady directions on where to wait for us, Tyler took the opportunity to ask me straight out.

"Everything all right?" he whispered.

"I'm just overly emotional. It's been a crazy week."

Tyler smiled. "Good. I'd hate to have to kick the boss' ass."

"Not this time, but I won't forget you're willing," I said with a tiny guffaw.

Edward walked around the car and took my hand. "What's funny?"

"Nothing."

He looked at Tyler, who shook his head. He narrowed his eyes at me. "Nothing, huh?"

Before I could tell him to let it go, I noticed Liam standing outside the front door. I hadn't seen him since the day I was almost kidnapped. He looked the same as he stood guard.

Edward was going to be jealous one more time tonight. I dropped his hand and headed straight for my former bodyguard.

"May I?" I asked, standing in front of Liam with my arms open wide. I knew better than to think he wouldn't freak out at an unannounced pouncing.

"Miss Swan," he said nervously but accepted my affection. He stepped forward and patted me on the back. "It's good to see you again."

I wasn't sure if he was telling the truth, but he sounded sincere.

"It's good to see you, too. I felt bad I never got a chance to check on you after everything happened."

"You should have let Mr. Masen fire me," he said, hanging his head.

I put a hand on his enormous biceps. "They knocked you out, Liam. You didn't hand me over to them. Your girlfriend even saved the day by calling you. Had it not been for that I might have ended up wherever they were taking me. We're all good. I'm glad to see you still work for Edward."

"Thanks to you, I understand."

I shrugged. Edward ultimately made the decision. I supposed I had asked him to promise, but that didn't mean he wouldn't do what he thought was best.

Edward and Tyler came up behind me. Edward's hand rested on my lower back. They greeted Liam, and he got the door for us. I could hear the music and chatter of the guests coming from the great room. Edward took my hand again as we passed a table covered in presents.

"Oh shit, I didn't get a gift. I'm the groom's best friend and didn't get a gift."

"Isabella," Edward said with a laugh. "You are the gift, baby."

I rolled my eyes as he pulled me into the room full of people. Alice and Jasper were standing together, each with an arm slipped around the other's back. The way Jasper looked at Alice made me smile. Just like the picture of my grandparents, you could tell how much he loved her just by watching him look at her. She was a lucky girl.

"Bella! Edward!" Alice's face lit up when she saw us. "You got her for me?" she asked while giving her brother a hug.

"Yep, for you." Edward gave me a wink. *For him*. He got me for him. He loves me. The feeling that created within me was like nothing I had ever felt before.

"Bells!" Jasper pulled me into a hug as well. "How are you? How's your mom?"

"I'm happy to be here," I said, hugging him tightly. "Mom's hanging in there. I don't think she wanted me to leave, but she knew I wanted to be here."

He let me go and Alice took his place, wrapping her arms around me.

"I kind of whined to Edward at dinner the other night. I hope she's not upset he came to drag you home earlier than expected."

"It's all right. She made Edward sweat for a bit but then gave us her blessing to head out."

"Renee loves me. She couldn't be too mad," Jasper added.

I smiled. "You're right. She's a little mad that you aren't marrying me, but I know when she meets Alice, she'll know you made the right choice."

Edward looked surprised. "For real? Your mother wanted you to get together with Jasper?"

"At graduation, our moms got together and decided they liked that idea," I explained.

Alice looked at Jasper. "Your mom wanted you and Bella to be together, too?"

"I think the two of them just wanted to be related," Jasper said with a laugh.

"My mother never liked Mike. I think she wanted me to be with anyone but him," I said.

Jasper nodded. "So true. My mom hated Maria, too."

I cringed and spoke the truth. "We all kind of hated Maria."

"Why are you guys talking about that bitch Maria?" Rosalie said, coming up behind me with Emmett trailing behind her.

"See?" I said with a wave of my hand that caused everyone to laugh.

Esme and Carlisle took note of our arrival and welcomed us as well. I was introduced to people Alice worked with and was hugged by Jasper's family. Edward was constantly at my side. His fingers intertwined with mine, his thumb brushing my hand every once and awhile. We were...connected.

We mingled, ate, drank, laughed. Then Esme asked Edward if he wanted to make a toast or if he wanted Carlisle to do it.

"I'll do it, unless Carlisle has something planned."

"He wants to give you the floor first."

"Then I'll go first," Edward said with a nod. Esme patted his arm and went to find her husband.

"Are you going to wing it or did you plan to say something?" I asked, curious because I could never speak in front of these people without a plan.

Edward exuded confidence. "I'll just say whatever pops in my head."

"Your head is a scary place sometimes," I teased.

"Sometimes." He brought my hand up to his lips. "It's been much calmer in there lately. Except when you run off to hug people."

I shook my head. "Still have some control issues, huh?"

"Meditation can only solve so many of my problems," he replied with a devious smirk.

Carlisle and Esme got everyone's attention, thanking everyone for coming to celebrate with them and Alice and Jasper. Servers were everywhere, handing out glasses of champagne. Carlisle graciously turned over the toasting honors to Edward, who didn't let go of my hand.

"As many of you know, I am the older and wiser brother of the bride-to-be. My sister is and always has been the most amazing person I have ever known. Alice has an innate ability to see the good in everyone she meets. Now, this only worries me because I, on the other hand, have an incredible ability to see the not-so-good in people."

Everyone laughed, but I knew he was making light of something very true. Edward was always the half-empty to her half-full. However, he was different. I hoped he believed in the good more than the bad now.

"The good news is that when I first met Jasper, I couldn't find anything not-so-good about him. He treated my sister with respect and kindness. He was a

loyal and good friend to the woman I love, and he wasn't afraid to put me in my place."

I wasn't sure how I was still standing. Edward had announced to a room full of people that he loved me. Like it wasn't even a big deal. In my head I was screaming, "*Big, huge freaking deal!*" I tried to control myself even though I could feel my heart thumping in my chest.

"Being five years older than my sister, I'm used to being the one who does things first. I hit all the major milestones first. Got to drive before her, drink before her, go away to college before her. She usually follows my lead, learns from my mistakes, but here we are at *her* engagement party. My sister will finally get to do something before me. I'm not worried, though. I step aside and happily let her lead the way on this one because if there is something I know my sister does better than anyone, it's love. Alice's love is always true and right. I don't doubt for a second that this is the beginning of something wonderful. I hope Jasper knows how lucky he is, and I hope that I learn a few things from my baby sister. I'd like to do this love thing as well as she does someday."

I could feel the damn tears pricking at the corner of my eyes. I willed myself not to cry in front of everyone.

Edward held up his glass and looked directly at Alice. "Someone said true love stories never have an ending; here's to your never-ending story."

I saw the tears in Alice's eyes as she made her way over to her brother. I downed my champagne in an attempt to hold my own emotion at bay. Edward released my hand so he could hug his sister. They whispered a few things back and forth between one another. Jasper and Edward shook hands, which made me smile. It was still so important to me that if Edward and I got back together, I had Jasper's blessing.

Jasper's dad made a toast for the other side of this soon-to-be family. When all the formalities were over, Edward pulled me away and into a room that looked like Carlisle's office. His lips were on mine before I even had a chance to ask him what we were doing in there. His strong hands pulled me close, pressing my body flush against his. He moved me until we were up against the wall where he still seemed unsatisfied with how close he could get. His hands were on me; gripping, squeezing, groping.

"I love you. I love you so fucking much," he whispered against my lips as he continued his assault. The new Edward wasn't afraid of the L word. That much was

clear. He was overwhelming me, though.

I pushed on his chest, so I could breathe. "Stop, I can't think straight."

"I want *that*, out there." He pointed back towards the door. He was so passionate. I could feel his heart beating through his shirt. "I want to stand in front of everyone that knows us and tell them that I promise to love you every day of forever. I want a never-ending story with you, Isabella."

I could feel all the emotion coming out of him. It made me dizzy. He was on me again, kissing and pressing into me. I pushed at him.

"Edward, stop. I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that you're in my story again."

He closed his eyes for a second and all the excitement that was dancing in them was gone when he reopened them. His hands moved to my face. "I'm yours for as long as you'll have me. I hope you believe me. I'm not going anywhere."

"I want to believe you. I really do." It hurt to voice my doubt, but he needed to know it existed.

His eyes searched mine. "But you don't right now, do you?"

I shook my head. "It so much, so fast."

Edward put some space between us. His hands clenched into fists that he rested on the wall on either side of my head. He dipped his head down and brought his mouth to my ear. "Do you know what today is?"

I shook my head. I knew it was Friday, but I sensed he meant there was some significance to this particular Friday.

"One year ago, I ate lunch at Eclipse with Alec. I was in a particularly bad mood. I knew someone inside my company was working for James. My aunt was pestering me to come over that weekend. I had dealt with incompetence all day and was happy to spread my misery around." He placed his hands on my face. "Then, I was informed my usual waitress was unavailable, and this doe-eyed girl thought my assistant was paying the bill."

One year ago, I waited on Edward for the very first time.

"I was rude and obnoxious. I treated her terribly. I made her nervous and jumpy. So nervous, that I made her knock my glass of wine all over my pants. I yelled and was mean. I didn't tip her and, to be really horrible, sent her the dry cleaning bill for the pants because she had the nerve to offer to pay."

The way he told the story made me wonder why in the world I ever got involved with him.

"Alec told me I was wrong. Told me I needed to be careful about the way I treated people. Told me he knew I would feel bad in the end for being so off-putting. I thought he was full of it. That was until he walked into my office with the waitress following behind. I noticed how small she was. How she fidgeted nervously with her hands. I thought about how she was probably the same age as my sister and how Alice would have kicked my ass for screaming at the girl."

Alice totally would have kicked his ass; I had no doubts about that.

"She, *you*, stepped forward, and I was impressed. You came to pay your debt to a billionaire. Who does that?" he asked with a shake of his head. "Most people would have thrown the bill in the garbage. I had obviously already paid it. But not you. You came in and apologized and dumped fifty-seven dollars worth of nickels all over my desk, letting me know what a true asshole I had been."

We had never talked about the nickel dump. It was funny to hear his side of it.

"That day, I knew I had met my match. I had met someone who was unlike any other woman I had ever known. That day, I met the woman who was always going to call me out on my bullshit, who was not going to back down just because I said to. I met the woman who would challenge me and surprise me at every turn. That day, one year ago, I met the woman of my dreams." He bent his head down. "Tell me what you need, Isabella. I'll do anything to make you believe, baby. I love you," he whispered, taking my earlobe into his mouth.

Now the space that existed between our bodies was too much for me. I found myself leaning into him as I closed my eyes.

"I love you," he repeated, kissing under my ear. "I love you." He kissed down my neck. "I love you." He placed feather soft kisses on my throat. "I love you." Our lips came together, and it was wet and warm and set fireworks off deep inside me.

His hands were back, and I was smashed between him and the wall once more. He pulled up one of my legs and hooked it over his hip, grinding himself against me in a

way that set me on fire.

"I'm never going to leave again. Tell me you believe it," he groaned as pushed himself against me. "I love you. I love you so much."

There was a knock on the door before I could answer him. Edward mumbled a string of profanities before stepping back and allowing us to readjust our rumpled clothing. I ran a hand through my hair, hoping I didn't look like I had just been manhandled even though that was exactly what had happened. I touched my lips, swollen from Edward's attack.

He went to the door and wrenched it open. Carlisle and Tyler stood in the hall. I was so embarrassed.

"Your aunt and sister have a little surprise for you. Would you two mind rejoining us?" Carlisle asked, keeping his eyes only on Edward. For that, I was grateful.

"What kind of surprise?"

Carlisle sighed but smiled. "Just come out when you and Bella are done talking. Please."

We were sort of talking. In between dry humping against the wall and making out. I could feel my face turning the color of my dress.

Edward put his hand out for me. I took it and we followed Carlisle back to the party. Everyone was gathered around a cake in the center of the room. It was lit up with so many candles. I was confused why an engagement cake had candles but let it go.

I saw Edward's shoulders slump as we got closer. I figured he would have rather stayed locked in the room with me than eat a piece of cake. He forgot this party was about Alice and Jasper and not him.

Alice was grinning ear to ear. "My brother failed to mention that he is not only older than me, but he's turning thirty on Monday. You didn't think you were going to get away without me mentioning that, did you?"

Edward's birthday! I had no idea. He shook his head and continued to drag me towards the cake.

"I should have expected this," he said, giving his aunt a hug and kiss on the cheek.

Alice wrapped her arms around his neck one more time before leading everyone in a round of "Happy Birthday to You." Wrapping his arm around my waist, he pulled me against his side and kissed me before blowing the candles out.

When the evening ended, Tyler opened the car door for us. I slid in the backseat and leaned my head against Edward's shoulder. It had been a wild day filled with so many unexpected events and eye-opening confessions. I was tired and overwhelmed. A good night's sleep was exactly what I needed.

"Did you have a good time?" Edward asked as he rubbed lazy circles with his thumb on my palm.

"It was fun. I'm so happy for them. You can tell how much they care about one another just by looking at them." For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel jealous about it either. Tonight, Edward had made me feel like the most important person in his world.

"True," he said, kissing the top of my head.

"I didn't know it was your birthday on Monday. I guess I'm going to have to go shopping this weekend. What does one get a billionaire for his birthday?" I asked, lifting my head so I could see his beautiful face.

He shook his head and touched my lips with his fingers before leaning in to press his lips to mine. "I told you already. *You* are the gift. There isn't anything I want in this world other than you."

With that, I knew. I knew this was the new beginning of our love story. This time, it would hopefully have no end.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

So, I think *most* of you will be happy with this outcome. Some of you are going to call Bella a pushover. I'm cool with that. I think that everyone has a right to their opinion. I can only say I'm not trying to write her as a pushover. I won't ramble here as I have done that over on the blog, so if you care what I have to say about this chapter, you can go there!

Thanks to momoffour and tennesseelamb for their prereading services this week. To all of you who have reviewed or sent PMs this week. I tried

really hard to reply to lots of reviews this week. I swear, I spent at least four hours this week replying but I did not get to everyone. I do read them all. I really do! But this chapter got sent to the prereaders just under the wire this week. Review reply or write the story? I'm guessing you want regular updates. So forgive me if I didn't get to you - I do feel bad. To the Twitter ladies and all the FB friends - thanks for always cheering me up.

So, I'm going to spend the weekend writing lemons. Next chapter and the Fiji outtake. Any suggestions? Oh, maybe I shouldn't ask that! I know there are some smutty ladies out there - yeah, I'm looking at you Ryden Dirtay. You know it. Friday by Rebecca Black is the quoted song in this chapter. It is horrendous but makes me laugh. Thanks to mercurio (then she's got some numbers in her penname but I'm too lazy to look them up) She's the one who posted that song on FB for me and inspired Bella and Emmett's singalong. Thanks, K!

It is was one year ago in the story that B & E first met. The nickel were dumped and their story began. Here's to some HEA for these two!

XOXO, TF

Edward's Birthday

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

It was blackmumba's birthday yesterday. She's nineteen. (I wish I was 19 again *sighs*) She asked for a birthday outtake for her birthday. God, I am such a sucker. I guess I also feel bad that I accidentally confused some of you into thinking the last chapter was the last chapter of this story. It's not. There are at least four left. Sorry about that! You all think James is going to go down that easy? Is my name troublefollows or what? This is not beta'd as my dear friend momof4 was unable to look at it in time, she is ill and I hope she is well soon! Hopefully you'll excuse any errors! Teaser for Friday's chapter still on the blog. Love you all. Happy birthday, blackmumba, hope you like lemon :)

Edward's Birthday

Monday, June 20th at five

I added a tiny bit more blue food coloring to the frosting before I started mixing it again. I didn't want it to be too blue, but I didn't want it to look like it was for a baby boy either.

Charlotte inspected one of the boxes of candles I had brought over. "Are you really going to put thirty candles on this thing? He won't be able to read what you write on it."

Thirty candles were going to be a lot. I put a frosting-covered finger in my mouth while I thought about it.

"Maybe I can put them all around the edge, you know, encircle the words."

Charlotte cocked her head to the side and pursed her lips. "That might work if you squish them together."

I giggled. Good thing Edward was only thirty. I dumped the frosting on top of the round two-layer cake and started spreading it around. Charlotte took a seat on one of chairs by the island.

"I think this is the first time I've ever seen him happy on his birthday. This

morning, I heard him whistling a happy little tune as he came downstairs for breakfast."

"A happy little tune, huh?" I laughed. I wasn't sure who was funnier; him or her.

"I'm serious. Usually, his birthday makes him rather grumpy."

"He's so different, isn't he? I mean, it's him, the Edward he'd let some people see once and a while, but I keep waiting for something to flip the switch." I smoothed the frosting along the sides of the cake. I glanced up at Charlotte who was giving me *the look*. "What?"

"So, that's what it is, huh?" She folded her hands together in her lap.

I set the icing spatula down in the bowl. "That's what what is?"

"That's why you're holding back. You're waiting for Darkward to return."

"Darkward?" I glared at her. She was being silly. "I am not waiting for Darkward to return," I replied somewhat indignantly. Shaking my head, I picked the spatula back up and began to even out the top of the cake.

Charlotte wasn't buying it. "Yes, you are. You're afraid, and I don't blame you."

I sighed and set the spatula down again. I lifted my eyes to hers. "Ever heard the saying, if it's too good to be true, it probably is? I'm just...being cautious."

"Oh, Bella," she stood up and wrapped an arm around my back, giving me a little side squeeze. "He's working really hard to make sure the switch doesn't flip. He told me every Tuesday I need to hold dinner because he has a doctor's appointment. What kind of doctor does a perfectly healthy man need to see once a week?"

"You think Edward's seeing a counselor?" My shock could not be disguised.

"I think he's going to do whatever it takes to make sure he can be the very best man he can be. You see, he's in love with this woman, who I think is the perfect girl for him, and he wants to make sure he's the kind of guy she'll want to marry someday."

I bit my lip and let my head rest on her shoulder. Ever since the engagement party, I couldn't stop thinking about what Edward said in the den. "*I want that, out there.*" That being an engagement. I was trying to picture us back in a dating

relationship while he was imagining the ultimate in commitment. My head was constantly swimming with a million thoughts on the matter.

"I'm not ready to get married."

"Well, no one said you have to get married tomorrow." Charlotte gave me another squeeze, then let me go, and sat back down.

"We're going to take it slow. I'm going to make sure I don't lose myself this time. And I want to see that he lets other people in his life, too. He and Emmett are friends. I think Edward needs some more friends. Then we can talk about crazy things like..." the word almost stuck in my throat "...marriage."

Marriage. Too much, way too fast.

"Does that mean you aren't moving back in?" She looked disappointed. I knew she wanted me to come back so badly.

Moving back in. Too much, too fast as well.

I shook my head. "I'm not moving back in. Last time, I moved in because James was a threat. Supposedly, that threat doesn't exist anymore."

"Exactly. You could move in because you want to this time. There isn't part of you that wants to?"

"Char, you're killing me." I put both hands on the island. "Give me some time to get used to all this, please."

She held both hands up in surrender. "Sorry. I'll stay out of it. You know I love you. You know I want what's best for you. I want what's best for him, too. You are what's best for him, but I'll let you figure out if he's what's best for you. No more meddling. I promise."

I finished icing Edward's birthday cake, and Charlotte helped me write my birthday message on it in white frosting.

"It looks perfect. He's going to love it," she said, standing beside me again.

I smiled. Edward was all about love lately. That much was sure.

A half hour after we finished with the cake, Edward got home from work. He had

on a dark navy suit and oozed power and control. I hadn't realized how much I missed seeing him in a suit. For some reason it made me weak in the knees.

"You're here," he said, his face lighting up when he saw me. We moved towards one another like we were being pulled together by some kind of outside force.

"Happy birthday," I managed to say before his lips were on mine. He was eager, needy.

"It is now." He kissed me again, and I found myself wanting to melt into him. "You taste extra sweet today. Like vanilla and..." he kissed me again "...sugar."

"I may have already tasted dessert."

"Funny, I was hoping I was dessert," he replied seductively. All weekend long, I knew he wanted to be physically intimate. I had resisted his advances, but today was his birthday and I knew he only wanted one thing.

I ran my hands down the lapel of his suit coat. "We'll have to see about that, Birthday Boy."

He wrapped his arms around me and held me against him. The smile on his face somehow grew bigger. "That was not a no. That makes this birthday boy very happy."

"Is that how you want to spend your birthday? I was going to take you out to dinner."

He laughed through his nose. "You may take me to dinner, but if you want to just skip right to the part of the night where we go upstairs. I'm all for that."

I took a step back. I could already feel the heat rising. "Good things come to those who wait, Mr. Masen. Let's save the best for last, shall we?"

He ran his thumb across my cheek so softly. "You are the best."

I was about two seconds away from running upstairs and throwing myself on his bed, so he could have his way with me. I changed the subject to keep myself from giving in too quickly. "So, what else does an old man like you want to do on his birthday?"

"Ouch," he said, wincing and holding his hand over his heart, making me giggle.

"Seriously. What do you want to do tonight?"

Edward's crooked smile was testing my resolve to stay clothed until the end of the night. "I have something to ask you. Your answer will determine how we spend our evening."

Edward led me over to the kitchen table and pulled out a chair for me. I sat down, questioning in my head why I would need to sit down. Then, he knelt down on one knee in front of me.

I almost threw up.

"Isabella," he began, taking my hand in his.

He could not be doing this right now. It was too soon. I wasn't ready. He was going to ask me to marry him, and I was going to say no. This was not how it was supposed to happen. He was supposed to wait until I was ready. I felt like screaming at him, but I was worried if I opened my mouth that whole throwing up thing would happen.

"I know I haven't been back very long. I know you're feeling a little uncertain about us, about me. I hope you're going to give me the chance to prove to you that we are going to be together for a very, very long time."

The room was starting to spin. Thank God he had me sit down.

"There is something I want for my birthday and it has to do with you."

He wants me to say I'll marry him for his birthday? This was crazy, completely crazy.

"Don't freak out on me," he pleaded, dipping his head down a bit to catch my eye. I was staring at our hands. He was going to pull out a ring and hope I put it on my finger. I was going to say no. I wasn't ready. I was so not ready. I looked at him, begging him with my eyes not to ask me.

"I love you, Isabella." *No.* "I want to take care of you." *Don't ask me.* "Please." *Not yet.* "Please let me buy you a car."

I blinked and then blinked again.

Did he just say he wanted to buy me a car?

"You want to buy me a car?" I somehow managed to say with a completely dry mouth.

"Yes," he answered, squeezing my hand in his. "I want to buy a new car. For you."

I threw my arms around his neck and almost knocked him over. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" I said over and over into his neck.

Edward wrapped his arms around me and somehow managed to stand us both up.

"Thank me? Thank you! This is the best birthday present you could give me, baby! I thought you would be so much more difficult about this. Tyler said there was no way in hell you would ever let me buy you another car. Ha! He thinks he knows you so well."

I was so relieved he wasn't asking me to marry him that I didn't realize I had accepted his request to buy me a car. He sounded so happy about it that I was never going to be able to talk my way out of it. I had to tell myself it wasn't a big deal. Some boyfriends bought their girlfriends flowers. Mine bought me cars because he could. *Damn him.*

I hugged him tightly, guilt washing over me. He was trying so hard and wanted nothing more than to win his place back in my heart. Charlotte was right. There was a tiny part of me waiting for something bad to happen, for him to choose the darkness over me. I couldn't ask anymore from him. He was doing everything right. Well, except the fact that he thought it was a good idea to buy me a fucking car.

"We're not going to the Toyota dealer," Edward stated in that tone that meant not to argue.

"I went to the Mercedes dealership and test drove two cars because you wanted me to. Now, I want to go to the Toyota dealer. That's where I would have gone if I was buying this car myself."

"Isabella, I am not buying some mid-class sedan. I'm not asking you to get something outrageous like an Aston Martin, I just want you to enjoy a little bit of luxury."

Buying a car with your boyfriend was a definite test of your relationship's staying power. Maybe that's what he was trying to prove with this gesture. If we didn't

break up over which car to buy, we were destined to be together forever.

"I want something normal people drive."

"Normal people drive Mercedes and Audi and BMW, Isabella. Sometimes you are such a reverse snob."

My eyes widened. "I am not a reverse snob!"

"You are," he said, turning to look out the window. We were both sitting as far from each other as possible in the back seat of the Audi.

"Tyler, am I a reverse snob?"

Tyler's big brown eyes met mine through the rearview mirror. "Don't even think about bringing me into the middle of this, Miss Swan." He looked as mad at me as Edward.

"You've been driven around in this thing for a few weeks. Can we go to the Audi dealer?" Edward turned back towards me.

I was feeling snotty and cross. It was causing nastiness to pour from my mouth. "I'm not a reverse snob. Buy me whatever you want. I don't know why I'm even involved in this process. Let's just go get dinner. You can have a car delivered to me in the morning."

"Don't be like that."

"I'm not being like anything. You want to buy me a car. You want it to be a certain kind of car. It doesn't matter what I think."

"Like *that*. Like I'm being some overbearing asshole because I want to buy you a nice car."

"You want to buy me something that is going to cost me a fortune to insure, that's going to cost me more to fill up because of the kind of gas it requires. The maintenance on luxury cars is also more expensive. Even if Jake can do the work for me, the parts are going to bankrupt me."

"Why are you worrying about money?"

"Because that's what people like me do! We worry about paying our bills!"

Edward's head fell back against the headrest. He closed his eyes and began taking deep breaths in through his nose, out through his mouth. It was loud and exaggerated, almost like he was in labor.

I watched him for a minute and then couldn't help but ask, "What are you doing?"

"Breathing. Trying to calm down, so I don't say something that pisses you off because I really want to have sex tonight. It's my fucking birthday, and all I want to do is buy you a car and make love to you. I really didn't think it was asking for much. I thought these were reasonable requests. Obviously, I am an idiot. A giant idiot, whose girlfriend doesn't think he's willing to take care of her the rest of her life."

He wasn't the idiot. I was. If I was going to agree to let him buy me a car, I had to assume he was going to pay for it all; the car, the insurance, the maintenance. This was the old us, fighting over stupid things that so did not matter. I was letting my pride get in the way of letting him spoil me. If I was choosing him, I was choosing all of him. Outrageous wealth included.

I unbuckled my seatbelt and scooted closer to him. I put my hand on his thigh, causing his eyes to pop open.

"You're right. I am being a reverse snob. I'm sorry. I don't want to fight, especially on your birthday. I have to get used to the money side of this again. I *will* get used to it," I reassured him. "Let's go to the BMW dealership. I've always secretly wanted a Beemer."

He leaned over to kiss me. His smile made everything better. "I'll give you a Beemer. Now, put your seatbelt back on."

Bossy, bossy.

"Holy shit, Isabella! Slow down. Let's try not to wreck the car ten minutes after I bought it for you." Edward's hand was on the dash in front of him like he needed to brace himself for some kind of impact.

My new 7 Series was not for the faint of heart. This baby was like nothing I had ever driven before. Edward couldn't really blame me for enjoying its pick up.

"Hey, I am a very good driver, thank you very much. I've never been in an accident or gotten a speeding ticket."

"That's because your father, in an attempt to curb your obvious predilection for a need for speed, bought you a truck that could barely hit thirty miles per hour. This, on the other hand, can go from zero to sixty in mere seconds. Not that I want you to try that," he added frantically. "Please be careful." He was sweet even if he was an annoying backseat driver.

It was after nine. I never realized how long it took to buy a car. There were so many forms and things to sign. The sales guy had to tell us all about the maintenance plan and about extended warranties. Edward was very good about letting me ask questions and made sure to ask the ones I didn't think to ask.

"It's late. Maybe we should get something quick to eat and head back to your place for dessert."

"Dessert." He grinned. "I've been looking forward to dessert all day." Edward's fingers found the inside of my knee.

"Anything in particular you'd like to eat for *dinner*?" I asked, kind of looking forward to dessert myself.

"I'm not familiar with any fast food besides that sandwich place you took me to. Why don't you pick?"

It was time. I bought my first luxury car today. He was going to eat his first fast food dinner. There was a McDonald's on the way back to his estate. This was going to be interesting. I pulled up to the drive thru window and rolled down my window.

"What do you feel like a burger or chicken?" I asked him.

"Give me a minute," he said, ducking his head so he could read the lit up menu board.

"Welcome to McDonald's. Can I take your order?" the voice came out of the box.

"A number six grilled, no mayo with a Coke. Aaaaaand..." I looked at Edward, who smiled like he was impressed with my ordering skills.

His face was scrunched up as tried to decide. "I'll have the Angus mushroom and swiss, medium well. Are those mushrooms sauteed or grilled? I'd prefer grilled."

"Um, did you say you want a medium combo?" the drive-thru girl asked, obviously clueless to the fact that Edward was even more clueless.

"No, I want it cooked *medium well*. What the hell is a combo?"

I had to control my laughter. "They don't cook to order at McDonald's, sweetheart. What do you want to drink?"

"Coke."

"Make it a combo with a Coke."

"What was that about the mushrooms?" the voice from the intercom asked.

"Never mind," I said through my giggles.

"That'll be \$11.76. First window, please."

Edward scratched his head. "You have to go to more than one window? Why the hell is this so complicated?"

Tears of laughter filled my eyes as I handed the high school girl her money.

He bought me a Beemer, and I bought him Mickey D's. Classic Bella and Edward.

"This is mediocre at best. Why is this the most popular restaurant chain in the world?" Edward asked after taking his second bite of burger. We were sitting at the kitchen island. We had the house completely to ourselves. No Charlotte. No Tyler. No Emmett. Just me and Edward.

"Come on. The fries are good."

"Oh, Isabella. Someday you are going to appreciate the finer things in life."

"Oh, Edward. Someday you are going to appreciate the simple things in life. Eclipse could never get food out to you as fast as McDonald's. It's all about convenience, baby."

He quirked an adorable eyebrow at me. "So, the simple things in life are easy, huh?"

"I've never been easy if that's what you're trying to get at," I replied coyly.

He snorted. "Don't I know it, but I wouldn't want you any other way than the way you are." He leaned over and gave me a kiss, the kind that made my stomach do a flip.

We finished our dinner, cleaned up, and I made him open his presents.

He grabbed the biggest box first and shook it like a little kid. He tore the paper to shreds and pulled the lid off the box. Out of the tissue paper came a black T-shirt with DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGIC written in white.

"Why are you so damn cute?" He gave me another tummy-tickling kiss before opening present number two.

The second gift was more serious. Again, nothing extravagant. He unwrapped it and pulled out a black leather journal. I had spent much of the weekend reading the journal that he wrote in when he was gone. He had let me ask him questions and was incredibly open and honest. Reading it made me think he should do more of that, even if no one but him read it.

"I find writing in mine very therapeutic. You shared so much in your journal while you were away, I thought maybe you'd like to start one now that you're home."

Edward flipped through the blank book and found the inscription I had written in the front. He stopped to read. I had written it, hoping he wouldn't think I was too cheesy. I had simply wrote:

Edward-

I want you to know how proud I am of you and your determination to be the man you want to be. Happiness is not something you stumble upon. No one controls your happiness but you. I want you to fill this journal with happy thoughts and memories, so when the sun doesn't shine or the storms roll in, you can open this and know tomorrow is another day filled with possibility.

You can be anything.

I want you to choose happy.

Love,

Isabella

Edward lifted his eyes to mine. I could see he was sincerely touched.

"I choose happy, Isabella. I choose you and I choose happy." This time the kiss he gave me was the kind that made my heart beat faster and my skin tingle all over.

I wanted to choose happy, too. Edward and happy. Happy Edward and happy.

"One more thing and then dessert," I said when he finally let me breathe.

I made him close his eyes while I lit all the candles on his cake.

"Don't open your eyes until I say," I demanded. I sang a horrible rendition of "Happy Birthday to You" like I was Marilyn Monroe and placed the glowing blue cake in front of him.

"Okay, open your eyes."

Edward was momentarily blinded by all the flickering flames. It took him a second to notice what the cake said. When it finally sank in, he grabbed my hand and pulled me into his lap.

"Yeah?" he asked, looking more hopeful than I had ever seen him.

"Yeah," I said with a smirk.

"Yeah," he repeated. His hand drifted over my behind and his head dipped so his forehead rested on my shoulder.

"You better make a wish and blow these candles out."

He slowly lifted his head, kissing me softly up my neck.

"You love me. There's nothing I need to wish for, baby."

"Well, I don't want to burn the house down, so blow," I told him.

Edward blew out his thirty candles, causing melted wax to drip on the words I LOVE YOU that were written in the center. When he finished, he grabbed me around the waist and lifted me off my feet. He set me on the island beside the cake. I wrapped my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck as he gave me a kiss that set me on fire.

"Say it," he whispered in between kisses. "Out loud. Say it." He pushed his tongue in my mouth, making it very difficult to do as he asked. He moved to my neck.

"I love you," I confessed. I did. I had never stopped.

He pushed both hands under the skirt of my dress. His hands pressed hard against my thighs as he moved them up to the silk panties I chose for this very special occasion.

"I love you, too. I love you so much," he professed against my skin.

I tugged his shirt out of his pants and started unbuttoning. We were going to have dessert and then maybe some birthday cake. He helped me lift my dress over my head. The rest of our clothes followed suit. Once we were both naked, Edward scooped me up.

"We're going to do this first time right. We're going to do this in my king sized bed," he said as I roped my arms around his neck.

"I don't remember you being too disappointed with our first time." I giggled.

Edward's lopsided smile made me wish we could try out stairway sex. "I don't think I could ever be disappointed in sex with you."

Once inside his room, he lay me on the bed and watched me as I scooted to the center of the bed.

"You're so beautiful," he complimented, moving around to the foot of the bed until he was directly in front of me. His gaze caused my entire body to blush.

He was the beautiful one. Tall and lean. He was thinner than he was before he left, but his muscles were more defined. His shoulders and chest, his abs, everything about him resembled a Greek god sculpture. I could feel the lump in my throat. I had missed him so much. I missed him every day he was gone. I had begun to worry I would never set eyes on him again. Yet, here he was. He wanted to worship me. He wanted to love me.

I swallowed hard as his eyes continued to take me in. "Come here."

He climbed onto the bed and crawled up my body. He kissed the tops of my feet, my ankles, the inside of my knees. His fingers wrapped lovingly around my ankles and he pushed my feet towards my body so I bent my knees. He trailed hot kisses

down the inside of my thighs.

I closed my eyes, wanting to focus solely on my sense of touch. Edward released my ankles and let his hands move to my hips and then my waist. His mouth moved closer to the center. I was afraid to touch him. Afraid to anything I did would stop him from touching me where I needed him the most.

"I know it's my birthday, but I want tonight to be about you. Can you handle that?" he asked, planting a kiss just below my belly button.

I opened my eyes to find his absolutely glowing with desire.

"I can handle that."

He smiled and kissed back down until his was met by my arousal. He moaned in pleasure and flicked his tongue out to taste me. His hands gripped me and pulled me closer to him. His tongue moved deeper, slowly lapping up the wetness he created with his touch. I was dizzy. It felt like it had been a lifetime without him. I spread myself wider as my hands squeezed my breasts. My nipples were so unbelievably hard. He did that to me without even touching me there.

One of his hands moved back down my thigh and then his fingers joined his tongue in making me squirm. As soon as one slender finger entered me, I let my hips buck off the bed. He could unravel me so quickly.

"I love you, Isabella. I want to make love to you every day."

Two fingers. One tongue.

Soft kisses.

Tiny nips with his teeth.

Three fingers. So full.

In and out.

Whispers of love.

Whispers of devotion.

In and out.

Coming undone.

His mouth was warm as he kissed up my stomach. His fingers still inside me. He moved up my body. I could only whimper as he wrapped his lips around my hardened pink flesh.

"Let go," he ordered huskily, moving his fingers in and out at a more rapid pace. His tongue pushed on my nipple, sending my body into sensory overload. "Let go. I love you and I'm never going to leave you again."

The tears pricked at the corner of my eyes. I wanted that to be true. I needed that to be true. My body believed. I felt the heat between my legs shoot up my back and through my belly. Edward waited until the clenching of my muscles was at its peak before he stilled himself inside me.

"That's it, baby."

I shouted out. No words, just the sound of release. The tears rolled down my cheeks.

Edward pulled his fingers out and pushed himself all the way up so we were face to face.

"Did I hurt you? Are you okay?" His worry was tangible.

I shook my head. He didn't hurt me tonight, but he hurt me when he left. I was so scared he might hurt me again.

Edward tried kissing my tears away. "What is it? Talk to me."

"You left. You left, and I felt so empty for so long. If you make me promises, you can't break them. I won't be able to handle it. I'm not as strong as you think I am." The tears continued to flow.

"Oh, baby. I'm not going anywhere. I swear to you. I couldn't leave you again if I tried. I'm better. I don't have to go anywhere without you ever again." He kissed me again. My hands dug into his hair. I needed him to be telling me the truth.

"I love you," he said rolling off me and onto his back. He grabbed my hand and placed it on his chest, over his heart. "Do you feel that?" His heart thundered beneath his sternum. "You do that. You make me feel more alive than anything in this world, and I know that because I have been all over this planet. Nothing thrills

me like you. Nothing calms me like you either. Nothing compares to you, Isabella. You are it for me. I have no doubts."

I wiped the stupid tears from my face. He rolled on his side and helped me rid myself of the wetness on my cheeks.

"No doubts. Don't you doubt me. Don't doubt us," he demanded wholeheartedly.

He climbed back on top of me and pushed his way between my legs. He pressed the tip of his erection against me.

"Look at me," he demanded. I could only comply. "I love you. Never doubt it." With that he pushed himself inside me. I felt nothing but his body on and in mine. It was as if I was floating above the bed, the only thing connecting me to the world was him.

"Edward," I said in an exhaled breath.

He moved inside me, making his love for me something more than just words in my ear; he was trying to imprint them on my heart. My heels pressed into his lower back as he went deeper.

I never wanted this feeling to end. I wanted to make love to him until every piece of my heart was permanently fused back together. He pulled out, and I could feel him hot and wet on my stomach. He rolled off and sat on the edge of the bed.

"Come here," he said, reaching his hand out for me. I moved behind him. Hugging him tightly from behind, I kissed him on the shell of his ear.

"I love you, too."

"Come here." He pulled me around and had me situate myself between his legs, facing away from him. He lifted me up and helped guide my body down on his. This position allowed for him to go so deliciously deep, to press on parts inside he couldn't when he was on top of me. He grabbed my breasts and kissed the soft spot where my neck and shoulder met.

I moved up and down on him. My hands pressed on his thighs, supporting me as I bounced. I could feel the sweat running down my back. My thighs began to burn as I raised my body and lowered it down on his lap.

"That's it, baby."

His hands moved down my stomach and massaged my tiring legs. They moved up and he used one to tease me back over the edge. As soon as I fell, he wasn't far behind.

"Fuck, baby. That's it. That's it!" Edward bit down on my shoulder as we both cried out and my legs gave out. I would have fallen if he didn't have such a good hold on me. He held me against him. His strong arms wrapped around me like a safety harness. He would not let me fall. He was not going to ever let me go again.

We cuddled under the covers later that night. Our bellies full of chocolate cake and blue frosting that made our tongues a weird purple color.

"Best birthday ever," Edward said, pressing his lips to my temple.

"Better than turning sixteen or twenty-one?"

He squeezed me tighter. "Monumentally better."

"Wow. Car shopping with a cranky reverse snob and eating McDonald's mediocre burger was your best birthday ever? I'm starting to feel bad for you again."

His laughing body shook me and him. "You make all the difference. You and the fact that you still love me after everything I've put you through makes it the best ever. Imagine how great thirty-one is going to be because we will definitely not go car shopping next year."

My fingers slid through the hair on his chest. "Good idea. Maybe we can skip the whole going out part all together. Go straight to dessert."

Edward tilted my face up so he could kiss my lips. "I think I'm going to like my thirties. A lot."

"Seconds on dessert?"

"Coming right up," he said with a smirk.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

Friday, June 24th at noon

"Did you know that you have a tiny heart shaped freckle on your hip? I think I'm in love with it."

Edward's head was on my stomach, my hands were in his hair, and the bed sheets were a tangled mess around our legs.

Rosalie was going to fire me.

It was his idea to play hooky, and I couldn't say no to him. Not when he was naked and begging me to stay in bed all day with him. A girl just doesn't turn down Edward Masen when he's naked *and* begging.

He had woken me in the middle of the night, making love to me while he whispered promises to never run away again. I fell back asleep after he informed me he wasn't going to work in the morning and was never going to leave my bed. I didn't think he was really serious, but he didn't get up when my alarm went off. When I tried to get out of bed, the begging began.

Presently, he was making out with the freckle on my hip. His tongue ran over it before he bit around it.

"Ow!" I shouted, smacking him on his head. "No biting. Geez! I'm going to go to work if you don't cut that out."

He kissed the spot he had attacked with his teeth. "Sorry. You're just so edible."

"Edible?"

The muscles of his arms flexed as he pushed himself up and moved up my body. He dipped down to kiss my ribs, my breast, my collarbone, and finally my lips. Settling his weight on top of me, he brushed my hair from my face.

"You are the most delectable woman I have ever tasted."

"You want to eat me up, huh?"

His smile sent a shock wave straight to the spot right between my legs, right where he was now pressing his little friend. *Who was I kidding?* There was nothing little about his friend.

"Now, it would be silly of me to eat you all up. I want to keep you forever." He kissed me again, pushing his tongue in my mouth while pushing another part inside as well.

I bent my knees and pushed my hips up to meet him, taking him all the way in where he belonged. *Connected*. This was how we should always be connected. My hands moved down his back, loving the feel of his body exerting itself to be joined with mine. His muscles strained, his hips rocked, his skin warmed.

Edward wrapped his hand around the underside of my knee and pushed my leg up so he could go in further, deeper. I needed him, all of him. It would never be enough. No matter how much he gave, I always wanted more. He was being gentle and slow.

"Harder," I moaned into his mouth.

His eyes opened, and he stilled for a moment. "I love you, Isabella."

A silly, lovestruck smile filled up my face. He told me every day, more than a dozen times a day. Edward never wanted me to doubt how he felt about me. He wanted to be clear. He bent his head and kissed me over and over in the crook of my neck as his hips pushed harder, giving me the more that I asked for.

The friction was glorious. I pushed up to meet every one of his thrusts. He groaned into my shoulder. I loved that I could make him feel like this. Only me. This was one feeling that I alone could give him.

He lifted his upper body off me and knelt between my legs. His hands gripped my hips as he pulled my body back onto his. I could no longer move myself. He held the lower half of my body off the bed and moved me back and forth, watching himself disappear inside me over and over.

"Damn, baby. You feel so amazing."

His fingers dug into my flesh until he changed his hold on me. He put one hand under me and let the other explore where we were joined. His fingers pinched and

rubbed. I could feel the heat rising from there, through my belly, up to my chest. I pushed off my headboard, trying to get closer, trying to take him deeper even though it was impossible. My orgasm took me, causing my entire body to shake and my eyes to roll back.

Edward fell back on top of me, kissing my neck, tugging on my earlobe with his teeth. "That's right, see what I do to you? See how good I make you feel?"

I tried to breathe; I had to focus to do so. He rolled us over, laying me atop of him. This time, I kissed him. I started at his lips and then moved down his chiseled jaw, down to his neck, and then across his chest. I sat up, straddling his hips. I wove my fingers in between his and lifted his arms up and over his head. I leaned down to kiss his mouth again. Slow. Loving. Magical.

He was smiling, and his eyes didn't look the least bit tired even though we had done more of this than we had slept.

"What?" he asked, crinkling up that space between his eyes. I had stopped moving to stare at him.

"Nothing. You look so happy, that's all."

He squeezed both my hands. "I'm more than happy. I'm *beyond* happy."

I did that. I made him beyond happy. Not his charity work. Not Emmett. Definitely not all the hot blonde goddesses in all of Rio de Janeiro. Me. Only me.

I pressed my lips to his, letting my tongue run across his top lip before sitting up. I used my hand to guide him back inside me. Edward's hands roamed my body. He gently ran them up my thighs, around my rocking hips. He glided them across my stomach, over my ribcage, around to my back, to the top of my bottom.

He pushed himself up so he could put his mouth on me. He placed open mouth kisses across my chest as he moved his hands up my back.

"I love you," he whispered with his face between my breasts. "Tell me you believe me."

He kissed the top of my right breast and then my left. He wrapped his lips around my hardened nipple, causing my head to fall back as I pushed my chest towards him. Always wanting more. More, more, more. His tongue swirled around my sensitive flesh. My mouth fell open and only moans of pleasure could come out.

Edward pinched the other nipple with his fingers. "Tell me, Isabella," he demanded.

I lifted my head back up and dug my fingers into his unruly bedhead. My eyes locked on his. "I believe you. You're mine. Always mine."

"That's right." He kissed my lips. His mouth was wet, warm, *mine*.

I moved up and down his length, rolling my hips back and forth. I could feel him growing impossibly harder.

"Yours," he declared, falling back on the bed. He lifted his hips off the bed, pushing deeper. I felt him twitch inside me, releasing his seed.

I fell on top of his body, both of us covered in a light sheen of sweat. His chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. He kissed the top of my head as I let my body slip beside him on the bed.

"I'm retiring."

I propped my head up on my hand. "Retiring from what?"

"I'm never leaving this bed. I might as well retire and turn the company over to someone else. You should retire as well since there's no reason to be here without you."

I giggled. "I haven't been in the workforce long enough to retire."

"Work is overrated. Making love all day is so much better. Trust me." He pulled me against his chest again.

"I believe you," I said, still laughing. "But all this lovemaking has made me a sticky mess. I need a shower."

"You need to eat, too. We skipped breakfast."

"You find us something to eat. I'll go get cleaned up." I popped up, but he yanked me back before I could crawl out of the bed. He kissed me deeply.

We were never going to leave this damn bed.

"Thank you for believing me," he said when he released me. I knew he wasn't

talking about work. He loved me. He made it very hard to deny.

I placed a chaste kiss on his cheek. "I love you."

I slid out of bed and padded down the hall to the bathroom. It had been quite a week. Edward and I had spent quite a bit of time together. Sometimes it was like he never left. It was so easy to fall back into certain rhythms. We could banter back and forth like old times. I enjoyed the comfort his touch provided. His affectionate words and promises of complete devotion were doing a good job of stroking my ego. He was so sweet, and it felt too good when we kissed or he made me laugh.

My desire to take care of him was still there, too. I liked making him smile. I wanted to show him I cared, but I was still running a little hot and cold. I made a point not to spend the night at his place other than on his birthday. I didn't even see him on Wednesday. I went out with Angela and helped her pick out some baby stuff to put on her registry. I kept telling myself, *balance, balance, balance*. That meant it couldn't be all about Edward. I was probably giving him terribly mixed messages. I was suddenly the one with multiple personality disorder. That was most likely why he kept demanding I say I believed him. Edward was different but the same in many respects. His patience could still be tested. He still wanted what he wanted. Apparently, he wanted me and was determined for me to believe it.

I stepped in the shower and under the warm spray. My body was tired even though it had spent over twelve hours in bed. I hadn't done enough resting. I smiled. That wasn't necessarily a bad thing. Being physically intimate with Edward was worth all the fatigue and soreness. We had an intense sexual relationship before he left. Now that he had come to terms with what he was feeling for me, the sex was on a whole other level. I never imagined hearing him say those words would add such a necessary layer to our relationship, but it did. Now, I was the one holding the words to my chest, afraid to use them as liberally as I had in the past. We really were reversing roles this time around.

I lathered up and rinsed myself off, knowing it wouldn't be long before I smelled like sex and Edward again. There were worse things to smell like, I supposed. I shut the water off and wrapped my hair in a towel before securing one around my body. I stepped out into the hallway and smiled at the sight of Edward in nothing but boxer briefs stirring something on the stove.

"Are you cooking?" I had to ask, for it was a little unexpected.

He turned around and grinned. "The only thing you have in the cupboards is macaroni and cheese. Your refrigerator has even less in it. How do you subsist on

noodles in imitation cheese sauce and some sort of weird dried potato crisp from a can?"

"Pringles are not some weird potato crisp." I opened the cabinet housing my red can of Pringles. I pulled off the lid and lifted out a stack. "These are my favorite. The only good thing about Jasper not really living here anymore is that he doesn't eat them all before me."

"That's the only good thing?" Edward asked, cocking a brow.

"Well, I'm assuming you would not be making me mac-n-cheese in your underwear if he were here. That would be a shame."

He seemed pleased with that answer and shook his cute butt while stirring the noodles. "You could have Char pick you up groceries and drop them off here, you know."

I shook my head. "Charlotte is my friend, not my employee. I would never ask her to do my shopping."

"She would do it as your friend, Isabella." I caught him rolling his eyes as he set the wooden spoon down.

"I am capable of doing my own shopping," I said, hoping we could put this eerily familiar conversation to rest. "I can't believe you didn't order take out."

"I believe I am quite capable of..." he lifted the now empty box "...boiling the noodles rapidly, stirring occasionally, seven to ten minutes to desired tenderness. Do you have a desired tenderness that I should be aware of?"

Edward stepped towards me with a predatory look in his eyes. I took a step back but bumped into the counter. He pinned me against it, placing one hand on either side of me.

"I like my noodles tender and soft."

"Are there other things you like tender and soft?" he queried with a lick of his lips. "Scratch that, I think I'd love to hear what you like hard, Miss Swan."

I swallowed hard as my chest heaved. He inhaled through his nose, dipping his head so he could put his lips on my bare shoulder. He closed his eyes as he breathed me in.

"I think you know," I replied as my eyes began to flutter. He made me feel under a spell.

He reached up and unwrapped the towel on my head. My hair fell in thick, damp clumps over my shoulders, down my back. He threw the towel into the hall just outside the small galley kitchen where we stood.

"You smell good. Really good." He pushed my hair back. "Take your towel off."

He made my whole body hum like some sort of electric fence; the tingling feeling spread through my arms and legs.

"But-"

"Take. Your towel. Off," he interrupted, leaving no room for discussion.

Our eyes were locked. As much as I hated being told what to do, this kind of bossing was the biggest turn on. He knew it, too. The look in his eyes told me he knew I was going to shut my mouth and drop my towel. So, I did.

"You can look, but you can't touch," I said defiantly.

Edward threw his head back as he laughed. "Oh my sweet Isabella, there is no way in hell you can stand there in front of me and not want me to touch you. If I stood here, not touching you for...a minute, you'd be begging me to put my hands on you."

I wanted to tell him take a flying leap, except that I was suddenly wishing he would press his bare chest against mine and I hoped his hands, which were currently gripping the countertop behind me, would grip my waist instead. *Damn him.*

I gave in right away. "Well, you can touch certain places, but tender is a good way to describe how I'm feeling in others."

Edward's hand went through his hair. "Did I hurt you? Are you okay?" Bossy Edward was quickly replaced by *Tender* Edward.

"I'm fine," I said, smiling at how quickly he could turn all sweet and gentle. I put my hands on him, running them slowly up his chest and resting them on his shoulders. "I'm just a little sore."

His hands encircled my waist and then glided over my hips. "Would it be wrong if I admitted that I kind of think it's hot that I made you sore?"

"Only if it's wrong that every time it hurts, I think about what you did to me to make me that way."

"Now, that's hot." His fingers pressed harder into my skin. "Telling me I can't touch you there, makes it the only place I want to touch." He pushed his body flush against mine. The contact was divine.

He kissed me, quickly coaxing me to let his tongue inside. His hands moved to my behind, and he squeezed my cheeks roughly. He made me want him to touch me where he shouldn't, but suddenly something started to smell really bad. Something was burning.

"Edward," I mumbled against his lips. "Edward."

He was in a zone. I had made the land of milk and honey off limits and now he was trying to grope me everywhere else while his tongue took up residence in my mouth. I tapped him on the shoulder with both hands.

"Something's burning." I leaned away from him and turned my head. "The noodles are burning!"

Edward stopped kissing long enough to process what I just said. He released me and ran over to the stove where, sure enough, the pot of noodles was smoking.

He took it off the heat and turned the burner off. He had accidentally boiled all the water off.

"What the hell happened?"

"I think you got distracted and they boiled a little longer than seven to ten minutes." I giggled.

"You think that's funny?"

I nodded and laughed. "I have never seen anyone burn boxed macaroni and cheese before."

"Aha, ha, ha, ha. So funny," he murmured sarcastically. "Where do you keep your take out menus?" He threw the pot in the sink and turned the water on it for good

measure. "And put your towel back on, you devil woman."

I chuckled at his expense all the way back to my bedroom after I handed him a menu for Chinese delivery and asked him to get me some orange chicken. I brushed my hair out and twisted it into a bun. Throwing on a T-shirt, I thought about changing the sheets on the bed. I started to yank them off when Edward came in the room.

"I guess lunch is going to take a little longer than expected. Sorry about that."

I shrugged. "It's fine. Help me pull these sheets off. Since you aren't cooking you can help me make the bed."

Edward pulled the fitted sheet off his side of the bed. "You're domesticating me. I have never made a bed in my entire life."

I tossed the dirty sheets on the floor and stared at him for a second. "Your mom never made you make your bed?" He shook his head. "Esme?"

"Esme doesn't make her own bed," he snorted.

"What did you do when you were in college?"

"Paid girls to do it for me. They did my laundry, too; sometimes just for the chance to go out with me."

"That's so wrong," I said, shaking my head at both his arrogance and the low self-esteem of some girls. I would never do a guy's laundry to get a date.

I pulled some clean sheets out of the closet and shook out the fitted one.

Edward was unapologetic. "Right or wrong, it got my clothes cleaned and my room picked up."

"Is that how you would want your son to act someday?" I tossed him his side of the sheet.

"We're talking children all of a sudden?" he stopped and stared.

"Hypothetically," I added with an eye roll. "If you were to have a son someday, wouldn't you want him to be more independent, be able to take care of himself? Not treat girls like that?"

"I think if he's smart enough to come up with ways to get things done that don't require him to do the actual manual labor, more power to him."

I was not going to convince him that way. "What if you have a daughter? Would you like it if some guy dated her because she changed the sheets on his bed?"

Edward smirked. "I'm not worried about my daughter."

"Why's that?" I was truly curious.

There was no cockiness in his expression. He looked at me in all seriousness and simply stated, "My daughter will be exactly like her mother."

His words stopped me cold. My heart did that crazy flutter thing inside my chest.

"Hypothetically, of course," I said, tucking the sheet in on my side.

He stared at me with that goofy grin on his face. "I guess. Who knows, right? We could have all boys."

My mouth fell open and a dumbfounded "Ha," came out. He was imagining us married, with kids. *Kids*, plural. It was my own fault for starting this conversation about hypothetical children in the first place.

"I have no idea what I'm doing here," he admitted, holding a corner of the sheet in his hand. Perhaps, he hadn't noticed that I was completely freaking out on the inside.

I walked around to the other side and took the sheet corner from him. He stopped me as I pulled it down, over the mattress.

"Well, how am I going to learn if you do it for me, Isabella? Teach me, I want you to teach me."

I let go of the sheet and reached up, taking his face in both my hands. My emotions were once again a tangled mess. As much as the thought of marriage and kids scared the hell out of me, the idea that Edward wanted these things with me made me feel...blessed. Every time I thought I was seeing the old Edward, the new one would pop up and blow me away. His willingness to grow, to admit he didn't have an answer to everything was enough to make me want to cry.

"Please be real," I pleaded. "Please, please, please. Please don't be too good to be

true."

"Do you have any idea how many times I have said that to you in my head?" he said with a laugh.

I lifted up on my toes and kissed him with all the affection I could muster. I loved this man. I loved him so thoroughly. Before he left, he was so complicated. It made me afraid of my feelings for him. Now, if he was for real, everything could be so *un* complicated. Loving him could mean never having to be afraid again.

"This is real, Isabella."

He walked to the end of the bed and stretched the sheet over the last corner. He came back over to me and pulled my shirt up over my head, discarding it on the floor.

He sat down on the half-made bed, his back resting against the headboard. He pulled me down and situated me between his legs, my back to his front. His hands skimmed across my skin; down my arms, my stomach, my thighs, and back up again. He didn't stop moving his hands as he talked.

"Your skin is so soft, so delicate. Touching you reminds me that even though you act tough, I know there are parts of you that are fragile. I know that your trust is one of those soft spots. There can't be any more secrets between us. We shouldn't hold back. Talk to me. I can't prove my sincerity unless you let me."

I thought he was thinking about sex, but he surprised me once again by thinking about love. I was naked in his arms, and he wanted me to bare my soul as well.

I leaned my head back against his shoulder and looked up at him. "Are you seeing a counselor?"

He seemed surprised by my question. "Yes."

I let out a long breath. That was good. Charlotte was right about that much. "Are you worried that things could get bad again?"

"I've put a lot of demons to rest. I'd like to keep it that way. I saw a counselor before, but I wasn't ready. I couldn't be open about the things I needed to be open about. I think I can now."

"I'm glad you're doing that."

"I'm trying to face things head on before they become a problem."

"But we're going to face things together, too, right?"

Edward placed a couple kisses on my shoulder. "We're going to face everything together," he said; but then, shook his head. "Let me take that back. We're going to face everything we should face together as a couple. Some things we have to do on our own."

"I do like the idea of some balance this time around."

"I want to support you; I want you to support me. I've learned that I can't create a perfect world for you. I don't have that much control. As much as I'd like it, I just don't." His hands were moving again, lightly dancing across my body. "We have to live in this world, and shit's going to happen, stuff neither one of us can control. All I want is that at the end of the day, I know I have you in my corner and vice versa."

"Emotional support," I clarified because I didn't want to ever fight about money again.

He squeezed me a little and kissed my head. "Yes, emotional support. I won't buy you any more jobs."

"I want to keep my apartment, too."

"What about when Jasper moves out for good?" He sounded surprised by my statement.

"I was thinking about that before you came back. I probably need to find an inexpensive place closer to school."

Edward sighed. I knew what he was thinking. The estate was very close to school and would cost me nothing.

"I imagine spending the rest of my life with you. What do you imagine?" he asked.

I slipped my fingers in between his on my stomach and let my head tip forward. "I'm trying not to think that far ahead yet. I can't see being without you, though."

"That's good." He nuzzled his nose in my hair. "Why live apart then?"

Thoughts of Darkward popped in my head. "I don't know. I'm trying to be

cautious."

"I'm not going anywhere. And if I did, *which I'm not*, would living here really make it easier?"

I tensed. "Nothing would make it easier."

"I don't know what it was like to be left, but I know exactly what it felt like to be the one who did the leaving. As much as you think you couldn't survive my leaving again, I *know* I wouldn't."

I had read the journal. I knew what he went through. He wasn't ever going to choose to leave.

"I know you aren't going to leave on purpose."

Edward's arms tightened around me, and he pulled me somehow closer. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I don't know. I'm glad you're going to counseling. It means a lot that you aren't acting like you have it all under control."

"But the ugly parts of me still worry you."

I turned my head back again so I could see his face. "You have no ugly parts, baby. The damaged parts worry me. The parts your dad messed up."

"I'm working on it," he said quietly, his eyes avoiding mine.

"I know." I caressed his face with my hand.

"I'm never going to be perfect. I'm still going to be me." The hurt in his voice made me feel so horrible.

I turned so I was facing him and buried myself into his neck, wrapping my arms around him. "I don't need you to be perfect. I loved you before you left, and I love you now. I just want you to be happy with being who you are, even if that person isn't perfect. I don't want you to leave me because you feel like you aren't who I need. I need you."

It was his self-loathing and his history of being unable to forgive himself that scared me.

His body relaxed underneath me. "If that's all you're afraid of, then we're going to be fine. I'll give you some time if you give me some. Don't make a decision about where you'll go after the lease on this place runs out until it gets closer."

His confidence made me less worried. I kissed his neck. "Fine."

"Oh, you have no idea how happy that makes me."

That was a lie. I could feel exactly how happy that made him. I kissed his lips, and we rearranged our position. He pushed his legs together so I could straddle his lap. Screw being sore.

"I deserve you, Isabella. We balance one another out."

That was a good way of thinking about it. I was a big fan of balance. He kissed down my neck.

"Is it the meditating that makes you so wise?" I teased as he made a home between my breasts.

I could see his cheeks move because of his smile. "Geez, I get no credit for being naturally intelligent? It's got to be the meditation?"

"I forgot how smart you are." My fingers combed through his hair.

He looked up at me with those shining eyes. Green and soft like the greenest meadow.

A knock at the door interrupted our fun.

"Food's here," I announced, reluctantly getting off him.

"I'll get the door, Naked Girl. You can get us some drinks from the kitchen."

Edward got off the bed and slid himself into some pants he had set on a chair in the corner of the room. He grabbed his money clip and cash off my dresser and went to the door. I picked up one of the sheets off the floor and wrapped it around myself. I didn't think the delivery guy was going to come in the apartment, but you could see into kitchen if you stepped into the living room. I wasn't taking any chances.

Edward went to the door as I opened the refrigerator. I really did need to go to the store. I had a little milk, a few beers, and an already open two liter of Dr.

Pepper. Chinese and Dr. Pepper sounded good to me.

"Well, I don't think that's any of your goddamn business," Edward said, sounding horribly rude. I set the two liter down on the counter and looked out at what was going on.

That was when I heard the voice coming from the other side of the door. "You're a real asshole, you know that? Don't you have some big company to run? I'm here to see Bella."

Jared.

"I don't really give a shit what you want." Edward's voice was menacing. "She's sleeping. You need to go, and if she hasn't made it clear, don't come back."

I was wearing nothing but a sheet, but this was headed in a very bad direction.

"You don't speak for her," Jared argued.

"You don't have a chance with her. Get over it."

"Edward," I said from behind him.

He looked over his shoulder, and his eyes went wide.

"Bella?" Jared pushed open the door while Edward was distracted by me.

"What the hell are you doing?" Edward nearly shouted at me.

My eyes went from his angry face to Jared's devastated one. Jared was holding a styrofoam container and a brown paper bag. He was bringing me something to eat. I felt an enormous amount of guilt even though I had made myself clear time and time again regarding my feelings.

"Jared..."

"You look like you're feeling better. I guess you really didn't need me to bring you some lunch."

"I-"

"If you want to talk to him, could you please go put on some fucking clothes?"

Edward was seething.

I scowled at Edward and then looked at Jared. "Can you give me a minute?"

He shook his head and shrugged. "Whatever."

"Edward," I said, nodding my head so he would follow me. I did not want to leave them in the same room together.

With fists clenched, Edward followed me back to my room. I dropped the sheet and quickly threw on my T-shirt before wrenching open my underwear drawer.

"Unbelievable." Edward stormed across the room to grab his own shirt.

"He's trying to be nice to me."

"Not him. You! You might as well of walked out there naked!" he practically hissed through his teeth. His jaw was bulging with tension.

"I didn't want you to fight with him."

"Why doesn't he know you and I are back together?"

"Have we even been back together a week?" I felt like he was being a little hard on me. I slipped on some shorts.

"You work with him, don't you?" he snapped.

"I was gone last week, he's been picking up some more dinner shifts. I haven't worked with him since the day you got back. The last time I talked to him was after my grandma's funeral. That didn't seem like the appropriate time to let him know I was thinking about getting back together with my ex."

Edward's head shot up. "You talked to Jared while you were in Florida?"

I shook my head at him. His possessiveness was not always attractive. "Yeah, we had phone sex right after I buried Gran. It was hot."

He didn't appreciate my sarcasm. "Don't talk to me like that when I'm already pissed off."

"He's my friend, and he called to make sure I was doing all right. That's it."

"He's done being your friend. Try to make that clear," Edward said, storming out the same way he came in.

Well, the king had spoken. This was old school Edward at his best...or worst. By the time I made it back to the living room, Edward was closing the front door behind himself. I figured he was going to wait for the delivery guy outside. That or he was going downstairs to bitch at Tyler for not stopping Jared from getting up here.

"I'm sorry for this...and that." I motioned towards the door, figuring he'd understand what I meant.

"I don't need your apology, Bella. I see that I interrupted something. You and your billionaire are back together. Rosalie told me you called in sick. I thought I could bring you some soup. I guess I was just an idiot."

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't get a chance to tell you in a better way than this. You're a good friend, Jared"

He wasn't even listening to me. "He walked out on you, and you take him back like it's nothing," he scoffed. "I thought you were better than that. I didn't think you'd throw yourself at him the minute he showed up."

I cocked my head to the side and put my hands on my hips. "You don't know anything about me and Edward. Don't assume anything about what we've gone through to get back here or why we had to go through it. You don't get to judge me."

"I came over to bring you some food before I headed over to Eclipse. I'll be sure to let Rosalie know you most definitely spent the day in bed." He set the soup container and bag down on the coffee table.

My head fell back in frustration. There was nothing I could say. He had this fantasy that we were destined to be together no matter how many times I told him we weren't. He went to the door and opened it. Tyler was standing outside.

"Perfect," Jared huffed. "Your guard dog is here." He walked past Tyler and towards the stairs.

My shoulders slumped, and Tyler walked in.

"Woof," he said with a smile. "Everything all right?"

I laughed humorlessly and shook my head. "Did he really send you up here?"

"He's waiting in my apartment for Jared to leave. I came up to make sure things were clear."

I sat down on the couch. "I love that they're both mad at me."

"Mr. Masen is not mad at you. Jealous as hell, but not mad at you."

I rubbed my forehead. "He was pretty pissed at me when he left."

"Jared reminds him that he was way too close to losing everything. It's not anger; it's *fear*. I'll go get him, if you're ready."

"Tell him that he can't come up unless he's sure he's going to be nice to me."

Tyler laughed as he opened the door. "Maybe you can write him a note that says, 'I like you. Do you like me? Check yes or no.' Then, I can run it back and forth between you two. That would be so much fun for me."

"Oh, Tyler." I sighed. "Remember when you didn't talk? Those were good times."

He smiled and winked. "I'll send him back up. Careful with that sarcasm," he warned, pointing a finger at me.

Tyler managed to diffuse my anger quite easily. Hopefully, he could do the same for Edward. No one made more sense than Tyler.

A few minutes later, there was a knock on the door. I got up, feeling bad that he didn't think he could just walk in. I opened the door only to be greeted by the delivery guy.

"Oh." I wasn't prepared for him. I didn't even know where the hell my purse was. "How much is it?"

"I've got it." Edward came up behind the guy with his money in hand. He glanced at me with cautious eyes, then at the guy holding our food.

He paid and came inside. "I'm sorry," he said, sounding like a child whose parents made him go apologize to his sister even though he didn't mean it.

"Did Tyler tell you to say that?"

"He might have mentioned it was a good opening line."

It took a second, but both of us cracked a smile.

"It usually works better when you mean it."

"I'm sorry for yelling at you. I'm not sorry if I hurt Jared's feelings. I don't care about his feelings."

"It's not fair for you to be mad at him for becoming interested in me after you left."

Edward let the brown paper bag with our food fall to the ground. He clawed at his hair. "I don't really care about fair, Isabella. He wants to take you away from me. I get to irrationally not like him!"

"It doesn't matter what Jared wants. It only matters what I want."

"Right! And you wanted to protect him. You wanted to make him feel better." He was angry at me, frustrated that I had cared about Jared's feelings.

"Because I felt bad that he thought I was sick but instead found out I was home having an all day love fest with you!"

Edward stepped towards me. I stepped back until I hit the wall. "Do you have any idea what it does to me to think that he could have been the one in your bed, the one touching your skin, the one you let love you?"

Part of me wanted to sass back at him. Remind him it was his own doing. He had taken the risk that I would move on with someone else. He was lucky I hadn't opened my heart to anyone else. That wasn't going to get us anywhere, however. Tyler was right; I needed to watch the sarcasm. I didn't want to fight. I wanted to go back to the damn love fest.

"But he wasn't because I only want that person to be you."

He pressed his body against mine, his eyes dark but not angry anymore. He grabbed my wrists and pinned my arms above my head. My breathing quickened.

His words came out in a growl. "Only me."

His mouth came down hard on mine. Edward could still put my mood swings to shame. From Mr. Zen in the bedroom before Jared showed up to a sex-charged caveman after. Tender Edward was gone as he handled me roughly; yanking my

clothes off, gripping my body with strong hands, biting my lip, grazing my jaw with his teeth.

He didn't even bother taking his clothes off. He dropped his pants and freed himself enough to allow him to enter me. This was sex; it was not about convincing me he loved me. This time, he was marking his territory. Perhaps, he was convincing himself that I loved him. By accepting his need as readily as his affection, I would prove that I cared about him. I took them both because I did love him.

There were so many feelings; the wall at my back, the warmth of his body everywhere else, the softness of his hair in my hands. Yet, it was the sounds that stood out. The sound of his body pounding into mine. The sound his mouth made as it sucked and kissed at my skin. The way his breathing became ragged when I lifted my legs off the ground and wrapped them around his waist, allowing him to slip in deeper. His feral grunt as he exploded inside me.

He held me against the wall, breathing heavy, hiding his face in the crook of my neck.

"You're not going to leave, right?" he said quietly into my neck. "I know I might make you want to."

The little boy was still inside there, afraid I wasn't going to love him enough to put up with the things that made him who he was. I had been so wrapped up in my fear, I failed to acknowledge that his still existed.

"I'm here. I've always been here, and I'm not going anywhere."

He readjusted his hold on me and pulled me off the wall. We held on to one another. Two healing hearts, trying to make sense of this overwhelming love we felt for one another. There would always be one love for us. I was his and he was mine.

"Favorite movie."

"The Hangover."

"The Hangover?" Edward stopped scratching my back.

"Funniest movie I have ever seen. I don't think I have ever laughed so hard."

"Seriously? Your favorite movie is a mindless comedy about a bachelor party in Vegas?"

"Come on," I said, smacking his chest lightly. "It has a little bit of everything. I cried it was so funny."

He shook his head. "Thank God you have Jasper to spend pizza and movie nights with."

"He totally loves it, too."

"Shocking."

We both laughed.

"First kiss," I threw out.

"Carrie Wilson, third grade."

"You kissed a girl in third grade? Don't boys think girls are gross in third grade?"

"I never thought girls were gross. Plus, Carrie was in fourth grade, so it was kind of exciting to be with an older woman."

"Go figure. Now, you're some sort of cradle robber."

"Again with the old man comments," he said, tickling my sides. I squirmed on his chest until he stopped.

"Sorry, won't happen again."

Edward kissed the top of my head. "Worst date."

I was going to have to be honest. I hoped I didn't ruin our fun. "Our first date."

"Ugh, I was afraid you were going to say that. You didn't even get to eat there and it's really a great place. We should go back. Redo."

"I can't believe I went out with you again after that."

"Me either. I was so messed up back then. You were so unreal. I thought for sure you had to be messing with me. Talk about too good to be true."

"You were so confusing. One minute we were having this great conversation and the next, you were this cold bastard."

"Not one of my better moments. You proved to be the real deal that night, though. Left my ass and paid the bill. I was so pissed."

I kissed him under his jaw. "That was the intention."

"I love that you aren't afraid to give it back when I'm a jerk."

"I'm glad you aren't really a jerk." I kissed him again, this time on the lips. "Weirdest thing you've ever eaten."

"Oh, that's a tough one. I've eaten some weird stuff in other countries. China has some interesting food; but in Thailand, I had Khai Khao."

"What's that?"

"It's basically a fertilized chicken egg with a nearly developed embryo boiled alive inside."

I rolled off him. That was the grossest thing I had ever heard in my whole life. "Why in the world would you eat that?"

"It's a common thing over there. Southeast Asia, Vietnam, China. In some countries it's called balut. People eat it all the time." He pulled me back on top of him.

"The weirdest thing I've ever eaten is calamari. I'm thanking the Lord for Jimmy Johns right now."

Edward laughed so hard he was wiping his eyes. "Man, I need to get you out of the States more often."

"Not if you're going to make me eat boiled chicken babies!"

We both fell into a fit of laughter. Our evening had been like this. Comfortable. A little bit silly. Very...normal. We ordered pizza for dinner, drank the last of the beer in my fridge, and were back to cuddling in bed.

"Favorite time of day."

"Hmmm, that's a tough one. I kind of like first thing in the morning."

"Why's that?" he asked, playing with my hair, twirling strands of it around his finger.

"I don't know exactly. Maybe it's because no matter what happened the day before, you have a chance to either make it better or do it all over again."

"Is that why you always have a smile on your face when you wake up? I swear, you do look happy in the morning."

"I guess."

My turn to ask a question was interrupted by Edward's phone. He reached over and grabbed it off the nightstand. He had kept it off during the day so work didn't bother him but figured he'd better turn it back on in case something important came up after hours, which seemed unlikely. Perhaps, we were wrong about that though.

He read the text and groaned.

"What is it?"

"Sometimes Emmett is at the top of my to-be-fired list."

"Why? What happened?"

"He just texted me that he can't keep his fucking mouth shut. Seriously, how hard is it to tell your girlfriend you went to work today?"

"What did he do?" I had a bad feeling about this.

Before he could answer, my phone chimed.

"He couldn't bring himself to lie to Rosalie. He told her he had the day off because I didn't go into the office."

I had a very bad feeling about this. "And did she ask why you didn't go into the office?"

"She asked why he didn't have to guard me at home."

I sat up and crawled out of bed to get my phone. "And Emmett told her what

exactly?"

Edward sighed in frustration. "That Tyler was guarding me."

I clicked on my new message. It was from Rosalie. I was right.

You're fired.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Dun, dun, dun. Is Bella really fired? Hmmm, come back next Friday! Okay, so big huge thanks to tennesseelamb and Nic for helping me out with this bad boy since my BFF and prereader momof4luvntwisaga had emergency surgery this week. Momo also looked it over in the dead of night from her hospital bed. Dedication, I tell ya!

I apologize for the delay in getting this out today. I wasn't sure it was going to be ready for the normal posting day, so it's later than usual but at least I got it out on Friday!

Couple announcements:

Fridays at Noon is up for Fic of the Month over at The Lemonade Stand. If the spirit moves you, go and vote. There were a lot of great fics highlighted this month. Vote for this one or one of the other ones because they're all deserving! . ?zx=35d62c9d4b46d37b And yes, the address begins with teh, not the. I don't know why. It just does.

The lovely Raum has interviewed me for her reading lounge. My first interview! Crazy! It should be up next week sometime - .com And if you haven't checked out her one shots, you should. The Moon over Volterra and The Love Path - they are both quite lovely. I saw SR rec'd them out in his last chapter. Come on, what more do you need to know?

Lastly, holy cow we hit 10,000 reviews this week. I am completely floored. Thank you so much for taking the time to comment. Many of you feel like friends now because I hear from you once a week :) I did not reply this week because I literally wrote this and the birthday outtake over the last six days. (blackmumba - everyone wished you a happy birthday, you should check out the reviews from the last chapter!) Thank you for reviewing. I read every

single one. Sometimes twice!

Blog is updated. I let Pennyward have the honors of writing the post this week. I know how much you all liked the interview last time.

Have a great weekend. See ya next Friday. XOXO, TF

Chapter 26

Chapter 26

Friday, July 1st at noon

We stood side by side, hand in hand, facing the door.

"You don't have to stay in there. You could just go in and then go back downstairs for lunch."

"No, I need to do this," he said resolutely, staring at the closed door. "I've been going to the office. I used to see him every day at the office. You would think that would be harder."

Edward was determined to eat in the private dining room this Friday. He and his counselor had decided that he should face his anxiety about going in there. They had spent their last session talking about how I had gotten fired, Emmett had gotten fired, Emmett got rehired because I wouldn't allow Edward to do that because of me, and I got rehired because Rosalie decided she could also show some compassion. Since Eclipse played such a vital role in Edward's relationship with me, this led to talking about Alec, which led to talking about Alec's murder, which led to talking about how Edward felt he had sent Alec to his death the last time he ate in the private dining room.

I was surprised, maybe even stunned, when Edward stopped by my apartment Tuesday night and told me all of that. This Dr. Cope person seemed to be getting right to the heart of things with him. I was amazed that he was so open with him and then again with me. He even asked if in the future, I would be willing to come with him to talk to Dr. Cope. Without hesitation, I said yes.

I hated that Edward thought he was responsible for Alec's death. We talked about it that night while he brushed my hair after we kind of got carried away in the shower together. He admitted that he didn't have any intel that James was coming after him that night. He agreed that Alec would never hold him responsible for what happened. Yet, the guilt still had its dirty hands wrapped around his neck.

"Do you want me to open the door?" I asked, trying so hard not to rush him but feeling more and more anxious the longer we stood there. This was more nerve-racking than I thought it was going to be for me. I had not been in there since

the day Alec died. Part of me felt like we'd open the door and be greeted by his smiling face and his twinkling eyes.

Edward took two deep breaths. "No. I'll do it."

I felt Tyler gently brush against my shoulder. He and Emmett were flanking us on either side. Tyler didn't accidentally do anything. I glanced in his direction. He gave me a reassuring smile, trying to ease my worry. We talked quite a bit about this on the way to work today. I had asked his opinion on "Operation Private Dining Room," and he thought it could go either way. This wasn't the only issue we were dealing with today, however. No, we had another very large problem on our hands.

James was scheduled to face a judge on Wednesday but did not appear in court. He was on the run, running from the authorities and the men Edward had looking for him. Edward thought he had most likely left the country to go into hiding. I was feeling less sure about that scenario. I was certain he was going to come for Edward, get his revenge. Security was doubled to make me feel better. It was a good thing Emmett wasn't fired. Edward had Emmett and Garrett with him while I had Tyler and Liam with me at all times. Hence, the need for both of them to be in the restaurant with us now.

Even with the James drama, it was decided that I would support whatever Edward wanted to do and look to Emmett for help if it didn't go well. Emmett had supported Edward through some of his darkest times. He had found ways to rally him and push him past the worst of it. If we had a setback, there was no one else I wanted at Edward's other side.

"You ready?" Edward asked, tearing his eyes away from the door for the first time. He squeezed my hand and checked for my reaction.

I smiled up at him. "I'm ready."

Edward gripped the knob and pushed the door open. No Alec. Just the dining room, exactly the same as I remembered it.

"Together?" he asked.

"Together." I nodded as we stepped into the room.

There was a strange vibration that ran through my body when we made it all the way in. Memories of working in here and eating in here flooded my mind. Good times, bad times. A wide range of emotions had been experienced in this room.

Fights and first kisses. We had sex in here. I accidentally spilled wine on him and wanted to throw a few drinks in his face a couple times. My birthday was celebrated here. A hundred thousand pennies once covered the table, chairs, and floor.

"Em," Edward called out, turning back to see if his bodyguard and friend followed us in.

Emmett stepped up. "I'm right here, sir."

"You're off duty for lunch."

"I figured, E. It's all good." Emmett clapped his hand on Edward's shoulder. "You want Bells to get us some drinks? I think we should stick with the nonalcoholic kind."

Edward frowned at him. "I'm not going to get drunk because I'm eating in here."

"I didn't say that."

"Yeah, you didn't have to." Edward kissed my temple and sat down at the head of the table.

"You're good?" I asked, biting my lip and watching him carefully. His breathing seemed normal, but his fingers tapped nervously on the tabletop. His other hand pushed up his hair.

"I'm fine," he said unconvincingly. Emmett walked around to sit on Edward's right. "Not there. Don't sit there." Edward's request stopped Emmett immediately. He turned around and sat to his left.

Alec sat to his right. Alec always sat to his right. He sat on his right the last time all three of us were in this room.

"Do you want me to get you something to drink?" I asked.

Edward pushed his chair back. "No, I want you to come here." He patted his lap.

I made my way over to him, needing to feel him as much as he probably needed me. We wrapped our arms around each other when I sat down.

"There were a lot of good things that happened up here. You and me. That's what I want to remember about this room." Edward nuzzled my neck.

"That's what I want to remember, too."

He was quiet for a minute. We sat, comforting one another with our touch not our words.

"I wish I hadn't sent him in my place."

I gently brushed the hair on his forehead with my fingers. I couldn't bring myself to agree. Had he not sent Alec, I'd be the one seeing Dr. Cope for therapy.

"I know you do," I empathized. He looked up at me, his eyes filled with an endless amount of regret. I wished I had the ability to change things for him, to keep Alec and Edward alive. All I had, though, was the power to love him through his grief. "I love you."

We kissed, letting our lips linger.

"I love you more than words." His voice gave away his melancholy.

I stroked his cheek with the back of my fingers. He was still healing, still mourning. My heart ached right along with his. He was a man who knew too much about loss. We were going to work together to see that we didn't lose one another. I leaned in to kiss his lips one more time.

"What would you like to drink, sir? We have a wonderful Grand Cru or perhaps you feel more like a nice Chave?"

"Oh, you're getting so good at this waitressing thing," he said with a hint of a real smile. "Too bad you have to leave soon to go teach the young minds of our fine city."

"Are you suggesting that I wasn't always good at this?"

"I believe I have the nickels to prove it." His breathtaking grin made me smile back.

I got off his lap and smoothed out my skirt. "You and your damn nickels."

"I'll just have a Perrier with cucumber," he requested after he stopped laughing.

"Really?"

Emmett snorted and Edward frowned. "Are you questioning my order? I take back

my compliment."

"Cucumber water? Sounds gross, but you've eaten boiled chicken babies so what should I expect?"

"Boiled chicken babies? What the hell?" Emmett's face twisted in disgust.

"The duck ones are a delicacy and an aphrodisiac by the way," Edward defended.

"Keep telling yourself that. If you ate a boiled chicken or duck baby and I knew about it, I wouldn't even kiss you for like a month."

Both men laughed.

"Keep telling yourself you could resist kissing me for a month, Isabella."

He was right, but I wasn't going to admit it. Good thing Eclipse did not serve boiled embryos of any sort. I took Emmett's drink order and headed down to get them made up.

Tyler was standing guard outside the door.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"He's good. Walking in was the hardest part, I think."

"The first step usually is."

I put my hand on his arm. "My wise, wise friend." I turned to go but stopped. "Does it bother you?" Tyler looked at me confused. I gestured towards the door. "His relationship with Emmett?"

"No. Should it?"

"I don't know, Alec was the closest thing to a friend that he had, and I always thought of you as the second. Then Emmett came out of nowhere, and they're best buddies. I just wondered if that bothered you."

Tyler smiled and shook his head. "You are such a girl."

"What? Guys have feelings, too. I know. I have a lot of guy friends."

"Oh, I know, Bella. Trust me, we all know about you and your guy friends."

"Are you done? See what I get for being concerned about your feelings?"

"It doesn't hurt my feelings. My relationship with Mr. Masen is ninety percent business, ten percent personal. We're a little bit too much alike to go 50/50. Now, if you go off and start playing Black Ops with Liam, I might get a little jealous."

It was my turn to laugh as I headed down the stairs. "Something tells me you won't have to worry about that," I said over my shoulder. Tyler was my friend, my 50/50.

I had promised Angela I would help her out today after work. She had offered to take care of Ben's niece for a few hours as a way of testing her mothering ability. She was beginning to doubt herself, worrying that she wasn't going to be a good mom or a responsible parent. She knew Ben was going to be great because he was a teacher and had the patience of a saint. Angela was basically an only child until her mother got pregnant with twins when she was in high school. She had two little brothers but had basically gone away to college soon after they were born. Ben's sister had a three-year-old daughter. We were going to take little Reese to the aquarium and for a stroll along the waterfront.

We were walking along Alaskan Way. Angela was pushing Reese in her little umbrella stroller. I pointed out some sailboats to her, and she got a kick out of some of the seagulls. Angela was trying hard to be attentive but tended to freak out whenever she seemed unhappy. I showed her the magic of snacks and a sippy cup and we were enjoying some quiet time.

"I've never been so afraid of doing something in my whole life," she admitted.

"You're going to do great, Ang. First of all, this is not being a mom. This..." I waved my hand over the stroller "...is not being a mom. This is babysitting. When it's your baby, it will be totally different. It'll be easier."

"You think?"

"Absolutely. You'll know your baby better than anyone else. You don't know Reese. It makes it harder."

Reese threw her stuffed elephant out of the stroller and then whined, pointing at

it as Angela pushed. I reached down and grabbed it, placing it back in the little girl's lap. The whining stopped immediately.

"You seem to manage just fine," Angela scoffed.

I rolled my eyes. "My mother was a kindergarten teacher, and I started babysitting when I was ten. Like I said, this is babysitting. Being a mom will be totally different."

"Do you think about being a mom?" Angela asked, glancing at me. "I mean, Edward's back. You two seem really serious again. Is there talk of a happily ever after?"

I shook my head and sighed. "Seriously, we've been back together for two weeks, and everyone has us married with kids already."

"So, you haven't thought about it at all?" She looked at me skeptically.

"Have I thought about marrying him someday? Of course I have."

"And little billion dollar babies?"

I shot her a disapproving look. It always was about the money to other people.

"To be honest the money is the thing that has always caused me pause when it comes to thinking about the future with Edward. I can't imagine it because he doesn't have a normal life or at least the kind of life that I'm used to."

"Think of all the security you'll have following you when you have kids." Angela nodded in Liam's direction. He was walking in front of us and to the left side while Tyler walked behind us and to the right. They weren't right on top of us but rather created this large bubble around us. They had this weird way of creating space. People naturally just kept their distance from those two.

"It won't always be like this, I hope."

"Well, I wouldn't mind the maid and the cook, but the personal security could be difficult to deal with."

"It takes some getting used to," I confessed.

"You could have had a normal life with Jared," she said his name all sing-songy.

"I'm not in love with Jared. Normal or not, it wouldn't have been a good life if I was with someone I wasn't in love with."

I was in love with Edward. I would always be in love with Edward. If that meant I had to live in his crazy world, I would do it. I just didn't know if I would bring a child into it. That was not something I needed to decide now and not something I would decide alone. Although Edward had talked about our hypothetical children, I had no idea what he really thought about it. I wanted children, but there was never going to be anything I wanted more than Edward.

"Don't get me wrong, Bella. I think if I had a guy like Edward Masen, I would be all over that. He is seriously one fine looking man."

If it wasn't the money, it was his looks. He was always reduced to these two things as if they really had anything to do with the man himself.

"He's more than his looks and money. He is so much more than those things."

"Really? So much more?" Angela wiggled her eyebrows. "Like how much more are we talking here?"

"Don't make me smack a pregnant lady."

"Oh come on! You can't deny me this kind of information. I deserve to fantasize accurately. That's all I'm saying."

We were both giggling. I shook my head. "You are such a pregnant pervert. You know that, right?"

"Come on now. I'm going to be fat, my feet are going to swell, and the baby books say I should become a human farting machine any day now. Fantasizing is all I got."

"That is so gross." I could just imagine how much Tyler was enjoying this conversation.

"It's true. You can Google it."

I linked arms with her and turned us in the direction of the aquarium. Reese loved looking at all the colorful fish. The sea otters were her favorite, though. They swam around and poked their head up out of the water. Their playfulness had all three of us entranced. We were checking out the fur seals when all of a sudden someone's arms were around my waist and I was yanked backwards and dragged into a

partially enclosed space outside the bathrooms. As I was being moved, I caught a glimpse of Liam in a full-out sprint, almost taking out a family walking towards the gift shop.

Tyler tossed me into the corner.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked, confused and anxious.

Tyler slid his hand into his suit coat, and I saw him unlatch the strap on the gun holster that held his gun in place. My eyes nearly bugged out of my head. I had no idea he was carrying a weapon. He held an arm out, keeping me in the corner of the space as he stepped forward and looked out into the exhibit area. There was some commotion and people shouting. My heart was thumping in my chest.

"We're getting you out of here, but you need to stay close to me. Do you understand?"

I understood completely. James was here. I could feel my blood run cold. He was why Liam was running.

"What about Angela and Reese?"

"You are my only concern."

"Bella?" Angela's voice was a little shaky.

I took a step forward only to have Tyler's hand push me back almost immediately. "Stay right there," he said very much in command. He stepped towards the open area. "Miss Weber, we're going to have to part ways here. You need to move along. Miss Swan needs to head over to Mr. Masen's."

If I wasn't so afraid, I would have stepped forward so Angela could see me and I could tell her goodbye properly. The thought that James could be out there somewhere kept my back pressed firmly against the wall, though.

"Sorry, sir, these bathrooms are out of order," Tyler said to a man trying to get to the restrooms.

The man looked like he wanted to argue but then thought better of it.

"You can't keep people from using the restrooms," I said, trying to peel myself off the wall.

"I can and I will until I can get you out of here. There are no guarantees he's here by himself. For him to get this close with me and Liam here, he's either crazy or not alone."

He might not be alone. I started thinking about Felix and the other guy who tried to kidnap me. I could feel myself starting to shake.

"These bathrooms are out of order, ma'am," Tyler said, turning away a woman and her two kids just as a woman came out of the bathrooms. The exiting woman looked at him odd.

The mother with kids wasn't afraid of Tyler. "She just came out. Were the bathrooms broken?" she asked the other woman.

"Worked fine for me," the woman answered, slipping past Tyler.

The mother took that to mean she could go past him. Tyler stepped in her way. "Ma'am you need to find another bathroom. Now."

"Are you all right?" she asked me. "Is this man threatening you?"

It took me a second to process what she was asking me. "No. No, no. He's not." What the hell was I supposed to say? He's my bodyguard, protecting me from a pyscho who is trying to kidnap me because I'm dating a billionaire.

"I'm going to get security." She stormed away.

"Great," Tyler said under his breath. His phone went off. He put it on speaker. "Tell me you got the son of a bitch."

Liam was out of breath. "He jumped in a car. I got a partial plate. It was the best I could do. He's a fast little fucker."

"Come back here and help me get her out of here."

"Getting the car," Liam replied before Tyler hung up.

James got away. Again.

"When Liam gets here, you stay between us. If I put my hand on your shoulder, that means I want you to hit the floor. Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"If I put my hand on your back, I want you to run. Do you understand?"

I nodded again.

"If security shows up before Liam, you do the same thing. You keep yourself between me and him. Okay?"

"Okay."

A security officer did show up before Liam with the angry lady right behind him. Tyler pulled out a business card and handed it to the guy who looked like he should have retired about twenty years ago.

"Tyler Crowley, head of security for Masen Corporation. I need help escorting this woman out of the building. Do you think you can help me, sir?"

"I thought there was a problem with the bathrooms?" he said, looking over his shoulder at the irate mother of two.

"He said the bathrooms were broken when they weren't. He has this girl shaking in fear!" she shouted.

"He's my friend. He's not the reason I'm afraid. I swear," I said, trying to reassure her.

"Can you help us get out of here?" Tyler asked the guard.

The old man shrugged. "Sure. Not so sure what the problem is. You get spooked by the sharks, ma'am?"

"You're just going to let him take her out of here?" the woman screamed. It was kind of her to want to protect me but this was a bad time to make a scene.

I stepped forward and tried to smile. "I promise you, Tyler is one of my very closest friends. I am in no way afraid of him."

Liam appeared, even more out of breath than he sounded on the phone. "Let's go. I'm just outside the entrance."

The next couple of minutes were a whirlwind. Tyler and Liam whisked me out of

the aquarium and into the car so fast that I didn't even get a chance to look around and see if Angela was still there or if there were menacing henchmen. Tyler slid in the back with me while Liam got in the driver's seat.

My heart was pounding so hard and fast. I couldn't even begin to process what was happening. Tyler put his large hand on my small knee.

"You okay?"

Was I okay? Did James Hunter follow me into the aquarium? Was he really in Seattle? Was he here to kill Edward? Hurt me? Both?

I shook my head as the tears welled up in my eyes. I fell into Tyler's arms and sobbed.

"I knew he was going to come here. I knew it. Edward thought he was going to leave the country, but I knew. He's a desperate man. Desperate men do desperate things."

Tyler and Liam let me ramble on. They didn't argue or even agree. They just listened. I couldn't do this. I couldn't fall apart. If we were going to win this fight, if I was going to keep Edward from being swept back up into the darkness, I was going to have to be a lot stronger than this. I needed to show Edward I was tough enough to handle whatever James tried to do to us.

I sat up and wiped my face. Edward could not see me crying. He could not see me freaking out. I had no idea how all this was going to impact him and his progress in the right direction.

"Don't tell him I cried."

"Bella -" Tyler began.

"Don't tell him. Please. I'm fine. Promise me." I looked at him sternly.

He sighed like I do when I think someone is being unreasonable. "I promise, but it's okay to be a girl. You're a girl."

"I know." I let my head rest against his thick arm.

"Masen Corp or the city residence?" Liam asked, surely uncomfortable with my emotional outburst.

"My place," I answered before Tyler.

"Bella, we need to get you somewhere we can easily secure."

"I need to get something. Then, we can go wherever. Should I call Edward? I don't think I can do it yet without crying. I am not going to cry." I took a deep breath. That seemed to help Edward.

"I'll call him when we're on our way to his place."

I continued to take deep breaths as I rested against my 50/50. He was an excellent bodyguard when he needed to be and a great friend when I needed that even more.

"Guys cry, too, you know," I said softly so only Tyler could hear.

Tyler chuckled and squeezed my knee again. "I know, Bella. I know."

Tyler came into the building with me while Liam stood guard outside the building. I went to my bedroom and headed straight for my closet. Getting up on my tip-toes, I pulled out the metal box on the top shelf. I set it on the bed and went to the nightstand. I grabbed the small box that was tucked in the back of the drawer and tossed that on the bed as well. I thought about packing some clothes. I would probably stay at Edward's until James was caught. I searched for an overnight bag.

"You know I could have gotten clothes for you later," Tyler said from my doorway.

"I needed to get more than some clothes."

He took a few steps into the room and his eyes locked on the items on my bed.
"What are you doing?"

I glanced at him as I packed a few things to wear. "What?"

Tyler walked over to the bed and picked up the small box. "What the hell are you doing with bullets?"

"Well, you can't shoot a gun without them," I replied sassily.

He shook his head. "You don't need a gun. Where the hell did you get a gun?"

"Did you think my dad was going to send me back to Seattle unprotected? We didn't know you were following me around. For all we knew when Edward left, I was

on my own. There was no knowing if James would believe I was of no use to him. Better safe than sorry."

"You don't need it, Bella."

"You have one," I argued.

His shoulders dropped in frustration. "That's why you don't need one."

I wondered how long that had been the case. "Have you always carried a gun?"

"No."

"Well, if you're worried enough to have one, I'm worried enough to have one," I reasoned. I grabbed the metal box that contained my handgun. "Give me the bullets please."

"You can't carry around a loaded weapon."

"My dad made sure I got a concealed firearms license. So, yes, I can. Give me the bullets."

Tyler looked more stressed out than I had intended to make him. He tossed the box back on the bed. "Shooting a person is not like shooting a target or a deer. If you think you had a hard time shooting a deer -"

"Hopefully I don't have to shoot anyone, but if James thinks he can get his hands on me and I'm not going to fight back, he's wrong. Dead wrong." I opened the case and took out the handgun so I could load it.

"Now you sound like Mr. Masen before he left on his mission of self-discovery."

I cocked my head. "I'm not devising a plan to break into James' house, so I can commit murder. That's what you both were planning. I'm protecting myself. I would never do anything except act in self-defense."

I opened the box of ammunition and detached the magazine so I could load it. Once it was full, I slipped it back in and pulled back on the slide so there was a bullet in the chamber ready to go. I slipped the gun behind my back in the waistband of my pants.

"You're just going to walk around toting a gun stuffed in your pants? Come on."

Leave it in the box. This is ridiculous."

I did need to get some sort of holster. He was right. I slipped it back in the box and put the rest of the bullets and the gun case in my overnight bag and slung it over my shoulder. "Let's go. We need to talk to Edward."

He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes but stopped arguing with me. With nothing left to say, I made my way out of the apartment. Liam was waiting just outside the building.

"Watch yourself," Tyler warned Liam. "Annie Oakley here is packing some heat."

"What?" Liam said, turning on me.

Since he didn't get the car door for me, I opened it myself. "Don't start with me or I might shoot both of you."

"Where the hell did you get a gun?" he asked me, then fussed at Tyler when I wasn't answering. "Where the hell did she get a gun? You're letting her carry a gun?" He made his way around to the driver's side as Tyler opened up the passenger's side door

"He's not letting me do anything," I said, feeling a tad bit annoyed by his parental tone. Liam and Tyler both got in the front seat. "It's my right as an American citizen. I have a license from the state. My father is a cop and taught me early on how to handle a gun. Can you please relax?"

"You know how to shoot a gun?" Liam was flabbergasted by all this information.

"Well, maybe if you had talked to her once in a while when you were her guard, you'd know something about her," Tyler said slamming his door shut.

"Ha! Like I could ever get a word in! She used to talk nonstop, but it was never about anything interesting like her knowledge of guns."

"I am sitting right here. I can hear you, you know," I called out.

Tyler turned his head and looked pissed. "I won't tell about the crying, but I'm telling about the gun."

"I was going to tell him anyway," I snapped back. "So there, you big tattletale."

Liam barked out a laugh. Tyler turned his angry glare on him. "I'll encourage her to shoot you. Watch yourself."

Tyler was uneasy about this, but I knew it was going to be fine. I was more than capable of handling a gun. He pulled out his phone and called Edward. He gave a very concise version of events at the aquarium and informed him we were headed to the condo. He looked back at me while Edward must have been saying something.

"Yeah, hold on." Tyler held the phone out for me. "Can you talk to him without...you know?"

I took the phone. "Hey," I said as calmly as I could. I could not cry.

"Are you all right?" Edward's voice was tense but controlled.

"I'm fine. A little shook up but fine."

"I will not let anything happen to you."

"I won't let anything happen to you either. Are you coming to the condo?"

"I'll be there before you are. I love you."

"I love you, too," I replied, relieved that he could still say it so easily. I was not going to let anything move us backwards.

"Let me talk to Tyler one more time."

I handed the phone off and pulled out my own. I texted Angela a lengthy apology. I called Jasper to let him know what was happening and where I was headed. I didn't cry, which was promising. Perhaps I would be able to hold it together when I saw Edward. Jasper didn't beg me to run away, which was even more promising.

Edward, Garrett, and Emmett were all waiting for us when we got to the condo. Edward and I clung to one another for a bit longer than necessary. As much as Tyler could comfort and protect me, nothing but Edward's arms made me feel truly safe and secure. In his arms, I knew we were both alive and well. I fought the emotion that seeing him created in me. I pushed it down so I could put on a brave front.

"I need to talk to the security team," Edward informed me when I finally let him go.

"I want to hear what you're going to talk about. Don't dismiss me into the other room," I pleaded. His lips fell into a straight line. I could see him trying to come up with a reason for me not to come in. "Please, Edward. We're in this together. No more secrets."

He let out a breath and took my hand as we led the security team into his office. There were not enough chairs for everyone to sit. Edward went behind his desk. I sat down across from him. The security guards all stood.

Edward dialed someone on his phone and left it on speaker so the ringing was the only sound filling the room.

"Whatcha got for me, Masen?" Peter's voice was as boyish as ever.

"I need you to help us track down a car. I got a make and model and a partial plate," Edward replied. Edward nodded to Liam who rattled off the information.

When he finished, Edward began again, "I also want to get into the city's red light cameras. See what you can dig up on any car that matches the description. He was in a hurry, he might have got careless."

I started to realize why he originally wanted me to stay out of this. These laws were being broken to find James, though. As long as all we did was find him so we could turn him over to the police, I was fine with that.

"I checked his offshore accounts this morning and didn't see any movement. Did you check again this afternoon?"

"I didn't check. I can do that. I don't think he's going to touch his offshore stuff until he gets offshore himself, you know what I mean?"

"Someone has to be helping him. We need to go back and look at who would risk everything to help him. We have to be missing something." Edward raked his hand through his hair. He had spent more time on this than I had thought.

There was more talk about stuff I didn't understand. Edward let Peter go and began talking to Tyler about what happened at the aquarium in more detail. Edward's jaw was tense, but he remained calm. Tyler reiterated what he had said to me about James either being crazy or not alone. Edward was on board with crazy.

"I want you to make sure the guards we have on Alice and my aunt and uncle stick closer than usual. No satellite security, they need to be on top of them."

Tyler and Edward discussed coverage and things they would need to think about if James was spotted again. Emmett would comment occasionally. Garrett and Liam kept quiet unless asked a direct question. I had nothing to add, but I was glad he let me sit in all the same. At least I knew they weren't planning to kill anyone. When they finished, Edward had everyone but me and Tyler leave at Tyler's request.

"He's planning on telling you that we stopped at my apartment to get my gun. I have a registered gun and a license to carry it. I brought it because obviously Tyler thinks things are dangerous enough that he needs one."

Edward stared at me in disbelief.

"I wasn't going to tell on you," Tyler said, rolling his eyes. "I think we need to discuss the practicality of you carrying a weapon. You aren't going to carry it around at work. When you're out in public, you have me and Liam. I don't see why you would need to be toting a gun, too."

"I don't have to carry it all the time. I just want to keep it close by."

Tyler wasn't convinced. "You aren't going to shoot anyone, Bella. You need to think about the fact that you could be disarmed and have it turned on you."

"I'm not planning to shoot anyone, but James doesn't know that. It could be enough to keep him from running until the police could get to him."

"That's a big risk for little payoff," Tyler said, shaking his head. "Have you ever shot at something that's moving?"

"No."

"No. Have you ever shot at something under pressure or with distractions or near other people, who could get caught in the crossfire?"

"No."

"No. If you shot someone once and it didn't stop them from coming at you, are you prepared to keep shooting until they do stop moving?"

"I don't want to shoot anyone," I said, seeing his point but sticking to my metaphorical guns.

"Exactly. You don't want to shoot anyone, but he wants to shoot you, and he will

do so without hesitation. If you become a threat, he will end you."

"You have a gun?" Edward finally spoke.

"My dad had me get it before I came back to Seattle."

"You have a gun?" These were the only four words Edward was able to say.

"Yes, I have a Glock 31." I looked at Tyler. "I won't carry it all the time, but I want it in the car when I'm in it. I want it somewhere I can get to it wherever I am."

He clenched his jaw and shook his head back and forth slightly. "Bella..."

"You have a gun?" Edward's hand was back in his hair. He was still staring at me like I was an alien.

"Can I talk to him alone?" I asked Tyler, cluing into the fact that Edward was not taking this well.

Tyler left me alone in the office with a still-stunned Edward. I stood up.

"Come here," I said, walking around the desk and putting my hand out so he'd stand up.

He stood up and took my hand, pulling me into his arms. "You have a gun." At least it wasn't a question anymore.

"Yes, I have a gun. Do you want to see it?"

"Your dad thought I would leave you unprotected?" I could hear the dismay.

"My dad wanted me to feel like I could protect myself. James is in Seattle. I will do whatever Tyler says, but I also want to be able to protect myself."

Edward's hold on me tightened. "We're not going to live like prisoners this time. I don't want you to feel like you can't be you. At the same time, I certainly don't want you running around with a gun."

I pressed my cheek against his chest. "I'm not going to be running around with a gun. Tyler and I will work it out."

"You and Tyler." He sounded bothered. "You two almost argue like you and me."

"He's my 50/50. Like Emmett is yours."

Edward pulled back so he could look at me. "50/50?"

"Fifty percent bodyguard, fifty percent friend. Excellent at both."

Edward sighed, squishing me against him again. "Thank God he was an excellent bodyguard today."

"You're calmer than I thought you would be about all this. I thought hearing about James being that close would send you in a tailspin," I said, being completely honest.

"I could say the same thing about you." He rubbed his hands up and down my back.

"Tyler made sure I felt safe the whole time. I knew he wouldn't let anything happen to me."

"Tyler, Tyler, Tyler," he said like he was tired of hearing his name.

I had to laugh. Edward got jealous of the silliest things.

"He's the best and you know it."

"He is the best, which is why he protects my heart."

It felt like my heart swelled so big that it might have been the reason there was also a lump in my throat.

"I love you."

"I love you, Isabella. But not the thought of you with a gun."

"My gun, my choice."

"Is that how it works?" he said looking down at me while still holding me close. I nodded. "Well then, my Isabella, my choice."

"Doesn't count with people."

"Sure it does." He was unbelievable, yet totally predictable at the same time.

"You don't get to say what I can or cannot do. You can have an opinion, which I'll take into consideration, but you don't make all the rules."

"I like making the rules." He was smiling. He was being so calm about this, joking with me about whether I should carry a gun or not.

"I'm waiting for you to unleash some pent up feelings about this, about him coming here to hurt you."

"You missed that part," he replied somewhat apologetically. I wasn't sorry I missed that but was sorry he had been angry.

"But you calmed down?"

"I'm...calmer," he said as he let me go. "I need to keep telling myself that one man is not going to outsmart me and my entire security team. We're safe, and he's a wanted man. Now that we know where he is, he's destined to go down in flames."

"Rational Edward. I like him."

He scratched at his head. "I'm trying. How do you feel about keeping our reservations at Il Bistro tonight?"

We had planned a second first date. Edward wanted me to erase the bad memory with a good one. We had reservations for nine o'clock because we were going to go see a movie, too. With James on the loose in Seattle, I wasn't sure that was a good idea to run around the city.

"Maybe tonight is a good night to stay in."

Edward took my hand and pulled me out of the office. "We shouldn't let James control what we do. We'll have guards."

I stopped walking, pulling on his arm. "Hi, my name is Bella, and you are?"

He smirked and squinted one eye. "You're funny."

"You're freaking me out by not freaking out."

"Well, let's just say I will need to pay some carpenters to fix a hole in the wall at the office. I also need to text Maggie and ask her to order some new chairs. Thanks for reminding me."

I touched his face. The man I knew was still in there.

"I'm sorry."

He bent down to kiss me. "Not your fault."

"I cried," I admitted. Honesty was a two-way street. "When we got in the car, I cried."

He kissed me again and pulled me in for a hug. "I'm sorry, sweetheart."

"Not your fault either. You know that, right?"

"I know."

"Dinner and then straight back here," I offered.

He kissed my forehead. "Perfect."

Il Bistro was exactly the way I remembered it. Cozy and warm. Romantic and unpretentious. So the opposite of how Edward came off when I left here the night of our disastrous first date. We were given a table in the back corner without anyone on either side of us. Tyler and Emmett both joined us inside while Garrett and Liam watched outside.

Frank was just as I remembered as well; genuinely welcoming. He spoke with me and Edward for a few minutes before turning us over to the waiter. Dinner was surprisingly pleasant. Considering the madness of the day, Edward and I were able to somehow set it all aside and focus only on one another.

"How's the ravioli compare?" he asked, lifting his glass of wine and smiling all flirtatiously.

"To Char's?"

He nodded, touching my hand that sat on top of the table. I wiped my mouth with my napkin. It was so nice to see him relaxed despite the threat looming over us. There wasn't even a hint of the darkness.

"She spoils me terribly. I don't know that anything can compare to her cooking,

but this was excellent."

"I'm glad you liked it."

"I'm glad we came. This is exactly how I needed this day to end."

Edward's crooked smile lit up his face. "This is not how we're going to end this night, Isabella. I have an even better ending planned."

"Really, Mr. Masen?"

He said one word that set my body aflame, "Dessert."

I raised a hand to get our waiter's attention. "Check, please."

In the backseat of the car, Edward kissed my neck and slid his hand up my thigh, making it very difficult to think straight. Brady was not driving fast enough. I really didn't want to have dessert in the backseat of the car with Tyler and Brady in the front.

I began to giggle.

"What's so funny?" Edward asked, bringing his mouth to my ear.

"Last time we ate at Il Bistro, I walked out on you because you propositioned me for...*dessert*. This time, dessert is all I want."

We both began to laugh. He threw his arm behind me, and I snuggled against him.

"I can truthfully say I am not disappointed if all you want me for is dessert. I'm totally good with that."

We got to the condo and rode in the slowest elevator of all time. Edward was holding my hand, but I was looking forward to his hands being everywhere else. I bit my lip, thinking about all the things I wanted to do to him as well.

"Is this elevator taking longer than usual or is it just me?" Edward asked, looking up at the numbers lighting up above the doors and bouncing on the balls of feet and rocking back on his heels.

Tyler shook his head but said nothing. I let out a soft chuckle. It was good to know I wasn't the only one looking forward to what was going to happen once we got

inside his condo.

We got to his floor, and he nearly yanked my arm off, darting out of the elevator.

"Goodnight, Em, Tyler."

Edward opened the door, pulled me in after him, and closed it in the bodyguard's face before they even had a chance to say goodnight back. His mouth was on me before I could laugh. His hands pulled on my shirt so he could slip them underneath. They were warm on my already heated skin. I roped my arms around his neck as I deepened our kiss. He tasted better than any dessert on any menu.

"Couch or bed?" he asked, pulling back so he could lift my shirt over my head.

"Floor," I said before dropping to my knees and undoing his belt.

"God, I love you." He threw his keys on the small table in the entryway.

I pressed my hand against his crotch. He helped me get his pants unbuttoned and unzipped. I licked my lips in anticipation. Together, we slipped him out of both his pants and boxers. I gently stroked his erection as he began to unbutton his shirt. I gripped him with two hands, and he groaned in complete satisfaction. I could do better than that. I was just about to put him in my mouth when his phone went off in his pocket.

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!" Edward roared.

I sat back on my heels and dug it out of the pool of clothes around his ankles. I handed it to him.

"Masen," he snarled. He was quiet while he listened. Cradling the phone between his ear and his shoulder, he bent down to pull up his pants. "But the fire is out?"

Fire?

I popped up and picked up my shirt.

"I can be there in thirty." He hung up and looked at me with all the lust missing from his eyes. "He tried to get into the estate. Broke the windows in the french doors in the living room. Set fire to the curtains. The alarms went off, the sprinklers went off."

"Charlotte?"

"I don't know. That was the alarm company."

"Give me your phone," I demanded. He handed it over, and I quickly dialed her. It went to voicemail.

Edward was headed for the door. "I have to go over there."

"I'm coming with," I called after him.

Charlotte didn't answer the entire drive to the estate. Edward tried to tell me she was probably talking to the first responders. He was sure she was fine.

As soon as we turned on Edward's street, I could see lights glowing from behind the trees that surrounded the house. We went through the gates, and it looked like a prison courtyard at night. Flood lights lit up the entire perimeter of the house. It was like we drove into the daytime, it was so bright. There was a fire truck and several police cars in the circle drive. Uniformed men were everywhere. I searched for Charlotte and spotted her in a pink housecoat, talking to one of the officers.

I leapt out of the car and ran for her.

"Hey," she gasped as I nearly squeezed the life out of her.

I couldn't speak. I could only hug her. Between the episode at the aquarium and this, I was losing my ability to think about this without fear being the dominant emotion.

"I loved those curtains," she complained. "Esme had them custom-made with fabric Mr. Masen found in France."

I laughed and cried at the same time.

"What's the matter?" she asked, pulling back and wiping the tear that slid down my cheek.

"You didn't answer your phone, and he could have gotten in the house."

"Oh, Bella, sweetheart, how I wish he would have. Then this could all be over."

I let go of her. She looked fine. Well, she looked like she had been in bed. She was

in her pajamas, housecoat, and slippers. Edward joined us and kissed her cheek, telling her he was glad she was all right.

"I'm going to give this back to you ma'am," the officer said to Charlotte. He handed her a hunting rifle.

"What the-" Edward's eyes went wider than mine.

"I sleep with it under my bed. I wish that dirtbag had come inside so I could have showed him how it works." Charlotte slid the gun strap over her shoulder.

"Since when do you sleep with a rifle under the bed?" I asked.

"I don't know. Since my husband died. It was his. I got it licensed in my name after he passed away. This is the first time I ever thought about using it."

"What the hell is up with the women in my life and guns? I should call Alice, maybe she's got a fucking rocket launcher!" Edward's hands gripped his hair.

Charlotte was fine. She had been awoken by the alarm, grabbed her rifle, and headed downstairs. The fire was almost out by the time she got to the living room. Edward, unsurprisingly, had a state of the art sprinkler system. She said the police and fire department arrived in a matter of minutes. There was no sign of James but he couldn't be far. She told the police exactly who they should be looking for. They had patrols combing the area.

We took Charlotte back to the condo with us. Edward and Tyler had spent a long time at the estate talking to the police and then alone. They were both more anxious-looking, which made my stomach hurt. It was late when we finally got back to the condo. Charlotte went to her room after giving me one more hug. Edward and I made it back to his in silence. I began to imagine all the crap going on in his head. Fear and doubt began to creep over me. It wasn't fear of James; it was fear of Edward.

I sat on the bed. "Promise me something," I requested as he began to undress.

"Anything."

"Promise you won't leave." I could feel the tears. I didn't want them to show up, but they weren't cooperating.

He tossed his shirt on the floor, came over, and sat beside me. Taking my hand in

his, he pressed his lips to my temple.

"Sweet girl, I promise to never leave. Never. No matter what."

I swallowed down the emotion creeping up in the form of desperate sobs and hugged him tightly.

"They'll probably catch him tonight. He could not have gotten far from the estate. The police will find him and he'll be back in custody in no time with a whole new slew of charges. He'll be in jail for much longer than before."

I was glad to hear him be so optimistic. I needed him to stay that way. I feared the darkness. I detested it.

"I know it's hard to trust me, but you know I never promise unless I mean it. I will not leave you. I will never leave you again, I promise."

This time we were going to do this together. This time James was not going to win.

I fell asleep that night in Edward's arms. I had wild, vivid dreams. Seals and sea otters were lying all over the living room. The fire sprinklers were on and keeping them wet. James was in the house, running from room to room with me and Charlotte in hot pursuit. She had her hunting rifle and I had my Glock. We chased him all the way to the roof where he climbed up on the railing and held his arms out like he was going to do a swan dive. Charlotte pointed her rifle at him and told him to get down. James smirked and stared right at me. His blue eyes were cold as ice. I could almost feel the evil behind them penetrating my skin. I raised my gun, too. Just before I pulled the trigger, I heard Edward's voice, begging me not to do it. I turned my head just as Charlotte's gun went off. I turned back and James was gone, but Tyler was standing on the rooftop patio with us, his hand clutching his bleeding stomach.

I jolted awake. Edward was still asleep, completely still at my side. I watched his chest rise and fall until morning, unable to close my eyes again for fear the dreams would only get worse. I wondered if it was dreams like mine that kept Edward awake the last time. We really had reversed roles. No one was leaving this time, though. No one.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

Happy Water For Elephants Day! Did you all catch my little shout out? Can't wait for this movie. Well, James is a bugger. Ramblings on the blog.

Thanks to my lovely prereader, momofffourluvntwisaga, who is recovering well from her surgery. Thanks to all the Pennyward Support Groupies on Facebook and those of you on Twitter that are always rec'ing this story out. I love you guys. Big hugs to all the readers of this story. Thanks for every review, PM, and email. I appreciate all the support. It is DarcyFitz1's 40th birthday TODAY! Happy birthday! Thank you for not having a birthday on a day other than Friday so it was easy for me to help celebrate it ;)

Happy Easter to those of you who celebrate. TF and the Easter Bunny need to get their act together and make some Easter baskets. Have a great weekend.

XOXO,

TF

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

Friday, July 8th at noon

Waiting. There was nothing more frustrating than waiting. I felt like I was waiting for so many different things. I was waiting for the police to find James, for Edward to crack under the pressure, for Peter to figure out who was helping James, for James to come after us again, basically for the other shoe to drop.

None of those things happened this week, though. James was still on the loose but hadn't reappeared. Peter was struggling to find any accomplices. And Edward? He was much too even-tempered.

I hated that I doubted him. I wanted to believe in him. He spent so much time away from me, so he could come back and never have to leave again. I believed that. He loved me. I believed that, too. I knew it, felt it. He hadn't planned on James being an issue for a very long time, however. When he came back, he thought James was no threat. James was a threat, though. He was a desperate man out to get the one person he blamed for making him that way. Edward had the darkness locked up, but how long could it stay that way with James bound and determined to release it?

I spent my days hoping and praying one of the other things would happen first. I hoped and prayed James was caught before Edward had a reason to break.

Waiting. I was waiting to see which would come first.

"Your order is up. Do you need help running it?" It was the most Jared had said to me in two weeks. He had asked Rosalie not to schedule us for the same shifts. Today, he was filling in for someone else and had kept his distance until now.

"That'd be great." I gladly accepted his olive branch. I was so much better at being someone's friend than their enemy.

"I'm sorry for being a total tool," he said, helping me put plates on a tray.

I looked at him with a disapproving head tilt. "You're not a total tool. Maybe...*half* a tool."

He smiled and nodded his head. We walked the order out to the dining room and past Tyler, who stood just outside the main area so he could keep an eye on me while I worked. I supposed he looked like he was restaurant security, although I didn't think any restaurant I'd ever been to had such a thing.

"Grrr," he growled quietly as we walked by. I looked back over my shoulder at him, and he was laughing at his own ridiculousness.

"Great, he barked at me earlier. Now, he's growling." Jared set the tray on the stand. "That'll teach me to watch what I say, huh?"

"Sorry. His bark and growl are much worse than his bite. I promise. He's just messing with you. I'll tell him to stop." Just when I was mending fences.

We served Table 4, and I grabbed the empty tray and stand. I walked over to Tyler with a nasty scowl on my face.

"Be nice or I'm swapping you for Liam. Then you can sit outside and watch the door like a good guard dog."

Tyler shoulders shook as he covered his mouth with his fist. "Come on. I'm just having some fun with the guy."

"Play nice or else," I said, having a hard time containing my smile. He was being uncharacteristically silly, which wasn't exactly a bad thing.

Eclipse was busy today. Someone said the guy at Table 7 owned the Seahawks. Emmett was probably going to find that more interesting than Edward. Knowing Edward, he probably knew this Paul Allen guy already. I checked my phone. It was twenty minutes past noon.

"Is Edward here yet?" I questioned Tyler, knowing Edward was quite capable of slipping past me. He shook his head and looked at his watch. His brow furrowed for a second.

I figured Edward must have gotten caught up in something at work. He was definitely back into work mode. Last night at dinner, we were interrupted by phone calls about the new project Masen Corporation was developing. Edward did make up for his lack of attentiveness by joining forces with Tyler to play me and Char in a game of Hearts. Mr. Super Genius, who could probably count cards for all I knew, won every game. It was unbelievable and annoying and sexy as hell. After I threw all fifty-two cards at him, he sent Tyler and Char on an errand and bent me over the

couch, making me call him "The King of Hearts." He had mine, so it wasn't a lie. We retreated to our bedroom, sated and content.

Our bedroom. That's what I was calling it. I was a total sucker. I held my ground about moving in for what? Thirty seconds? I hadn't officially moved in. I was staying at the condo because it was the safest place, but the truth was I had no good excuse not to stay once it was safe to go. When my lease was up, I was not going to get another apartment. I was going to live with Edward because with him was where I belonged.

I served drinks to one of my tables and took orders at another. When I made my way back to the kitchen, I noticed Tyler wasn't standing in his spot. I checked my phone. Another twenty minutes had gone by. Edward was really running late. Maybe he was going to cancel, which was disappointing. I was looking forward to having him in the private dining room all to myself.

When I returned to the main dining area, I was startled by Tyler and Liam charging in.

"We have to go," Tyler said, looking much too serious.

I swallowed hard and wiped my hands on my apron. "I have to tell Rosalie."

"We need to go *now*."

I knew better than to argue. I asked the hostess to tell Rosalie that I had an emergency. Tyler rushed me out so fast there was nothing else I could say. I wasn't sure if Liam had seen James again or what. The two bodyguards stood on either side of me and hurriedly shoved me in the backseat of the car. I scanned the area outside the car. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. They climbed in, and Liam started the engine.

"Was he here? What happened?"

They exchanged looks but neither answered me.

"Tyler?" I leaned forward. "What happened?"

"We have to take you to the condo, Bella." He wouldn't look at me, which bothered me to no end.

"Okay. What happened, though?"

Tyler pressed his palm to his forehead and looked out the window. His lack of answers was making me crazy.

"Just tell her, Tyler," Liam said frustrated.

"Tell me what?"

"Bella, let's just get you to the condo." He turned his head just enough for our eyes to connect. I saw something I had never seen in Tyler's eyes before.

Fear.

His fear transferred to me like a lightning bolt to the chest. I was literally blown back in my seat. "What happened?" I raised my voice when I was not answered. "What happened?"

Tyler turned again. "He's missing."

Edward.

"No." I pulled out my phone and dialed his number. "No. No. No." Denial was going to keep me from falling apart. Denial was going to make sure I kept breathing. The phone kept ringing and ringing. "No." Voicemail picked up. "No! No! No! No!" I screamed.

I was shaking and crying. Edward was missing. He wasn't late for lunch. He wasn't busy at work. James got to Edward. Some way, somehow, James got Edward.

"We're not stopping at the damn condo. Pull out your damn phone and figure out where he is!" I was raging. "Who called you? How do you know he's missing?"

"Peter called. He found out who's been helping Hunter," Tyler said James' name with such disgust.

"Who? What happened?" This was no time to play the secret game. I was in this. I was all in, and they needed to treat me that way.

"It was Garrett. Peter's been looking into everyone that works for Mr. Masen. Garrett's the only one on the security team with a wife and family. Peter found out that Garrett's daughter seems to have gone missing. No emails, no phone calls from her cell, no Facebook posts. The teenage girl fell off the face of the earth. He dug a little deeper, found a bunch of phone calls between Garrett and his wife, some texts.

Then that all went dark, like Garrett got worried Mr. Masen might start looking into the guys on the security team."

"This hasn't been going on very long?"

"No, but Peter says by the look of things, James was getting the girl to help him out before he decided to use her as leverage."

I could feel the blood drain from my face. "Garrett's trading Edward for his daughter, isn't he?"

"Most likely."

We were getting close to the condo. I was not going to sit there, waiting to hear what became of all this. The thought of doing nothing but waiting made me want to throw up. They were taking me along. I pulled out my phone and called Peter.

"Bella?" he said, sounding surprised to hear from me in the middle of all this.

"Pull up his chip. Where is he? He's got to have his chip on him. Garrett wants his daughter, but he isn't going to tell James Edward is chipped. I just can't believe he would do that."

"Tell Tyler I'll send the coordinates to the car's GPS."

"You can do that?"

He laughed for a quick second. "Bella, haven't you learned that I can do just about anything?" His tone turned somber very quickly. "I'm sorry I figured all this out a minute too late."

"At least you figured it out. Thanks, Peter." I hung up and told Tyler, "He's sending Edward's signal to the GPS."

"You're getting out here. Liam's going to stay with you."

"No. He needs both of you! I'm going with you. I'm not going to sit here and do nothing. Keep driving and follow *that*." I pointed to the blinking dot on the screen in front of me.

Tyler shook his head. "Absolutely not. You are going in *there*." He pointed to the building.

"You're wasting time fighting with me! Please go!"

"She's stubborn as hell. I'm not carrying her ass up there," Liam said, looking at Tyler. "I say let's go before we can't catch up."

Tyler stared at me hard and then nodded at Liam. He looked back at me. "You do what I say," he said, angrily pointing a finger at me. "If I say don't fucking move from this car, you'll do it. Do you understand me?"

I nodded.

He was still extremely unhappy. I could hear him grumbling and mumbling up there. He got on the phone and talked to Peter himself. I heard him say Emmett's name and a new fear stopped my heart.

"Is Emmett all right? Did Garrett do something to him?" I asked Liam.

"We don't know, Miss Swan. Just sit back, put on your seatbelt, and let us do our job, okay?" That was Liam's nice way of saying, "*Shut the hell up, Bella.*"

I decided to call him myself, but again got no answer. It was the not knowing that was killing me right now. *How could this happen?* They weren't looking close enough until it was too late. James knew how to cut right to the heart of someone. He knew how to use fear to manipulate. As much as I wanted to strangle Garrett right now, I felt bad for him. If James had gotten to his daughter, he had to be beside himself. I just didn't understand why he didn't tell Edward. Edward and Tyler could have helped him. They could have figured out a better way than giving into James' demands.

We were driving so fast. The landscape around us was a blur of color. Liam weaved in and out of traffic. I secured my seatbelt and tried to stay focused on the blinking dot. *Edward*. What was James going to do? Kill him. That was what he wanted to do. Would he do it right away? Would he take his time? Would he give us enough time to catch up to them? He had to give us enough time. This was not how this was going to end.

"Did someone call the police?" I asked after a long stretch of silence.

"Someone contacted them, I'm sure," Tyler replied.

"Well, shouldn't we be talking to them? Do they know about the chip?"

"Bella," Tyler turned around and had a new look in his eyes. A *murderous* look. "When I find Hunter, I don't want the cops around."

James Hunter was going to die today. I couldn't stop that because the only thing that mattered to me at the moment was saving Edward. Tyler was going to do whatever he had to do in order to save Edward. I believed that. I was counting on it.

We were getting out of the city. Edward's dot was moving east over the floating bridge that led to Mercer Island. It continued on with us following. Liam never let up on the gas, the speedometer reaching over a hundred miles per hour at times as we flew along Interstate 90. Tyler had his Bluetooth earpiece in as he talked to Peter and checked the dot on an iPad that he pulled out of his briefcase.

The dot stopped and so did my breathing. They had gotten off the interstate and went south towards Cougar Mountain. Peter and Tyler were talking about some estate homes that were near there. Tyler zoomed in on the stationary blinking dot. We exited the interstate and made our way to Edward.

I was nauseous. I stared at the dot as if it were blinking to the beat of his heart. I was waiting. Waiting for the dot to stop blinking, to signal the end. If Edward died, I was as good as dead as well.

"We'll have to go on foot. If we park up here, that way we'll have some tree cover here to approach the house," Tyler explained to Liam, who was trying to drive and look at the iPad at the same time.

They talked strategy like this was a military operation. Their expertise in this area was hopefully going to mean the difference between life and death. Their objective was to retrieve Edward and take James down at the same time. It would be justifiable homicide. I sat and listened, careful not to interrupt or interfere. These two knew better than I. When they had the plan set, Tyler opened up the glove box and pulled out my handgun.

"You stay in this car. You use this only if he sees you." He placed the gun in my hand. "You can't think about it. Don't second guess. If he sees you, shoot him. Do you understand me?"

I nodded and gripped the weapon tightly.

"He won't think twice, Bella. He will kill you if given the chance." Tyler couldn't be more intense. "Don't give him the chance."

"I got it. Go get Edward."

They got out of the car and pulled out their weapons. This was really happening. Today this whole nightmare was going to end one way or another. I began to pray.

Please God, don't take Edward. Please let him be all right. Please save him. He has lost so much. He finally has a chance to be happy. I promise to make him happy. At least, I'll try. I want to try because I love him. I love him so much. He's a good man. You've seen him. You've changed him. He wants to do good. He's been doing good. There's so much more he can do. That we'll do together. I'll do anything. We'll go to church every Sunday. We'll donate money to all the churches in Seattle. We'll go back to Africa and open more hospitals and bring them clean water to drink. Edward can do so much for so many. Please, please, please.

The tears were running down my cheeks as I rocked back and forth in my seat, pleading with God, bargaining for Edward's life.

Please, please, please.

BANG! BANG!

The sound of gunfire literally shook my whole body. I sat quivering for a minute while my heart tried to recover. My heart was never going to recover if Edward was dead. With the car off, I couldn't see Edward's blinking light. I grabbed the iPad off Tyler's seat and pressed the button to turn it back on. The monitoring screen popped back to life and Edward's light still blinked on and off. I knew that meant nothing. That was no guarantee that he was still alive, but it made me feel a little better. It allowed me to pretend that his heart was still beating.

BANG! BANG! An exchange of gunfire, I could tell it was not the same gun firing both times.

It was happening. This was it. I looked in the direction of the sound. That was when I saw it, the smoke. Something was on fire. Tyler was going to be pissed, but something told me I needed to find the fire. I needed to find the fire, now.

I jumped out of the car and slipped into the dense forest surrounding the property we were infiltrating. I carried my gun at my side, my finger on the trigger, just in case. I hoped Tyler and Liam wouldn't shoot at me if we crossed paths. I kicked off my heels; there was no way I was going to be able to walk through this in pumps. I wished I had grabbed my bag at work so I had my Converse. It didn't matter, though. The only thing that mattered was finding Edward and getting him out of

here. I followed the smoke and found what was causing it. The house where Edward's dot came to rest was mammoth. There was a separate garage on the other side of the circle driveway, and that was what was currently on fire.

I looked around and saw no one. No Tyler, no Liam, no Garrett, no James. I crept out of the trees and ran for the garage. In my heart, I knew Edward was in there. The roof was on fire, but I continued to look for a way in. The door was unlocked. I swung it open but was not prepared for what I saw.

Edward was standing in the middle of the three car garage, tied to a support beam in the middle. He was surrounded by a ring of fire, like a line had been drawn on the floor and set aflame.

I didn't even look anywhere else, I just ran in his direction.

"Edward!"

"Isabella?" he said in between coughs. "What the hell are you doing? Get out of here!"

I could see that some sort of gel had been spread on the floor and that was what was burning. I looked around for the first time and spotted a shovel hanging on the wall behind Edward. I sprinted over there and figured if I could scrape the gel away, I could make a space to get through. The room was filling with smoke. We needed to get out of here quickly. I pulled the shovel off the wall and that was when another figure caught my attention. On the floor, Garrett lay in a puddle of dark red blood. His eyes were open but vacant. He was the recipient of one of those bullets I heard being shot. There was no time to feel bad. I moved back towards Edward.

"Get out of here! Please, Isabella! Please!" Edward's voice was desperate and full of horrified fear.

"We're both getting out of here. I'm not leaving without you." I was behind him; he couldn't see me. I shoved my gun in my apron pocket and used the shovel to move the gel. I made a gap in the circle after the little bit left behind burned off. I stepped in and stood in front of Edward.

"Please, go. You have to get out of here," he cried. Tears ran down his face. He coughed and so did I. He was beaten up a little bit, but he was alive. The only problem left to face was the fact that he was tied to the pole with some pretty heavy duty climbing rope.

"I'm getting you out of here." I needed something to cut the rope.

"Open a door. Open the garage doors." Edward tried to say in between coughs.

I looked for some sort of opener on the wall by the door where I came in. Finding it, I pressed all three buttons. They began to open as I set to task, trying to find something to cut the rope. There was nothing on the walls. I went over to a giant tool bench and started rummaging through the drawers. I found a small pair of pruning shears. It was the only thing that might work.

"Isabella, please, get out of here." His desire to not save himself was starting to piss me off.

I dug the shears in between the rope and used all my strength to cut it. It was slow and difficult, but I kept at it until I had his hands free. Then, I went to work on his legs.

"James can't be far. How did he not see you?"

"I don't know. He's gone. Maybe Tyler got him. Tyler and Liam are here somewhere. I don't know where."

"Liam came in and I had him get the girl out. James shot her, but she was still alive. Garrett wasn't so lucky." Edward looked over his shoulder and rubbed his wrists. He helped me tug on the rope as I cut it away and managed to get free.

"Let's go," I said, grabbing his hand. Edward didn't move.

"I'm covered in gasoline. If I get near the fire...I-I'll go up." The fear was glowing in his eyes. I could only imagine what he had been through.

James Hunter was a maniacal bastard.

"Take your clothes off," I said, letting him go. He didn't move. He looked like a lost, little boy. "Edward..." I grabbed his face in my hands, trying to help him focus "...I need you to take off your clothes. If they have gas on them, we'll leave them here. I'll keep you safe. I promise."

Edward shed everything but his boxer briefs. I took his hand and carefully led him out of the ring of fire and out the garage door. I was a little discombobulated. Finding my way here had been easy, I followed the smoke. Getting back to the car was going to be more difficult. We headed back into the trees. We just needed to get

to the road, the car would be somewhere on the road.

"Well, well, well," James' voice stopped me in my tracks. Edward wrapped his arm around me protectively. "Look what we have here." He stepped out from behind a large tree. He had a gun in his hand and pointed it at us.

I thought about pulling out mine but worried if I moved he would shoot first.

"You're ruining my plans, Isabella. I had everything set up perfectly. Edward was supposed to go up in flames like his dear, dead mother. I don't like it when my plans get all screwed up."

"It's over, James. The police are on their way. Edward's security is all over this place."

James threw his head back and laughed. "If by security you mean that gorilla you call a bodyguard, I already took care of him. I don't think there's anyone else to worry about. Garrett was very helpful until I ended him as well."

My legs nearly gave out on me. He killed Tyler. That was almost as bad as killing Edward. My whole body began to shake, not with fear but with rage.

James continued to taunt us, "I guess we'll have to make this a murder suicide. We'll pretend you found out about Edward and that little teenager, too. Blinded by rage, you were in cahoots with Garrett and shot our little Edward here before shooting yourself. Adds a whole new exciting twist on the story, doesn't it? Very dramatic. A real tragic love story. Like mine and Bree's. I didn't want to kill her, but when I heard what she did, I couldn't stop myself. It's all Edward's fault really. Luckily, no one but me gave a shit about her. It was so easy to make everyone believe she killed herself. It should be just as easy to make everyone believe you did the same."

I stuck my hand in my apron pocket. I was going to kill someone, but it wasn't me or Edward.

BANG!

A shot was fired before I got the chance, though. James fell over right in front of us. I turned towards the sound. Tyler was still pointing his gun and had one hand pressed against a spot on his bloodstained shirt.

His breathing was labored. "I said...when he sees you, shoot his ass. Not...listen to

his crazy...then shoot. Damn it, Bella, you never...fucking...listen." He fell to his knees and dropped his gun.

I ran over to him. Dropping to my knees, I tried to support him the best I could.

"Don't give up on me now. We need to get you to the car. You're a-a-a fucking Marine. Haven't you ever been shot before, you big baby?"

He smiled and tried to laugh, but I could tell the pain was bad.

"Edward, I need your help, baby." There was no way I was going to carry Tyler anywhere. "Edward, Tyler needs your help."

Edward was frozen in shock. He stood where I had left him, staring down at the man who had tried to kill him. There was rustling in the trees and branches snapping. I pulled out my gun and pointed it in the direction of the sound. Liam came into our little clearing, his gun also raised and ready to fire.

"Shit," he said with heavy breath. "I heard the shots." He lowered his gun and so did I.

"Come help me get him to the car. He's hurt."

Liam came over and helped Tyler to his feet. He had a good hold on him, so I went to Edward.

"You scared the hell out of me when I got to the car and you weren't there, you know."

"I heard the guns, I saw the smoke. Good thing I did leave, Edward would still be in that garage, dying of smoke inhalation."

"He told me to take the girl," he said as if I had accused him of something. "She was bleeding pretty bad. I was taking her to you, but then you weren't there. I knew if Tyler came back to the car and you were missing, he would have had a shit fit."

"Didn't I say she wasn't going to listen?" Tyler said quietly. Liam chuckled and nodded.

I stood in front of Edward, putting myself between him and James' lifeless body. "Do you hear how they talk to me? I saved you, and they're giving me a hard time."

Edward didn't respond. I put my hand on his cheek and tried to make eye contact. There had been so many triggers to his PTSD today. I could only imagine how his mind was coping with it all.

"Let's go to the car. Can you follow me to the car?" Still no response. I pressed my lips to his and then wrapped my arms around him. "You're okay now. We're safe. No one can hurt us anymore."

I held him until I felt him move his arms. He secured them around my waist and pulled me closer to him. His head dropped to my shoulder.

"We're safe," he whispered like he almost didn't believe it.

"We're safe. I promise. Come to the car."

"You're safe. You saved me."

I hugged him a little tighter. This was going to be a difficult concept for him even when he got his wits about him.

"We still have to save Tyler. Come on." I let him go and took his hand. We stepped around James and followed Tyler and Liam.

We ended up at the hospital in Bellevue. Edward and Tyler were both admitted. Tyler had been shot in the abdomen and needed emergency surgery. Edward was admitted for observation due to his PTSD symptoms. I told him they were worried about his cuts and bruises. I wasn't sure he'd like being a mental patient. Garrett's daughter was also in critical condition. She had taken a bullet in the chest and it was lodged in her lung. It was a miracle she was even alive, although I didn't envy her and the emotional pain she was going to experience because of what James had done to her and her family.

Edward was already offering to pay her medical bills. I was sure he was counting Garrett as another casualty for which he was to blame. I would have none of that. Garrett made his choice. He could have come to Edward and asked for his help. Edward would have given it, without a second thought. He chose to handle it his own way and almost got his daughter and Edward killed in the process. Garrett's blood was not on Edward's hands.

I stayed with Edward the whole time, waiting impatiently for updates on Tyler,

talking to the police, listening to Edward talk to the police. Charlotte, Carlisle, Esme, Alice, and Jasper all made it to the hospital eventually. Sometime after dinner, several of them were there to sit with him, so I snuck down to visit Tyler.

"Are you related to Mr. Crowley?" the woman at the desk asked me.

"Yep," I said confidently.

She looked at me, ready to call my bluff. "How so, ma'am?"

"He's my father."

"Do you have ID?" she asked, not believing it for a second.

"Sure, but I go by my married name. Daddy cried like a baby the day he gave me away. I'm sure he really wants to see me." I dared her to contradict me, so I could accuse her of thinking a black man couldn't adopt a little white girl. Hell, I could probably get Peter to fax me over a forged birth certificate in minutes.

She sighed and had me sign in. I slipped into his room and tried not to visibly react to the sight of him hooked up to all the machines. His eyes were closed, but I knew he knew I was here.

"Can't a guy be off duty while he recovers from a gunshot wound?" he asked with his eyes still closed.

I smiled, sitting beside him and putting my small hand on his large one. Black and white, large and small, man and woman. We were opposite in every way, but he was still my 50/50.

"Don't worry, you're off duty. I'm just here to steal the cookie off your dinner tray. Edward wouldn't share."

He smiled. "Don't make me laugh. It hurts."

"Sorry," I replied, giving his hand a little squeeze.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay." There was some emotion I couldn't hide in my words, which caused him to open his eyes.

"I'm going to be fine, Bella. I'm a...what did you call me? Oh yeah, a *fucking* Marine. I'll be fine."

"I was trying to motivate you to stay alive. You military guys are all about being tough and swearing." I shrugged, making him smile.

We sat in silence a minute. The only noise coming from the machines that were monitoring him.

"He'd be dead if it weren't for you. I went after Hunter. Liam took care of the girl because Mr. Masen told him to. He wouldn't have made it back in time to save him. You did good."

"We'd both be dead if it weren't for you."

"Nah, you were going to shoot his ass. I could tell. I didn't want you to carry that around with you, though."

"You stole my glory," I said with a half-smile. The reality of it all was beginning to weigh heavy. So many terrible things could have happened. We were so fortunate that we got out alive.

"We're all going to be all right, Bella. Don't you worry."

I nodded. "I know. I just thought for a minute there that you were...."

"I wasn't going to be taken down by some punk ass psychopath," he continued. I wiped an escaping tear. "Come on. Where was your faith in me?"

"I'd be lost without you, you know."

"God, do I know."

"Well, good. Now that that's settled. I'll let you get some rest."

"Tell Mr. Masen I said goodnight."

I leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "I'll come back in the morning. I hear they have doughnuts. You know Edward won't share those."

He smiled and tried not to laugh.

"And if the nurse asks, I'm your daughter and you cried like a baby the day I married Mr. Swan. Just go with it, okay?" I winked and left him for the night. I could hear him laughing and groaning as I closed the door.

Edward was on the phone when I came back to his room. Carlisle and Esme were the only ones still there. He was talking to someone about Emmett.

Emmett had been knocked out by Garrett and locked in a storage closet back at Masen Corp. Garrett had told Edward that they were going to try a new security tactic that afternoon and send Brady and Emmett with a decoy while Edward and Garrett drove to Eclipse for lunch. Edward had been so trusting that he went with Garrett without question. He was put into some kind of sleeper hold and regained consciousness moments before being delivered to James.

"Whatever he needs. I want only the best...yes...thank you." Edward hung up and immediately reached for me. He patted the bed where he wanted me to sit.

I obliged him, letting him wrap me up in his arms.

"How's Tyler?"

"He's good. He was awake and talkative."

"Tyler was talkative?"

I didn't understand the need for the question. "Yes, he was fairly talkative."

"Have they ruled out brain injury?"

I swatted Edward's chest and gave him a disapproving look. "He's talkative with me. He's my-"

"Your 50/50, I remember, I remember." He squeezed me against him. "I want to go home. They have me hooked up to nothing. My cuts and bruises will heal. I'm certain I have no internal injuries. I want to go home."

I sat up and looked at Carlisle for some support.

"Son, I think the doctor just wants to make sure you're psychologically sound to go home. You've experienced quite a bit of trauma today."

Edward stared at Carlisle and then turned his gaze on me. "They're worried that I'm crazy or something? Are you worried that I'm crazy?"

I shook my head. "No! I just want you to rest and maybe talk to Dr. Cope before we go home. That's all."

"I'm fine!" He threw the covers back and tried to push me off the bed so he could get up. "I don't need to stay in the fucking hospital for psychological reasons. I'm checking out. I don't give a shit what the doctors want me to do. I'm going home."

"Edward," Carlisle and Esme both stood up.

I slid off the bed and he followed. "Where are my clothes?" He looked around, under the bed, in the bathroom.

"You don't have any here. Remember? We took them off in the garage?"

I hated to have to bring it up, but he wasn't going to stop looking. Edward froze and then ran a hand through his hair.

"Son, come sit back down. No one thinks you're crazy. We just know you've been through a lot today. I think it's a good idea to stay here and let the doctors and nurses take care of you, so Bella can rest, too." Carlisle was so smart. This thinking got Edward's attention right away.

He pulled me close and held my head in his hands, stroking my hair, my cheeks, my shoulders. "Are you okay? If anything would have happened to you, I...I would never-"

"Shh, I'm fine. I'm tired but fine. Please don't worry about me."

I didn't think he was crazy, but I was worried about his emotional stability. His mood was erratic and he seemed to have a hard time remembering things that had happened today. I didn't know what that all meant, but I knew I didn't want to have to handle it alone back at the condo.

I guided him back to the bed. As docile as a child, he climbed in. He stayed distracted with a combination of his Blackberry and Esme's ideas for redesigning the living room. Edward told her he wanted me to choose since it was going to be *our* home. We chatted about colors and patterns. It wasn't long before Edward and Carlisle were yawning.

I walked Esme and Carlisle out when visiting hours were over.

Carlisle tried to reassure me that everything was going to be fine. "He'll bounce back. James Hunter is dead. Once Edward comes to terms with that, we'll see a new person, I bet."

I returned to Edward's room just in time to interrupt the heated argument he was having with the nurse on duty.

"There she is!" he shouted, gesturing in my direction. "Isabella, come tell this woman that you are spending the night here. She has this ridiculous notion that I will stay here if you do not."

"Ma'am visiting hours are over, and you are not family. I understand your desire to stay but rules are rules."

"Rules? Who fucking decides who someone considers family? My fucking father tried to kill me once. But I guess you'd let him spend the night if he was still alive? This woman saved my life and she has to go? How fucked up is that? It's ridiculous! She's staying! I don't give a shit about your fucking rules!"

"Edward," I said his name firmly.

"Sir, I understand your concern, but there is nothing I can do about the rules. I do not make the rules."

"You don't make the rules? *Shocking!* Of course you don't make the rules. I make rules! I could buy this whole fucking hospital if I wanted to and fire your ass. How's that for rules?"

"I'm going to ask you to calm down, sir. You need to watch how you speak to me." The nurse was becoming agitated.

"He's been through a very difficult ordeal today. Please, just give me a minute with him," I begged, trying to get in between them.

"You have five minutes," she huffed before leaving.

"I want Nicole back! You suck!" he shouted, referring to the nurse he had earlier in the day.

"Edward!" I scolded. I hadn't seen him this agitated in forever. "You can't talk to people that way and think they're going to do what you want. Stop, please."

"It's exactly the way you speak to stupid people like that! Come here." He pulled back the sheet and patted the bed. "Come sleep with me."

"Honey, they aren't going to let me stay. I'll come back first thing in the morning.

I'll lie and say I'm your sister."

"Absolutely not! Isabella, I am not staying here by myself. I'm not." I could tell he was serious. His eyes went wide and there was anxiety in his tone.

I couldn't leave him. Not until I knew he would be all right.

"I'll sit right here. Why don't you close your eyes for a bit and try to rest?" I stood beside him, pushing his hair back before leaning over and kissing his lips. "I'll be right here, okay?"

He grabbed my chin with his thumb and finger. "Okay. Don't leave me, okay?"

"Okay." He kissed me again and then closed his eyes. I sat in the chair beside him and held his hand.

The nurse wasn't lying about giving me five minutes. When those five minutes were up, she was ready for me to go.

"She's not going!" Edward roared.

"Sir, I brought you a sedative to help you sleep, but the young lady is going to have to go." She walked over to him with a pill and some water. Edward swatted it out of her hand. I could see it on her face; she was pissed.

She stormed out, and I followed.

"Please. He's suffers from PTSD, he's not himself. If it keeps him calm to have me here, why can't I just stay? Do we need to get the doctor's approval? I'm sure we can get the doctor's approval."

"I'm going to get the doctor's approval to give him a shot. A shot that will put him out. That's the approval I'm going to get. He is hostile and violent. I do not need to put up with that."

"Of course not, but he doesn't want to take sedatives and things like that. He doesn't like them or the feeling of being out of control. Please, just talk to the doctor about me staying."

She got on the phone and I heard her ask for permission to give Edward another sedative.

It appeared we were going to be doing this on our own.

Brady came and picked us up. I slid in the backseat of the car with Edward in his borrowed scrubs. We had signed him out against medical advice, but I was not going to let them drug him up so he would be quiet. I called Carlisle, who agreed to come stay with us at the condo. The drive seemed long, and I was ready for bed when we got home.

Edward took a quick shower and changed into his own clothes. We got into bed, and Edward quickly wrapped himself around me.

"Isn't this better? We should have got out of that Godforsaken place a long time ago. We need to get Tyler transported over to Harborview as soon as it's safe to move him. The people over there are completely incompetent."

"Let's not worry about that tonight." I buried myself in his chest and listened to his heart beating strong...and fast. "You need to relax, baby. Your heart is beating out of control."

He loosened his hold on me just enough so I could look up at him.

"You're not mad at me are you?" His eyes scanned mine, looking for the truth as if I would tell him something different.

"Why would I be mad at you?"

Edward let me go completely and rolled onto his back. His hands grabbed at his hair. "You could have died because of me!"

I rolled on top of him and pressed both my hands to his face. "Don't go there. It's over. It's all over. We're safe. No one is ever going to try to hurt us again."

"I was so afraid today. All I could think about was how I promised you I wasn't going to leave you and how that asshole was making me break my promise. I didn't want to leave you. I never want to leave you."

I kissed him, trying to stop us both from crying. That was where this was headed. "I know. I don't ever want you to leave. That's why I came to get you."

He grabbed my head and held me to him, kissing me hard, invading my mouth with his tongue. His hands traveled down to my hips and pulled my body flush with his.

"I love you, Isabella. So much. So, so much."

His hands grabbed the hem of my pajama top and pulled it over my head. We both sat up so we could undress. I wiggled out of my sleep shorts and panties as he tugged down his pants. He pounced on me, knocking me back towards the foot of the bed. Kissing me with such fervor, I could barely breathe. This we could not have done in the hospital.

Edward's fingers slid down my thigh and curled around my knee. He pulled my leg up and hitched it around his waist. I could feel him hard and hot between my legs. I rocked my hips just so, hoping to encourage him. It was all he needed. He drew back and then sank inside. My head fell back and he attacked my neck with wet, open mouthed kisses.

"I love you, too," I confessed, gripping his hair in my hands.

He lifted his body up as his hips pressed further into me. He hovered above me, my beautiful man. No one could hurt us. No one could tear us apart again. His lips came down on mine, soft and sensuous. Our bodies moved together, our hips rolling and rocking just enough to create that wonderful friction my body craved but not enough to separate us.

He kissed under my ear. "Never leave, never leave, never leave." He repeated that over and over as he pushed against me. I could feel his body tense and then him release inside me. Exhausted, he fell on top of me, heavy and warm.

"No one's leaving. Ever," I said, running my fingers through the hair on the nape of his neck. That was when my tears would not be denied any longer. I sobbed underneath him. I wasn't sad, I was...tired, overwhelmed, relieved.

Edward shushed me, unsure of why I was crying. He rolled off me and pulled me on top of him. Cradling me in his arms, he begged me, "Don't cry. Please don't cry."

"I'm okay." I wiped my face and took some deep breaths.

He kissed my face and held me until I fell asleep. And I slept until he woke me. Edward woke me in the middle of the night. His screams and his thrashing woke me.

I tried to wake him.

I tried to soothe him.

I couldn't do either.

He woke Carlisle.

He woke Charlotte.

We should have stayed at the hospital.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

I know it's not a super happy ending to this chapter, but I felt like I needed to stay true to the character. The events of this day would have messed with him more than anything that has happened thus far. He's gonna be all right, though. I promise. Ramblings on the blog.

Good news - James is DEAD! Yay!

Fridays at Noon won Fic of the Month over at The Lemonade Stand. Thank you so much to those who voted! That is such an awesome honor.

TF is going to be in Vernon Hills, IL on Sunday May 1st to see Peter Facinelli at Westfield Mall. If you live nearby you should totally come and support Alex's Lemonade Stand. Peter is such an awesome guy for doing these signings and raising money for such a great cause. Maybe we can get him to take a picture with a penny! :)

Thanks to the usuals - momofffourluvntwisaga, the Twitter and Facebook gangs. Hello to all the new readers. I appreciate all the newbies who have been reviewing all the chapters as they read! Love hearing what people think as they read. Haven't been replying to reviews because writing has been taking up all my time. Remember, I'm writing a Fiji outtake in EPOV for The Fandom Fights Tsunami. Info on my profile.

Thanks to all of you who have offered to translate FaN into other languages. At this time, I am asking that you do not. If I change my mind when I am all finished with the story, I will get back to you. Thanks for asking and showing interest!

One more regular chapter and then the epilogue. *sobs* Can't believe we're that close to the end. Unbelievable! Thanks for all the support out

there.

Have a wonderful weekend!

XOXO,

TF

Chapter 28

Chapter 28

Friday, July 29th at noon

"Would you please sit down? You aren't on duty. You're having lunch with us, and I can tell you're hurting. Sit."

Tyler was standing by the door like it was all he knew. It was driving me mad because this was the first time I had allowed him to leave the house and he shouldn't have been pushing himself. Being laid up was making him a little crazy. I could tell around Day Four of his stay in the hospital, he wasn't going to handle having to take things easy very well. Tyler was a man of action. Resting was not in his vocabulary. Edward hired a private duty nurse so we could bring him home sooner. Between the nurse, Charlotte, and I, Tyler was well taken care of at the estate. He was healing and had not gotten an infection, which eased my biggest concern.

He sat down in one of the chairs at the table. I wanted to do this at the estate but Edward wanted to be here for the meeting, so we agreed on lunch at Eclipse. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea. This room was a magical place for me and Edward. That had to bode well for what we were about to do.

"I still don't understand why Jenks isn't my lawyer as well as Mr. Masen's," Tyler said, picking up one of the smaller forks in front of him and setting it back down.

"I told you. It's better that we all have separate representation, someone to make sure they are looking out for our interests individually."

"I'll talk to the cops without any representation. It was justifiable homicide. He was going to kill you and Mr. Masen. He had already shot me. They aren't going to be able to prove any different. There's no way they can make a case the other way."

I rolled my eyes and sighed for dramatic effect. "I'm not taking any chances. These are the same police who believed Edward sent men to kidnap me so I would be scared of James. You will not talk to the police again without a lawyer."

There had been initial questioning done when Tyler was in the hospital, but the police were trying to wrap things up with a few more interviews.

"Is this guy from Jenks' firm?"

"You're going to be very pleased with our choice of lawyer, trust me," I said, trying to fight a smile.

The door to the room opened and Edward strode in with Emmett behind him. He came right over to me. I stood up and hugged him tightly.

"How was your morning?"

He pushed my hair over my shoulder and kissed the side of my neck. "It was fine, but being with you is better," he said quietly.

He released me and sat down at the head of the table after greeting Tyler with a firm handshake. Edward looked tired. He was sleeping a little better, but he was always awake when I got up in the morning. I couldn't be sure about how much sleep he really got. The nightmares didn't wake the whole house anymore; of that much I was sure. We upped therapy to three times a week at first. That was helping immensely. He recently dropped down to twice a week.

"Did you send a car for the lawyer?" Edward asked me with a mischievous grin.

Before I could answer, the door opened again and the host was leading Tyler's lawyer into the room. Edward and I stood up to welcome her.

Terry Harris was strikingly beautiful. Even though she and Tyler were the same age, she looked much younger. She was tall and lean with dark skin and big brown eyes. Her hair was braided and then pulled back into one thick ponytail. I couldn't help but wonder if she always looked this good or if she had put a little extra effort into her appearance today.

Tyler's eyes nearly bugged out of his head when he turned to see who had arrived. It was a good thing I knew his heart was in good shape. The last thing I needed was for the man to have a heart attack.

"Ms. Harris, glad you found the place all right."

She shook my hand and smiled nervously. "Please, call me Terry. You must be Bella. I recognize your voice from the phone."

"Yes, and this is Edward Masen," I said, introducing her to the man who had paid all her expenses to fly here and set her up at the Four Seasons for the weekend.

"Mr. Masen, it's a pleasure." They shook hands briefly, and then Edward placed his hand on the small of my back, leading us back to the table.

Tyler stood up and looked absolutely shocked.

"I believe you and Tyler know one another," Edward said, trying to uphold a professional demeanor.

"Terry," Tyler said in an exhaled breath as if he had been holding it in since she walked in the room.

"Ty, you look good for someone who was nearly shot to death a few weeks ago."

The two former lovers stared at one another, lost in their own memories – hopefully more good than bad.

"Bella..." his eyes connected with mine "...may I speak to you outside for a minute?" He pressed his lips together and gave Terry a tight smile. "Excuse us, just a minute."

He stepped around her and led the way out of the private dining room. As soon as I closed the door behind me, I knew I was in trouble. Tyler couldn't even speak. He rubbed his bald head with his giant palm. He paced back and forth in front of me.

"You could have died," I said, stopping him in his tracks.

"What the hell does that have to do with your meddling in my life?"

"You almost died! Doesn't that put a few things into perspective for you? Doesn't that make you want to do things that you haven't because you've been afraid? She's never been married. She turned into a workaholic just like you. As soon as I told her who I was and why I was calling her, she didn't hesitate to accept my offer to bring her out here. That has to mean something, Tyler."

I saw him wince and put his hand on his wound. "I don't like surprises. You should have asked me if I wanted you to call her."

"What's wrong?" I could tell something was wrong, and it didn't have anything to do with Terry. "Let me see your bandages." I had become quite the Florence Nightingale since he got out of the hospital. I helped change his bandages and made sure he took his medicine and pain pills on schedule. I annoyed the private duty nurse, but Tyler was my 50/50, and Edward paid her well enough to put up with

Tyler and me.

"It's fine," he huffed, pushing my hands away as I reached for his shirt.

"You've been moving around a lot today, more than usual. Let me look at it." I would not be deterred. He reluctantly pulled his white polo shirt from his pants and lifted it up so I could see the bandage I had put there this morning. It wasn't bleeding through. I started to carefully peel back the tape.

"It's fine. You're right; I need to take it easy." He pushed my hand away and pulled his shirt back down, tucking it into his pants. "What do you think is going to happen? That Terry and I are going to fall madly in love again?"

"I think that someone once told me that if Terry knocked on his door, he wouldn't think twice. Don't think twice. You're alive. Edward and I no longer need protection 24/7. You can have a life outside of this. You could see if that life could include her."

"She lives in Atlanta," he argued half-heartedly.

"And Edward ran away for seven months. And we had a psychopath trying to kill us. You were the one who told me to follow my heart, to not give up because I was afraid or because I was worried everything wasn't perfect."

"She's not here because she loves me. She's here because you called her and hired her for this job."

"Right," I said sarcastically. "She flew all the way out here to represent someone who's only getting questioned by the police. A guy, who two minutes ago told me there was no way he was getting charged with anything. She's a busy woman with plenty of cases to keep her rolling in the dough in Atlanta. She's here because of *you*. She wanted to reconnect with *you*. God, was I this annoying?"

"No, you were way more annoying."

I smiled and put a hand on his shoulder. "Don't think twice."

He took some deep breaths and closed his eyes for a minute. When he opened them, I could see he found his Tyler mojo.

We reentered the room to find Edward and Terry talking about something that Edward quickly put to an end when he saw me. We took our seats and made some small talk. Jared came in to take our drink orders. I could see Edward grappling with

his negative feelings towards poor Jared as he ordered a bottle of wine. Luckily, Terry's presence kept Tyler from barking.

We didn't discuss the shooting. Terry told us that in order for her to properly defend Tyler, she could only discuss what happened with him. She also thought it was a good idea if her retainer was paid for by Tyler and not Edward, so there was truly no conflict of interest. She was looking out for Tyler. I liked that about her. I liked that a lot.

I was happy to not have to talk business. Instead, I did my digging, got to know the woman I knew had my 50/50's heart. She was brilliant. In fact, she was Edward smart. The two of them got along quite well. Terry was what I imagined. Strong, opinionated, but compassionate. She had a hard time keeping her eyes off Tyler, which made me smile.

At one o'clock my phone beeped. It was my reminder to give Tyler his pills. I grabbed my bag and pulled out the bottle, opening it and shaking two into my hand.

"I'm good, Bella. I can wait."

"Don't give me a hard time. Take them. You've been much more active today. I don't want things to be bothering you later." I set the pills next to his plate and put the bottle back in my bag.

His shoulders sagged a bit, but he picked them up and tossed them in his mouth, washing them down with his glass of water. He hated to be dependent on a pill to manage his pain.

"If for some reason I ever decided to go into nursing, I'd want to work maternity because then I would never have to deal with sick men. Men make the worst patients, I've decided," I said to Terry. She smiled and nodded.

"I was never a bad patient," Edward argued.

"Says the man who made the nurse want to shoot him up with horse tranquilizers."

Tyler and I laughed. Even Emmett let out a chuckle by the door.

Edward narrowed his eyes at me. "She was a bad nurse. If you were my nurse, I would have been the model patient. I might have abused the call button so you would come in my room all the time, but I would have been very nice about it."

"Face it; men don't like to look weak. You either tough it out too much like Tyler or become an insufferable complainer like you."

Edward set his wine glass down with his eyes wide. "An insufferable complainer? That is so not true!"

"When you had the stomach flu last year, you were the biggest baby I had ever met."

"You gave that flu to me! It was your fault I was that sick. I was completely justified in my complaining."

I tossed my napkin on the table and smiled. "You're a baby when you're sick. Just admit it. You don't have to be ashamed."

"Ashamed?" Edward's voice began to rise. "You should be ashamed of yourself for telling such lies in front of our guest."

"I don't lie. I can't lie. You know that," I defended myself.

"Oh, you're totally lying; you just *think* you're telling the truth. You make stuff up in that pretty little head of yours and you believe it, but that doesn't make it reality, sweetheart."

He made me giggle. "My thoughts exactly, baby."

Luckily, Jared came in with the check before Edward could retort. I loved it when he was playfully obstinate. It was one of his more adorable traits.

"Are they always like this?" Terry whispered to Tyler.

"Always," Tyler answered, making her and me smile.

"Ha!" Edward laughed as he handed Jared his American Express. "You're one to talk, big man. You and Isabella can bicker with the best of them."

I nudged Tyler under the table with my knee. Our banter could be entertaining when he wasn't infuriating me.

"I suppose that's true," Tyler said, nudging me back. "It must be her, huh, Mr. Masen? She *is* the common denominator."

"Oh, it's absolutely her." Edward sat back in his chair and tented his fingers in front of him.

My mouth fell open.

"Do not listen to a word they say," I warned Terry. "These two are lucky I put up with either one of them. It irks them to no end that I speak my mind and that I'm right 99% of the time."

Both men laughed heartily. I wanted to smack them.

"Do not laugh at me! Seriously, I'll make you take care of one another and then we'll see who's laughing."

This was my life now. In just over a year, these two men had become two of the most important people in my world. They teased and laughed at me. They angered and annoyed me. But more importantly, they cared for and needed me. They loved and protected me. They were my family, and I loved them.

Jared returned and Edward signed for lunch. He told Terry and Tyler to stay and discuss the shootings, offering to drive me home.

"I think I'll finish my day at home. No reason to go back to the office." He took my hand and pulled me to my feet. This was unexpected.

"I was going to go to my apartment and get some packing done."

Edward's face lit up. We were officially living together. There would be no apartment, no lease with my name still attached, nowhere to run back to if the going got tough. I was moving in with Edward because we were going to spend the rest of our lives together. There was no denying it and there was no reason to not start now.

"Wonderful! I can help."

"Ah, yes, I think that's what you told me the last time I moved. Then, you spent the entire time on your phone and argued with my roommate."

Edward looked over my shoulder at Tyler. "Yep, totally her."

I smacked him on the shoulder.

We said our goodbyes to Terry and Tyler. Emmett got the door for us. At the bottom of the stairs, we were greeted by Rosalie. She was smiling, but I could see the hidden animosity that still lingered because she was not one who could easily let things go. I hadn't given her a two-week notice; I left the day Edward was taken and didn't come back. The day I saved Edward was the day I decided there was no reason I should not start living my life as Edward Masen's girlfriend. He was a multi-billionaire. I did not need a summer job.

"How was everything today, Mr. Masen?" she asked. I ignored the snub because it really didn't matter.

"Excellent as always, Rosalie. The waiter left a little to be desired, but otherwise everything was superb."

I elbowed him hard in the ribs and quickly defended my friend. "Jared took perfectly good care of us. Do not listen to him." Edward and I exchanged heated glares. He was so ridiculous. His jealousy knew no end.

"He was...adequate," Edward relented and wrapped his arm around me, pulling me to his side. He turned his attention back to Rosalie. "You'll be joining us tonight, I assume?"

"I am. I appreciate the invitation." She sounded as if she really meant it.

"Your brother is marrying my sister and my best friend is head over heels for you. I would hope you know you will always be welcome. Emmett and I hope you and Isabella might be friends one day as well."

I tried like hell to control my expression, trying to not look too surprised, but this was the first I had heard he was hoping Rosalie and I would be friends. Rosalie appeared to be feeling the same way.

"Well, now that she no longer works for me and will never work for me again, perhaps we will be friends."

I almost laughed at the way she added that I would never work for her again. I had burned that bridge, not that I ever saw myself ever in need of a summer job again. Next summer, I was planning on volunteering for NWBF and Alice. Working because I wanted to sounded so much better than working because I needed to.

"I'm sure we'll find a way," I said civilly. Rosalie had come a long way in a year. I felt like we had an unspoken understanding and something close to mutual respect

at this point. Friends might be a stretch, but I would try for Edward's sake. It was nice to hear him call Emmett his best friend.

"See, I told you, E. We should start planning that trip to Switzerland. The girls are totally going to get along." Emmett threw his arm around Rosalie. "We're going to go skiing in the Alps. Show you some of the places we went when we were over there."

I looked at Edward. Again, this was news to me. It seemed he and Emmett had big plans.

"The six of us, of course," Edward added cautiously. "Jasper and Alice would be invited as well. We'll talk about it. For now, we look forward to you joining us for the movie tonight."

Rosalie smiled genuinely. "Can't wait."

Emmett kissed the side of her head and led us out of the restaurant. Brady was waiting just outside the door. We headed to my apartment and talked about Terry and trips to the Swiss Alps.

Jasper had already cleared out all of his things. He and Alice had bought a place in the city and spent all last weekend moving. I had gotten some of my things packed up one day this week when the private duty nurse was with Tyler and Edward was at work. I didn't have that much stuff to begin with and most of my clothes were already at the estate.

"What are you going to do with all of your furniture? Do you want me to store it?" Edward asked from his spot on the bed. He sat with his legs stretched out and his back against the headboard. He had taken his suit coat off like he was going to help, but he was definitely more of an observer than an actual participant in the packing process.

I finished putting my books in a box and pushed some hair over my ear. "I don't know. We could give it away, I guess. There doesn't seem much reason for me to keep it."

I joined him on the bed. He held me and kissed the top of my head. I fingered his tie and played with the buttons on his shirt.

He sighed contently. "I'm going to miss this bed. We've had a lot of fun in this bed."

"You hate this bed. It's too small and lumpy."

"I wouldn't want to sleep in it alone," he acknowledged. His hand moved to my hip and down my thigh, pulling my leg over his body. "I don't like sleeping anywhere alone."

"Maybe you should buy a dog," I teased. Lifting my head off his chest, I looked up so I could see his face. He wasn't finding me as funny as I was finding myself. I kissed under his chin and nestled myself back on top of him.

"Let me rephrase so I'm understood; I don't like sleeping without *you*. Where I sleep never matters as long as you're beside me."

It seemed so effortless on his part to make my heart flutter and literally ache for him. My entire body desired to be close to him. From my head to my toes. I never wanted to sleep alone again either. I never wanted to sleep without him.

"You're stuck with me now, so let's hope that's true."

His arms tightened their hold on me. "Truer words were never spoken."

I lifted back up again, and our lips connected. Soft, wet kisses were exchanged. His hands drifted down and made the heat rise between us. My tongue lightly touched his top lip and I could feel him smile against me before opening his mouth to guide me inside. I loved kissing Edward. His tongue stroked mine; warm and rough. I rested my forearms on his shoulders as my fingers moved from his cheeks to his sideburns. I ran my thumbs along the shell of his ear before weaving my fingers through his hair. He was right, the "where" would never matter as long as we were together.

Then, his phone went off.

"Shit," he groaned as I pulled back. He pulled it out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. "I have to take this. I promised them they could reach me while I was out of the office."

"It's fine." I smiled. "You're distracting me from my work anyway." I rolled off him and went back to packing the last of my things. The kissing could wait. We had the rest of our lives. Neither one of us was ever going to leave again.

Tyler wasn't home when we got back to the estate. Something told me that he and Terry had a lot of catching up to do. Edward and I found Charlotte busy in the

kitchen.

"You're both home early," she said as we walked into the room hand in hand.

"Edward decided to take the afternoon off and help me pack up the rest of my stuff."

"Really?" Charlotte's eyebrows pinched together. She knew him so well.

He arched one of his beautiful brows at her, daring her to say something else. I saved her from his wrath.

"Well, I use the word *help* loosely. There wasn't much left to box up, though. Liam won't have much to bring over here with the truck tomorrow." I let go of Edward's hand and took a peek at what she was cutting up at the island. "Whatcha making?"

"I promised Tyler a carrot cake. He texted me that he's going to have a guest for dessert tonight."

"Dessert?" Edward chuckled, coming up behind me and snaking his arms around my waist.

I elbowed him in the chest for the second time today.

"What? The man moves fast. He must be having dinner with her and is already plotting dessert at his place. Our boy's got some game even while recovering from a gunshot wound."

"He asked Char to make dessert. The real kind. Hence, the carrot cake. Our *boy* is a gentleman. You've been spending way too much time with Emmett and Peter. You're starting to talk like them."

Edward laughed again.

"What are you two talking about?" Charlotte asked, tossing some freshly grated carrots into a bowl.

"Nothing," I answered before Edward could say anything else.

His phone beeped. One look at the screen and his entire face lit up. He looked like he had just won the lottery (if winning the lottery mattered to a guy who already had billions of dollars).

"I'll be right back. Stay here," he said, kissing my cheek. He dashed out of the kitchen at lightning speed.

"What is that about?" Charlotte laughed.

"No idea," I said with a shrug. He and his phone were inseparable since the phone call that interrupted us on the bed.

I helped Charlotte with the cake and filled her in on our lunch with Ms. Terry Harris. It seemed promising that Tyler wanted to bring her to the estate tonight. With Alice's campers here for movie night, I wondered what he was thinking exactly. Maybe he wanted her to see Edward's charity, show her he worked for a good, decent man. Edward was a good man. He was finally believing that about himself, too.

Charlotte put the cake in the oven. "You did good, Bella. I think Tyler deserves to be happy."

"I know he does. She's still in love with him. I can tell. Just the way she looked at him. It reminded me of how Jasper looks at Alice or Esme looks at Carlisle."

"How Mr. Masen looks at you," Charlotte added with a grin.

My own lips curled upward at the thought. Edward did look at me that way, like I was the most important and amazing thing in the world.

"I'm a lucky girl."

"He's a lucky guy." She went to the sink to wash her hands. How I loved my Charlotte.

"Can you believe he took the afternoon off? He seems to be doing okay, even with the campers coming here tonight. He invited Emmett and Rosalie. I think he really plans to make an appearance at this thing."

"He's doing really well. He doesn't have to worry the way he did before. That has to bode well for his recovery."

He was better. I had to keep telling myself that. He was also going to keep getting better. The more things went right, the more confident he was going to feel. We were kicking the darkness to the curb. It was never going to get its nasty little claws in him ever again. I was going to be his light. Together we would be untouchable.

"Oh, Esme stopped by with some accessories for the living room. She said you should keep whatever you like and she'll take back whatever you don't."

Esme and I had fun the last couple weeks picking out new things for the living room. There was enough water damage in there to require a complete redo. I wasn't much of an interior designer but Esme sure was. She brought me books to look at and made it incredibly easy to get caught up in the excitement of personalizing a room in Edward's house. *My house. Our house.*

I went back there to see what she picked up. She had wonderful taste, so I knew I would probably keep it all. The room still smelled like fresh paint. The walls were the color of parchment, not white, not beige, but somewhere in between. I wanted the walls to be nothing more than a backdrop to everything else in the room. I wanted to walk into the room and feel like I was transported to that meadow Edward and I had sat in when we went camping at Hurricane Ridge. There were the loveliest blues and greens and browns accented everywhere. We kept real flowers in vases and in pots all around the room. Esme had found a painting of a field of wildflowers that made me almost weep when I saw it. I also had her hang my million dollar Siren painting in here. Edward said it was perfect. The Sirens had lured the mariners from the sea to the flowery meadows in mythology. After he told me that, the painting became one of my favorite gifts from him.

There was a large bookcase I had chosen on one wall. I wanted to keep my books down here. The library held so many books that I loved on the third floor, but I wanted a separate place for the things I was bringing here. I noticed one of the things Esme had brought over right away. There was a beautiful silver frame standing upright on one of the otherwise empty bookshelves. I picked it up and smiled. It was a picture of me and Edward from Alice and Jasper's engagement party. I could feel the tears in my eyes. I was such a silly, sentimental girl, but I knew that someday my children, my grandchildren, maybe even my great grandchildren would look at this picture and only see one thing - undeniable love. It was written all over Edward's face as he looked at me instead of at the person taking our picture. The man I met over a year ago, who swore he loved nothing, loved me. It was indisputable. I hugged the picture to my chest.

"Isabella! Where are you?" Edward's voice called out.

"I'm in here. In the living room." I set the frame down and wiped my face with both hands. He would worry something was wrong if he saw me crying.

He came barreling in, looking like the kid who found the Golden Ticket. "Come here, baby, I got you a present. Come see."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the room. We went out the french doors and out onto the deck. He carefully led me down the stairs and across the lawn.

"Where are we going?" I asked, trying to keep up with him, but I almost had to jog to keep up with his long, graceful strides. "What did you do? Am I going to be mad or happy?"

He looked at me over his shoulder. His smile made him look so young and carefree, I decided right then that even if he brought me a fucking yacht, I was going to tell him I loved it. I loved him. Madly.

We traipsed across the lawn all the way to the stables. He stopped and let go of my hand.

"Stay right here," he said before kissing me hard on the lips. "I love you."

I laughed at his joie de vivre. "I love you, too," I called after him as he jogged over to the stables and disappeared inside.

The good news was it wasn't going to be a yacht.

I leaned against the horse rail and noticed the grey Arabian was out. She never came over to me, but I stuck my hand through the slats, hoping she would change her mind one of these days.

Not today.

It wasn't long before Edward entered the corral, holding onto the reins of the most gorgeous black Friesian I had seen since Twilight. He led the young doppelganger over to where I was standing.

"What did you do?" I asked, smiling like a fool.

"This is my official welcome home gift to you." He loosely tied the reins to the rail. The majestic horse stood before me and whinnied hello.

Edward and I both laughed. I stuck my hand out, and the horse let me pet its head.

"You bought me another Twilight?"

"Well..." he paused and predictably ran his hand through his hair before clasping

the same hand to the back of his neck "...I named this one Eclipse. I probably should have let you name him, but when I thought about it, it was the first name that popped in my head. It just seemed...perfect."

My heart took off, sprinting like it was in a race. This was so much better than a yacht. Eclipse was beyond perfect.

I stepped on the bottom rung of the fence and grabbed Edward's face in my hands. I leaned over and kissed him. I kissed him with all the love and adoration I felt for him, which was more than I ever thought possible. When I finally let him go, he somehow looked even happier than he did when he walked me out here.

"So, you like him?"

"I love him. I love you."

"I love you. I'm glad you're staying here. With me. For good."

"For good." I pulled his mouth back to mine. For good. Forever.

"What can I get you, sweetheart?" Jasper asked the next little girl in line.

"Popcorn, please," she replied, smiling big and showing off the huge gap a couple missing teeth created in her mouth.

"You want butter on that, don't ya?"

She giggled and nodded.

Jasper was going to be an incredible father someday. There were people in this world that were just made that way. He was one of them. His easy-going personality, his patience and acceptance, his fierce loyalty, his loving protectiveness all made him perfect daddy material. It hit me in that moment that when I married Edward someday, Jasper and I would become brother-in-law and sister-in-law. Our children would be cousins. It was funny because it seemed like destiny. He was always meant to be my family and fate saw to it. It was another thing about today that made me absolutely blissful.

"Two boxes of Gummi Bears, Bells," he said, giving me a nudge with his elbow. "Wake up, Princess Lollipop. We've got sugar starved campers looking for a fix!"

I was distracted by my thoughts for the millionth time tonight. "Sorry. Here you go." I handed the two boys their candy as two arms wrapped around my waist from behind. I sank back against him.

"Do you need a break?" Edward asked. I could hear his concern. It surprised me that I was so easily overwhelmed by having everything turn out so right.

"Actually, I could use a break. I'm going to step outside for just a second."

He kissed my cheek and took my place beside Jasper, handing out candy and popcorn to the eager campers. I made my way around the counter and maneuvered around the clump of kids and counselors waiting in the concession line. It was a perfect night. The sky was clear and there was a gentle breeze. The moon was almost full and glowed so brightly.

"Bella?" Tyler came up the path with Terry at his side. "Everything all right?" He quickened his steps so he could get close enough to get a good look at my face. I smiled to reassure him I was fine.

"It's a madhouse in there. I think the camp doubled in size this year. There are so many kids in there."

I could see him visibly relax when he saw there was nothing to worry about.

"Did you guys come to watch the movie with us?"

"Terry hasn't seen a movie in the movie theater since Erin Brockovich back in 2000, so I thought we'd check it out."

"Whoa. That's a long time! Erin Brockovich, huh?"

"I'm a sucker for legal dramas, what can I say?" Terry admitted. Her life was her work and her work was her life, just like Tyler's. They both needed a different balance. They both needed each other, I just knew it.

"It's almost as strange as Tyler's love for military games. So odd."

We all laughed, but I noticed Tyler wince.

"Did you take your pills?" I questioned like the good nursemaid I was.

"Yes," he answered like an insolent child. "I just took them after we finished

dessert."

"Char's carrot cake," I whimpered. "You have no idea how difficult it was for Edward and I not to dive head first into that thing."

"There's plenty left over for a midnight snack." Tyler smirked. He looked so damn happy.

I did that. I helped make that happen.

"Is there a restroom in there?" Terry asked, pointing at the theater doors.

"There is. This place is the real deal. Just past the concessions on the right side."

"I'll meet you in there," she said, gripping Tyler's arm before stepping away. "Thanks for letting us crash the party, Bella."

I nodded. She walked away, and we immediately turned into a gossiping teenager.

"Spill."

"God, Bella! She's the same but different in all the ways I would want her to be different." He was positively glowing with excitement. It made my heart swell. "She thought about me, all the time. Just like I thought about her. She visits my mother, did you know that?" I shook my head. "She visits her once a month. She said it helped her still feel connected to me, even as my mother became less connected. That's got to be a good sign."

If I didn't love him so much, I would have busted out laughing. He was so damn cute.

"I think it's a very good sign," I said, keeping my composure.

Tyler placed his giant hands on either side of my face. "Thank you. You think I saved your life, but you...you're so good at finding ways to make life worth living, Bella. That is your gift. I know Mr. Masen would agree."

I bit my lip to keep from crying. I hadn't imagined this day would be so emotional. Reunions, move outs, move ins, welcome home gifts, friends turned family, happy endings for me and for the people I loved. It was everything I could ask for rolled into one day.

I went in for a hug, careful not to press on his healing wound. I knew he'd let me have one, and he didn't disappoint. Tyler hugged me back and even lifted me off my feet for a second.

We went inside, and all the campers were getting settled in the theater. My friends and I took up an entire row. Edward shared my popcorn and put his arm around my shoulders. I was drunk on happiness. Laughing a little too loud, smiling at nothing. There was this tingling feeling coursing through my body, causing me to crave more contact with the man to my left. I was ready to climb onto his lap. I wanted to kiss him again like we did by the stables earlier this afternoon. I wanted to lie in bed with him, to make love to him, to show him how much I loved him.

I could tell he felt it, too. He slid his foot over until it came in contact with mine. His fingers twirled small sections of my hair. He kept leaning over and asking silly questions, always peppering me with a few kisses before he sat back in his seat.

"How rude would it be to leave before the movie was over?" he whispered in between two soft kisses just below my ear.

It would probably be rude, but this was the first time Edward had ever attended this event. Sitting through the majority of the movie was monumental. Alice really couldn't complain too much.

"I think everyone would understand," I whispered back.

Edward pulled his arm off my shoulders and leaned over to whisper something to Emmett next to him. Emmett nodded, and they shook hands. Edward grabbed my hand and led me out of the dark theater.

"Emmett will take care of my sister," he said once we made it out by the concession area. "I'm feeling a little bit like a kid. Want to play?"

His playfulness intrigued me.

"I love playing with you."

We walked out arm in arm. Instead of taking me to the house, Edward led us to the pool house.

"Swimming?"

"Skinny dipping," he said with wiggling eyebrows.

"Not with all these people on your property," I said, resisting his charm.

He pouted but continued on. "Fine, bathing suits can be optional. We'll start with them on, at least."

Several of the bathing suits Edward bought me last year when we went to Fiji were kept in one of the changing room of the pool house. I picked out one of my favorites while he changed in the room next to me.

"I'm surprised at how easy it was to be around all those kids tonight," he said from the other side of the wall.

I slipped off my jeans and panties. "You seemed very at ease. I didn't notice any anxiety."

"There was a little. No panic attack, though." I could hear the rustling of his clothes hitting the floor.

"That's good. I know it's still not easy. I didn't mean to assume that because you didn't look anxious there weren't some feelings still brewing underneath it all."

He suddenly appeared at the door to my changing room. His naked chest, his messy hair and devilish grin caused my body to flush. Considering that I had just removed my shirt, he could see it all.

"I didn't think you assumed anything. I'm glad no one could tell."

In a moment of misplaced modesty, I turned my back and unclasped my bra. I looked over my shoulder at him. His green eyes burned with desire.

"Can you hand me my top?" I pointed to the small blue strip of fabric sitting on the bench beside us.

"What do you need a top for?" he purred, stepping further into the room. I narrowed my eyes at him, and he lifted the top off the seat.

He approached me and brushed the back of his fingers along my arms, leaving goosebumps in their wake. His lips connected with my shoulder as he pressed his bare chest against my bare back.

"So beautiful," he mumbled against my skin.

His hands cupped my breasts before gently pinching my nipples. I leaned back against him for support more than anything. He made me feel boneless. He covered me up with the bikini top and placed a few more feather-light kisses on my shoulders. I didn't need to get in the water, my head was already swimming. I felt buoyant in his arms. He clasped my top and spun me to face him. He placed his entire palm on my chest.

"Your heart is beating so fast. Do I make you nervous?" he asked, touching my face with his other hand.

"You make me feel alive." I pushed up on my toes and kissed him on the lips. Maybe it was because my heart was sending the blood racing through my veins at an impossible rate, but I did feel more alive than I ever had. His mouth tasted salty like the popcorn we shared. My hands gripped his upper arms, so strong and hard under my touch.

"First we play in the pool, then we'll play in the shower, and lastly we'll play in bed. I have a very busy night planned for you."

He took off and dove into the swimming pool, leaving me a heavy-breathing, overheated mess. His self-control never ceased to amaze me. I would have lasted about five more seconds before I would have been naked and begging for him to take me on a pile of towels. His head popped up out of the water, and he swam back towards me. He folded his arms on the tiled ledge around the pool. He wiped his wet face with his equally wet hand. His smile was terribly infectious.

I sat down on the edge and put my legs in the water. It was a heated pool and the warm water felt nice against my skin. I watched as Edward pushed off the side and did laps back and forth. He moved so effortlessly in the water, like an Olympic athlete. His arms and his back muscles flexed and tightened. He was my Poseidon.

He swam back up between my legs. Shaking his head, he sprinkled me with droplets of water like he was wet dog.

"Are you coming in or what?" he asked, letting his fingers dance up my legs.

"I will, I like to take it slow. I never rush."

"Don't I know it. You're just like that Siren, sitting by the water, luring helpless sailors from the sea." He kissed just inside my knee and then dove down, swimming the width of the pool completely underwater.

I liked watching him. He came back to me the same way, under the water. His body seemed to ripple and shimmer, my view distorted by the water above him. He looked other worldly.

He popped back up, once again between my legs. This time he was breathing hard. He pushed the hair from his face and wiped his eyes.

"Come in," he begged, lifting me and pulling me into the water. I didn't resist. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist. He carried me out to the middle. "You've been in your head a lot today. I don't know what to make of it. I worry that you aren't totally sure about coming to live here. I know it wasn't what you originally planned. I kn-"

I cut him off, covering his mouth with mine and stopping all the paranoid thoughts that he was venting.

"I'm happy. I'm more than happy," I reassured him. "Today has been a very good day. One of the best."

"You don't doubt this, me, at all?" After everything we had been through, after all that had been said and done, he still worried there was part of me that wasn't sure. I needed him to know how very sure I was.

"I plan to marry you, Edward Masen. I plan on spending the rest of my life with you and growing old together. I want to have your children and sit on the porch someday surrounded by a dozen grandchildren. I have no doubts about that or you. My life starts now. No reason to wait."

"Yeah?" he asked all hopeful and starry-eyed.

"Yeah."

His eyes closed and he pressed his cheek against my chest, nestling his head under my chin.

"You are my life, Isabella. Now and forever."

"Our story will have no end."

I felt him smile against my skin. "I like the sound of that."

"We'll have the greatest love story of all time." It was a promise I had every

intention of keeping.

He lifted his face to mine. It was all there in the way he looked at me. Everything I would ever need to know was there in his eyes.

True love.

Everlasting devotion.

Complete adoration.

My love. My life. *Mine*.

A/N: I don't own Twilight.

***wipes tears* That was the last chapter. There will be an epilogue that I'll post in a couple weeks. I think I'll save my big mushy, gushy A/N for that one. I will just say thank you for taking the time to read this story. Thanks to those of you who have reviewed and messaged me. Thanks to the people who through this story I now call friend. Thanks to momof4luvntwisaga for helping me as always.**

Ramblings and a few more tears shed on the blog.

I have been so busy writing, I have not answered many reviews, but I promise with this chapter I will reply to every single one of you who signs one. If you have a question that has gone unanswered, feel free to ask it now because I will actually answer it this time!

XOXO,

troublefollows :)

Epilogue

Epilogue

Friday, December 30th at noon

Edward had me on my back. His hands held my legs under my knees. My hips were raised up on the high end of the chair to meet his. My back curved down the slope while my head rested just above the dip in the middle. I could look up and watch what he was doing to me.

"You feel so good, baby. So damn good," he said with his eyes closed. He was trying to keep himself from losing it. Sometimes all it took was a look. If he saw me tip my head back or bite down on my lip or bat my eyelashes at him, he was done for. He liked having more stamina.

He let go of my legs and lifted my body up, kissing my mouth with a moan. The sounds he made while making love to me made my heart beat faster. They were like shots of adrenaline.

"Flip over but try to keep your back straight," he instructed as he helped me turn over. The cool leather felt nice against my stomach.

I held myself up as Edward gripped one of my ankles, holding it against his hip. He entered me slowly. His other hand pressed down on my back, keeping me right where he wanted me.

"That's it. Do you feel that? So fucking good," he said, picking up the pace.

"Mmmhmm," I murmured. I felt it. I felt all of him, and it was magnificent.

He leaned forward, kissing the spot between my shoulder blades, my neck, whispering his I love yous. His hand stroked up my arm and over my shoulder. His mouth stayed on my shoulder as his hand drifted down the length of my body, resting on my lower back. Lifting his body off mine, he pushed harder, deeper. I was so close, but my arms were beginning to shake. Besides holding me up, they were absorbing the force of his thrusts. I was going to explode around him.

He seemed to read my mind. "Don't come yet. Please. I won't be able to stop myself if you do."

"Too much," I nearly grunted. "Too good."

He pulled out and helped me off the chair. Our bodies were damp with sweat. He kissed the side of my neck, holding my hair out of the way with one hand. In his embrace, I felt at home no matter where we really were.

"I love you so much. Did you know that?" he said before kissing my mouth.

Obviously, he wasn't looking for me to really answer. His tongue pushed its way inside. My hands slid up his shoulders to the nape of his neck. I twirled my fingers in his hair, holding his head to mine. I kissed him back, tasting the spearmint on his tongue and wishing I could find a way to attach myself to him permanently. I knew he loved me. He loved me like I loved him.

Passionately. Completely. Eternally.

I knew he loved me, but it was so good to hear it. His pink, perfect lips pressed against mine one more time and then curled into a breathtaking smile. His green eyes were alight with more than just lust and desire. They said the same thing as his words. He loved me. We rubbed noses, sharing a sweet Eskimo kiss.

"Come here," he said, leading me back to the chair. He sat down in the middle, straddling the sides. He pulled me on top of him so we were facing one another.

Nothing compared to kissing Edward. His mouth moved down my chin and throat. He lavished my collarbone with sweet caresses from his tongue and then the same to each of my breasts. The air around us was almost buzzing, causing my skin to tingle in delight. My back arched ever so slightly. Every feeling was intensified. The hardness of his erection under me, the pressure of his fingertips on my hips, the way his thumbs gently stroked my stomach.

"You're so good to me," I groaned as he bit down on my taut nipple.

He snickered with his head between my breasts. His breath was warm on my skin. He kissed back up my chest.

"Let's take care of you and then we can finish off together."

He lifted me up on the higher end of the chair and placed my legs over his shoulders. His mouth was between my legs, his tongue wet and warm. He licked and stroked until I shook with my release.

Edward wore a cocky smirk. He loved what he could do to me. He loved the control. He sat back down and I climbed back on top of him. It was my turn to be in control and time for him to let go.

I lowered myself on him slowly, enjoying every inch of him. I let out a satisfied moan and my eyes fluttered. That alone drove him wild.

"God, baby. So good." His hands found their home on my hips again. His long fingers pressed into my flesh. He let his body lean back on the lower hump of the chair. His hands drifted down the sides of my thighs.

I planted my hands on his legs and leaned back on my side. I lifted myself up and down ever so slowly. We weren't going to have to move too rapidly, the position itself was creating the most amazing sensations. Edward closed his eyes and kind of whimpered. I had him. I had him right where I wanted him.

His fingers approached my center and then drifted back down my thighs over and over. He sat up, his hands ran up my stomach, squeezed my breasts. He wanted to lift me up, be in charge of the pace. He held me at my waist and began to move me up and down his length.

Edward called out my name as he fell off the ledge he had himself so precariously balanced on. The beauty of his release sent me soaring off the cliff with him. Together we were perfection. He fell back, pulling me on top of him. I could feel his heart beating hard and fast under his ribcage. It matched mine. Even our hearts were meant to be together.

We lay quiet, wrapped up in one another and our post-coital glow.

"So, have you come up with a New Year's resolution yet?" I asked, as my fingers ran through the hair on Edward's chest.

"I resolve to do more of this..." he kissed me sweetly "...every day."

"More kissing or more of the fantastic sex we just had on this bad boy?" I asked with a giggle.

The Tantric chair Edward had purchased for the house on the island, where we were currently enjoying our after-Christmas vacation, was a keeper. I never imagined a piece of furniture could add so much to the love-making experience, but after using it, I knew we were going to be getting one of these things in every Swan/Masen residence.

"Would it be greedy if I say both?"

I was going to have to take up yoga. "Not greedy at all."

"More sex, more chances of knocking you up when you stop taking your shots."

I pressed my cheek to his chest and couldn't bring myself to look up at him. This - again. Ever since Angela and Ben had their baby, Edward had been making more comments about having children and about me not getting my shot when it was time.

We weren't married. We weren't even engaged. I was halfway through my first year in my new job. I was not ready to have a baby.

We lay there in silence for several minutes.

"Well, it appears bringing up getting you pregnant is the perfect way to kill a good conversation," Edward said, stroking his fingers up and down my arm.

"You know how I feel about it." He knew exactly how I felt about it. I felt like he wasn't thinking the whole idea of babies all the way through. He seemed to want one because someone we knew had one. He seemed to forget that a baby was a full-time job. There would be no running off to the island for marathon sex vacations. There would be no waking me up in the middle of the night to have his way with me because the baby would be doing that instead.

"You've been quite unwavering in your opinion, that's for sure."

I was not going to argue with him, even if he tried. We had this conversation for several hours after a visit from Ben, Angela, and little Benjamin Jr. At the end of it, Edward had agreed we weren't ready. Unfortunately, he thought bringing up the idea repeatedly would change my mind. He was wrong.

I lifted off him and sat up. Running a hand through my hair, I looked down at him. He looked displeased. I leaned down and kissed his pouting lips. "I love you, and someday we're going to have a houseful of kids. Four, maybe five."

He smiled. "Two. A boy and a girl."

"Good luck with that," I said, getting to my feet. I couldn't wait to see him try to control that, although the technology existed. I'd be damned before I let him genetically engineer our kids, though. No way. No how. I stretched my already

aching muscles. "I'm going to put my suit on and go down by the water. You want to join me?"

Edward, lounging on a chair naked, was a sight to behold. I wasn't sure how I was walking away from that. I bent down and picked up the sarong I had been wearing before we decided to try out our new piece of furniture.

"Can you grab me a T-shirt?" he asked, looking much too comfortable in his current spot. He was smiling again, which was good. "I put some in the big dresser."

"One T-shirt coming up."

I made my way back to the bedroom. It was still so strange to be somewhere so secluded. Even when we were home, Charlotte was there. I never would walk around the house naked, but the island was our private getaway. I was becoming a big fan of the island. I grabbed a bikini and then pulled open the drawer I assumed would have Edward's T-shirts in it. I lifted the top one out and noticed a blue box underneath it before I closed the drawer. It was a Tiffany's blue ring box to be exact.

I stared at it for a good minute or so. He brought a ring to Fiji. He brought a ring that he bought at Tiffany's. Part of me wanted to start jumping up and down and the other wanted to throw up. This was it. He was going to ask me to marry him. I was going to say yes. I loved him unequivocally. The last five months had been the best of my life. I had this feeling he got me a ring the size of Texas. We hadn't discussed rings. We hadn't discussed weddings except for Alice and Jasper's, which I thought was starting to get on Edward's nerves.

I looked at the bedroom door, knowing he was probably still sprawled out on the "Love Chair." My curiosity got the best of me. I couldn't stop myself from reaching in the drawer and picking up the box. Obviously, the diamond wasn't going to be the size of the Lone Star State, but I was fairly certain it was going to be several carats.

I had small hands. I wasn't going to be able to wear something that was too big. I reasoned in my head that this was why I needed to see what was inside, so I could avoid having a bad reaction when he presented it to me. I braced myself and opened the box. The smaller, velvet box dropped in my hand. I swallowed hard and lifted the hinged top. My eyes were closed until I got it all the way open. My heart hammered in my chest. I opened my eyes and time stood still.

It was...

Small.

Really small.

Definitely under a carat. Maybe only half a carat.

What had I done?

I thought I had gotten so good about accepting gifts from him. We barely ever fought about money, except when he paid off my school loans without telling me. Oh, and the time he got me an American Express card. One of those black ones. Walmart did not accept American Express Centurion cards. I tried to use it there just to prove to Edward how silly it was for someone like me to have one. Then, there was his attempt at giving me this island for my birthday. We came to a compromise, and I co-owned it with him instead.

This was my engagement ring, though. I was going to wear it every day for the rest of my life. It was supposed to be a symbol of his love for me. Had I really been so bitchy about money that he was scared to buy me a normal-sized diamond? People were going to want to see this ring when they heard we were engaged. How was I going to explain why my billionaire fiancé only got me half a carat? Maybe it wasn't new. Maybe it was an heirloom. Maybe it was his great-great grandmother's. It was in the Tiffany's box, though, and it looked pretty damn new. The simple platinum band and the solitaire were not very old-fashioned. No, it was a new ring. Maybe the diamond was from some rare diamond mine and was the most flawless diamond in the world. That would be very Edward.

I closed the box and put it back in the blue box, neatly tying the white ribbon back together. Curiosity killed the cat. Didn't I know that by now? I headed back out to the veranda where Edward was now standing, looking out over the water with his swim trunks on.

"I got you a shirt," I said, tossing it at him when he turned around.

"I was ready to come looking for you. What took so long?"

"Nothing," I lied. "I... had to use the bathroom." I was a miserable liar, but obviously my excuse wasn't very necessary. Edward didn't question me at all.

He was smiling like he knew something I didn't. Only I did know something he thought I didn't, and it was killing me at the moment.

Wrapping his arms around my waist, he kissed me with his soft, gentle lips. "I love you, Isabella. I love you so damn much."

I felt it; real, undeniable love. "I love you, too." *No matter what kind of engagement ring you picked out for me.*

We played outside for a few hours. We took the wave runners out and lay on the beach until I started to feel like I was frying. I tried not to think about the ring tucked away in the drawer. I tried to tell myself there was a perfectly good reason why he had bought such a small diamond. I pushed down the tiny superficial part of me that cared what size diamond I had at all. I was a total hypocrite, being mad that the diamond was small when I had snuck a look because I was paranoid it was going to be humongous.

It didn't help that Edward seemed tuned in to my distraction. He persistently asked if there was something bothering me. Why was I letting it bother me? He wanted to marry me. That was all that mattered. So what if people were going to ask me why the diamond was on the small side? Who cared if other people were going to think it was odd that Edward would choose a ring that was completely unremarkable, a ring that was totally understated, a simple ring that was *supposed* to symbolize the *enormity* of his love for me? What marketing genius told women that men were supposed to spend two month's salary on the ring? Two month's salary for Edward was astronomical. They probably didn't even sell rings that cost that much. The ring so did not matter. Why was I letting it matter?

"Seriously, Isabella, what is wrong with you? You look like someone just told you Santa's not real." Edward reached over and squeezed just above my knee.

"Nothing. I'm fine. I'm daydreaming."

"It must be a crappy daydream. I know you. Something is bothering you and you're not telling me."

The last thing I wanted to do was admit that my mind was crowded with superficial thoughts due to my totally inappropriate nosiness and complete lack of self-control. If Edward offered me a ring out of a gumball machine, I should be overjoyed. The man changed his life for me. He worked on his demons so he could be with me. He went to scary places inside his head and suffered more than his fair share of panic attacks so he could be better for me. That meant more than any ring. The man himself was the symbol of his love for me.

"I'm fine," I said, getting up and readjusting the bottoms of my bathing suit. I straddled him on his lounge. He put both of his hands on my waist. "What could a girl like me complain about when I'm on my private island with the man I love?"

His hands drifted down to my thighs. "That's what has me so concerned. Ever since we came outside, you've been distracted. Was it bringing up babies again or did something else get you in a tizzy?"

"I'm not in a tizzy," I protested. I bent forward and lovingly kissed his lips. His body felt warm under my hands. His shoulders were pink from the time he had spent in the sun. "I know we have some other steps to take together before we bring babies into this."

"You're right. There are other things that need to happen first. I want to tie myself to you every way humanly possible." He kissed me, his mouth as greedy as his words. He stopped and his nose grazed against my chest and up and down my neck. "I think I'd like to tie you up *and* tie you down."

"Promises, promises," I said with a laugh. He was always teasing me with his sexy threats as if I was still afraid of him. I trusted him with my life, with my heart and my soul.

"Let's get out of the sun," he suggested.

We rinsed off in the outdoor shower and went inside to change. Between the activity of the day and the extreme time difference, I was exhausted. I ended up falling asleep on the four poster bed while Edward read a story on his iPad beside me.

When I woke, the setting sun cast new shadows across the room. I was alone. Edward was no longer in the bed with me nor in the room. I sat up and scratched my head. I had no idea how long I had been asleep for. There was no alarm clock in the bedroom. We didn't need to worry about what time it was when we were here. I saw that on Edward's side of the bed a white dress had been set out for me along with a note that said, *Wear me. Only me.*

I smiled. This time Edward had not packed for me. I was aware of the trip and had packed my own suitcase with plenty of undergarments. Obviously, Edward still had his own ideas about proper island attire, though. I slipped out of my tank top and shorts and into the dress he had chosen for me. I went into the bathroom and brushed out my bedhead. I wrapped my hair into a loose bun and headed out to find Edward.

As soon as I stepped out of the room, I noticed the flower petals on the ground. White and pink flower petals created a trail for me to follow.

What was he up to?

The flowers led me outside and down the wooden steps. Tea light candles in small glass holders soon replaced the flower petals as my guide. The candles led me down the short path to the private beach, which was covered in hundreds of the same flickering lights. It was like he had collected the stars from the sky and scattered them on the ground at my feet. When I finished taking in the breathtaking view, I noticed Edward standing by the water. His back was to me and his face tilted towards the sky, like when he meditated in the mornings. He had on black shorts and a white button down shirt. The ocean breeze caused his shirt to flutter around his body.

"This is what you do when I take a nap?" I approached him slowly, taking in the beauty that was Edward Masen.

He didn't turn around, but his head dropped back down. He put out his hand for me so I could join him at the shoreline. The water lapped at our feet, white foamy bubbles tickled my toes. I looked out at the sea. The last bit of sunlight cast a bluish-purple haze over the water. Fiji at twilight was something straight out of my dreams. We stood, side by side, holding hands for a little while. It felt like a magical night.

"Before I met you, my life was like a starless night," Edward said, still looking out at the water. "There was nothing. No meaning, no point, no beauty." He turned to face me and took both my hands in his. "Then you walked in and lit up the sky. You opened up a world filled with a million points of light. You will never know how much you have changed me and the way I see the world. You, Isabella, are my reason for being."

My heart thumped hard in my chest and my throat constricted with emotion. It made no sense that I could change the world of the man who flipped mine upside down. He thought he was lucky to have me, but I was the fortunate one.

Edward let go of one of my hands and reached into his pocket. The familiar looking ring box came out. I suddenly didn't care what the ring looked like. The ring was nothing compared to the man.

"You're a terrible liar, Isabella. You know this. You know I know this."

I looked at him, feeling very confused. He smiled and shook his head. He opened the box and pulled out the ring I had seen earlier today.

"I'll admit that I set you up. I wanted you to find this and banked on the fact that your curiosity would get the best of you. When you took so long in the bedroom, I knew you had battled with yourself over whether or not to look inside. When you got lost in your thoughts all afternoon, I knew you had taken a peek."

I covered my face with my hands. I was so busted. I could only imagine what he thought of me.

"I'm such an idiot. I wanted to be able to react the right way when you asked me, but it was stupid to put that much importance on the ring. The ring doesn't matter. What you just said to me, about what I mean to you, that's all that matters."

Edward looked at me seriously. "You hate it, don't you?"

"I don't hate it," I lied. I had spoiled his proposal with my snooping and my curse of over-thinking everything.

He threw his head back and laughed like he was truly humored. Then, he wound up and threw the ring into the ocean.

"What are you doing?" I shouted in total surprise. My engagement ring was swimming with the fish before he even asked me to marry him. Thoughts of grabbing some snorkeling gear ran through my head.

"That ring represents all the crap we still let get in our way. I wanted you to realize that you deserve more than you allow yourself. I wanted you to see that if I did things your way, you would not be as happy as you think. You're about to become mine, Isabella. You have to be willing to accept more because in my world, everything is bigger and better."

Edward dropped to one knee and reached in his other pocket. He placed the black ring box in my hand.

"Isabella Swan, I can't possibly imagine spending a single day of my life without you in it. Please let me spoil you, indulge you, *love you* every day of forever. Will you please marry me?"

He pulled open the lid of the box and inside was a ring, much different from the last. This one looked like something a princess would wear. The enormous round diamond was set in what almost made the ring look like a blooming rose. The band was delicate, and the whole thing looked very Edwardian. *Coincidence?* I thought not.

There was only one answer to give. "Yes, yes, yes, yes. I say yes to all of it."

Edward's face lit up, his smile bigger and brighter than I had ever seen it. He grabbed me around the waist as he stood up and spun me around. I held on to his neck, gripping the ring box tightly. This ring was not going to end up in the ocean. He kissed my neck and then on the lips.

"Then I have only one more request," Edward said, setting me back on my feet. "Let's do it right now. Right here."

"What?" I must have misheard him.

"Marry me tonight on this beach."

"We can't-"

"We can if you will. I have someone ready to perform the ceremony and witnesses. All I need is for you to agree."

"But our families, our friends..."

"Can celebrate with us another day," he finished for me. "I've spent the last six months listening to my sister plan her wedding. Jasper's Aunt Sally is allergic to fish so they can't have shrimp appetizers, and some woman from her work wants to know if she can bring her son because she doesn't trust to leave him with a sitter. Then there are all the hassles with the caterer and the musicians they hired, and don't even get me started on what she told me the other night about how one of her bridesmaids asked her if she could choose a different dress because she didn't feel comfortable wearing something strapless."

He wasn't kidding. Jasper had called me to complain about the same thing the other day. Planning a wedding was sometimes more about pleasing everyone else other than the two people actually getting married.

Edward held my face in his hands. "I don't want our wedding to be about that. I don't want to think about making anyone happy but you. I want to marry you and not think about one single thing other than how much I love you. Marry me tonight. Become my wife because that's what it's all about. Not the dress, not the cake, or the first dance. It's about us. Only us."

He was very convincing. Every excuse I could come up with to not do it was always related to someone else's feelings. Marrying Edward should only be about

the two of us.

"We won't tell anyone," he continued his plea. "We'll throw a wedding for everyone else a couple months after Alice and Jasper get married. They'll never be the wiser and we'll have tonight all to ourselves. Say yes."

A proposal and a wedding all in one night, my head was spinning. It was an easy decision, though. I wanted to marry him. Today, tomorrow, whenever.

"Yes."

So, we stood in the midst of hundreds of candles under a canopy of stars and pledged our lives to one another. We exchanged simple vows in front of some district officer that Edward had flown in from Suva and one of the women that worked on our island. She took pictures for us and even clapped when the gentleman proclaimed us husband and wife. My mother was going to kill me and Alice was most definitely never going to forgive Edward, but neither of us cared at the moment. Magical couldn't even begin to describe our wedding.

We danced on the beach to the sounds of the ocean and consummated our marriage in the bedroom later that night. Edward held me in his arms, but we were both too wound up to sleep.

"Mrs. Isabella Masen," he said, trying out my new name. "Mr. and Mrs. Edward Masen. The Masens." He sounded like some sort of radio announcer.

I laughed at him. "Bella Swan-Masen."

"Eeeeh!" Edward made an annoying buzzer sound, like I had gotten the answer wrong on Wheel of Fortune. "No hyphenating."

"I'm a new teacher and people are just learning my name. I'll confuse the hell out of everyone if I come in with a new name next fall." I had no intention of going by any other name than his. It was fun to tease him, however.

"That'll make it even easier to switch. If they don't even know you as Miss Swan, what's the difference?"

"Can't change it until we have our second wedding anyway."

"But you will change it, right?"

I smiled and kissed him over his heart. "Bella Masen." It was a good name. It was a great name. It was my name. "Sounds...perfect."

Friday, February 10th at noon

"Bella Marie Swan!" Jasper yelled from the room down the hall. I quickly finished fixing his boutonniere with a little help from some floral tape. The stem on the flower had snapped, making Jasper more of a nervous wreck than he already was. Carmen was a lifesaver. She had come prepared. I was glad Alice had hired her to do the wedding. Plus, it was fun to see Liam help her set all the bouquets up in the church. He was working for the Masens even on his day off.

"I got it, I got it. Relax!" I pulled the pins off my dress where I was keeping them safe and tried again to attach the boutonniere to his lapel.

"Remind me again that everything is going to be fine," he pleaded, lightly bouncing where he stood, which made it very hard for me to do what I was trying to do.

I sighed. "Everything is going to be fine. Stop worrying. You are not a worrier. You are the one who's supposed to be calm, cool, collected." I finished fastening the flower. "There. Perfect."

Jasper turned and looked at himself in the mirror. "I look good. You're right. I'm not a worrier. Everything is going to be great. Everyone is going to have a great time."

This was exactly why I said yes to Edward on the beach. This was unnecessary stress. I wasn't sure I even wanted to fake it in a few months.

"Don't worry about everyone else. Today is about you and Alice. Period."

"You're right again. Today is about me and Alice. Alice and I? Alice and me?"

"You were right the first time," I said with a giggle. "Come on, deep breaths. It's all good." I rubbed my hands up and down his arms. He hadn't been this nervous since the night he asked her to marry him.

"How's everything going in here?" Edward said, popping his head in.

My smile grew twice as wide. My husband looked incredible in a tux. Fake wedding was back on.

"Shaking off a few nerves. How's the bride holding up?" I asked, moving towards him as he moved towards me.

"She's doing well. Ready to get this thing going. She's almost the most beautiful bride I've ever seen." He kissed me with a conspiratorial smile. How we had kept our marriage a secret from the family this whole time was a mystery. I felt different, how could Jasper not see it?

"Almost?" Jasper questioned from behind me.

"Well, she's my *sister*. It's weird to think she's the most beautiful," Edward replied, covering up his little slip. "Anyway, you are needed upstairs to take pictures with the groomsmen and your family. Then they need us to clear out so the girls can take five million pictures. Then, you get married."

"Why are we getting married on a Friday?" Jasper fretted. He was really stressed. "Don't people get married on Saturday?"

"Lots of people get married on Friday," Edward retorted, again making a face at me. "Very important people get married on Friday."

"Prince William got married on a Friday. You're like royalty." I jumped in before he could give us away.

Jasper was too nervous to put too much thought into it, thank goodness. He smiled at the thought of his beautiful bride getting the same treatment as a soon-to-be queen and took one last deep breath.

"Can I have one more minute with Bella?" he asked Edward, who already was holding my hand, ready to take me to the Bridal Suite where the ladies were all getting ready.

"Sure." He kissed me one more time. "I'll see you out there, I guess. I'll be the good looking one in the tux, third from the left."

He made me laugh. "I think I'll be able to pick you out."

I turned to Jasper when Edward closed the door. "It's time." My eyebrows shot up and my happiness could not be contained.

"This is big. This is real big."

"It's big," I acknowledged. "But nothing could be more right."

"She's the best thing that's ever happened to me, Bells."

He was going to make me cry. I was hoping the crying wouldn't start until I watched him watch her come down the aisle.

"Like I said, everything about this is right."

"The best part is that we don't have to lose this." He motioned between the two of us.

Cue the tears. "Today you officially become my brother. It's just how I want it."

We embraced in the tiny room in the basement of St. James Cathedral. Today we became family.

"Wait..." Jasper pulled back and looked at me suspiciously "...I don't become your brother *officially* until you marry Edward."

I tried to mask my guilty feelings. "Right," I said shaking my head. "I meant you officially become Edward's brother and in a couple months you'll be mine."

He eyed me for a couple seconds. I could feel my face changing color under his glare.

"Bella Swan, what did you do?"

"Nothing," I said, avoiding all eye contact.

"You didn't!"

"I didn't! I don't know what you're talking about."

Code red! Code red! My horrible lying skills were killing me at the moment.

"You did! When? Bella! Alice is going to kill him."

I turned away from him and pressed my hands against my flushed cheeks. Jasper was my best friend. This was the longest I had ever kept something this important

from him.

"You guys eloped, didn't you?"

My hands slid upward to cover my eyes as I nodded.

"When? How could you not tell me? How did you guys do it without the press picking up on it? What are Renee and Charlie going to say?" He rattled off more questions than I could answer.

"Remember when we came home from Fiji engaged?"

"Yeah."

I shrugged and scrunched my face up apologetically.

"You got married the same week you got engaged?"

"The same night," I admitted in the smallest voice ever.

"The same night!" Jasper's hand slapped down on the top of his head. "You've been married this entire time?"

My eyes shot to the door for fear that someone was standing out there and could overhear. "Shhh! We didn't want to upset anyone nor did we want to take any attention away from you and Alice. Please don't tell anyone. Please."

Jasper started laughing. He covered his mouth and doubled over. "He asked you to marry him and then asked you to literally marry him at the same time? Classic! I don't know if I should be mad I wasn't there or mad that I didn't think of eloping, too!"

"It was a lot less stressful," I said with a humored grin.

Jasper took a couple deep breaths to stop himself from laughing. "So we really do become family today."

"We've always been family. We didn't need the Masens to be family."

"No, we didn't..." he pulled me in for another hug "...Mrs. Masen."

"Please don't tell Alice. I know that's asking a lot since she's going to be your wife

and all, but give Edward a chance to tell her himself. Please."

"He should tell her. *Soon.*" He let me go and fixed his jacket. "She'll be mad for as long as Alice can be mad at him, which is never long enough, in my opinion."

"Hey, that's my husband you're talking about."

Jasper rolled his eyes. "I can't believe you're married."

"Let's focus on getting you married. Shall we?" We headed upstairs to get him hitched.

St. James was a beautiful church. Open and airy, the arches, bronze doors, and stained glass windows made it an architectural standout in Seattle. You definitely felt like you were in a holy place. A higher power was going to oversee this union, I could feel it.

The tears flowed freely as I watched Carlisle walk Alice down the aisle and Jasper get misty eyed. I caught Edward watching me several times throughout the ceremony.

My husband.

A higher power had blessed our union as well. We wouldn't be here if it weren't for the grace of the God I had prayed to the day James tried to kill Edward. I made a mental note to leave a large donation before we left for the reception back at the estate.

Everyone stood and clapped as the priest presented Mr. and Mrs. Jasper Hale. Jasper and Alice shared one more kiss before making their way down the aisle. When it was my turn to join the recessional, I slipped my arm around my husband's.

"Mrs. Masen, you should be ashamed of yourself for being the most beautiful woman in the wedding party. It's really unfair to the bride," he whispered into my ear.

I nudged him with my shoulder and tried not to roll my eyes since the photographers were taking pictures. The picture taking was making me reconsider the fake wedding again. Now that Jasper knew the truth, it was only a matter of time before everyone found out and the fake wedding would be unnecessary.

"I told Jasper, by the way," I whispered back as we made our way to the end of the

aisle.

"Told Jasper what?"

"About us. You know..."

Edward quirked a brow at me. "You wanted my sister to disown me on her wedding day?"

"He's not going to tell her. He's going to let you tell her. Not today but soon." I smiled at people I recognized around us but didn't know for sure. We were making our way to the exit so we could join the receiving line that would see people out of the church.

"Great. Thanks, *dear*." He rubbed his face with his free hand.

A few hundred handshakes and pictures later, we were walking to the car that would be taking us to the estate for the reception. Tyler held the door open for me.

"Bet you can't wait to do this again in a couple months, can you?" he said, giving me his friend smirk, not his bodyguard smirk.

"Maybe we'll just elope," I replied with a wink, patting my friend on his big, burly chest. Okay, Jasper wasn't the first person I told. I told Tyler as soon as we got back because I knew he would see through me in an instant. He said he knew. I was beginning to think he could read me better than Jasper. Although, Jasper was understandably distracted the last couple of months.

"You told him, too, didn't you?" Edward accused the second he slid in the backseat with me.

I shut my eyes and bit down on my bottom lip.

"Did you tell him the second you were alone with him or did you manage to wait a whole five minutes?" he asked as Tyler got in the passenger's seat.

"He knew! We're talking about a man who can tell you if I ate breakfast by just looking at me! He has a Bella sixth sense, I don't know."

Edward was quiet a moment and then looked at me regretfully. "Well, I told Emmett. And Maggie. And Carlisle." Each confession made him more uneasy as evidenced by his increased fidgeting.

"You told Carlisle?" I shouted. "And Emmett?" I could forgive him for telling his assistant Maggie. She wasn't going to tell anyone, but the other two could tell lots of people.

"You told your best friends! I told my best friend. Em hasn't told anyone. As for Carlisle, he has...an Edward sixth sense, and he called me on it. I wasn't going to flat out lie. He told Esme because he was feeling guilty."

"Esme knows, too? Who didn't you tell?" I started thinking about the important people who still didn't know. "Charlotte's going to be so mad that so many people knew before her."

"I might have told Charlotte," Tyler confessed from the front seat.

"What?" I screeched. This was unbelievable.

Tyler turned around so I could see his face. "She has a Bella *and* Edward sixth sense. She knew something was up with you two. She cornered me and gave me cookies. Those chocolate and butterscotch chip ones."

"No one told me," Brady threw out there. Something about his cluelessness made us all laugh.

"Edward and I got married in Fiji over New Years."

"Isabella!"

"What?" I exclaimed, throwing my hands up. "Might as well tell everyone! Alice and my parents are the only ones who don't know at this point."

Edward shook his head while exhaling out his nose.

"I should call my parents and tell them. No reason to have a fake wedding now that almost everyone knows it's fake." I dug in my clutch for my phone.

He grabbed my wrist. "Enough telling for one day. Alice will never forgive me if she's the last to know."

He was right. I shoved my phone back in my clutch. Charlie could be last. He would be the least hurt. My mother, on the other hand, was going to have to be told right after Alice.

As soon as we got home, I went looking for Charlotte. I found her in the kitchen, dealing with the caterer and servers. All these people in her kitchen had to be making her nuts. I stood patiently while she tried to explain to the caterer what he could and what he could not touch. She rolled her eyes at me when the man walked away in a huff.

"Hi, sweetheart. How was the ceremony?" She grabbed my hand and tugged me out of the mayhem in her kitchen.

"You know I love you and I hate keeping things from you, right?"

Char smiled knowingly. "Oh Bella, honey. I'm sure it was all him."

"We took some pictures, and it really was kind of perfect. He thought of everything."

She hugged me warmly and then looked me in the eye, putting her hands on my shoulders. "I am so happy for you. I am. The fact that he wanted to marry you the second you agreed does not surprise me. I blame him for leaving me out." She winked and let go of me.

"He didn't want to leave anyone out; he just didn't want to deal with all the hassles that come with a big wedding." Just then, someone dropped something in the kitchen that made a loud crashing noise. "Like that," I added as her head fell forward in frustration.

"I can appreciate that. I can," she said with a sigh. "I love you, Bella. If you are happy, I'm happy. I know you're happy. Don't worry about me." That was why I loved Charlotte like a mother.

Having earned her forgiveness, I left her to deal with whatever they were doing in the other room. I ran upstairs to freshen up my make up only to find Edward in the bedroom on his phone.

"Well, I appreciate that, Charlie. I will. She'll talk to you soon, I'm sure." He hung up and looked at me warily.

"Oh, please tell me you did not just tell my father that we're married."

"I started thinking about the fact that I should have asked his permission to ask you to marry me in the first place, so I called him to tell him that I felt bad about skipping that step and one thing led to another and...yes. I told him."

"Edward!"

"I couldn't stop myself! He was really understanding and thanked me even. He said he was ready to take a second job so he could help pay for part of the fake wedding we were going to throw. Now, he feels completely off the hook."

"Oh my God. Now, I have to call my mother. She is going to... to... *flip out!* I mean...ugh!" I grabbed his phone away from him and started to dial my mom. He snatched his phone back.

"Alice cannot be the last to know."

"Well, my mom can't be the last to know. Charlie was supposed to be the last to know, but you blew it!"

"I'm sorry!" he said exasperatedly. "I have to tell Alice. We can tell them at the same time. Just not today. Today is her wedding, and I don't want to make her mad on her wedding day."

I punched him as hard as I could on the shoulder as I made my way to the bathroom. This was out of control. My day began with only one person knowing the truth to being surprised our elopement wasn't going to be the top story on the ten o'clock news.

Edward strolled into the bathroom after me, sitting on the edge of his vanity. "You can't be mad at me. You told two people today."

I refused to look at him, focusing instead on my reflection as I tried to bring some bounce back into the soft curls in my hair. "We are terrible at keeping secrets."

"Just from the people we love." His words made me glance his direction. I loved when Edward talked about the people he loved.

"I love you," I conceded.

He stood back up and came up behind me. His hands made their way around my waist. He really did look fantastic in a tux. Maybe we didn't need to have a fake wedding; we could have a black tie reception, though.

"I love you, Mrs. Masen. More than anything in the whole wide world."

I smiled, even though I wanted to still be a little mad at him. He made it

impossible, though. Especially when he kissed my shoulder and made those damn sex eyes at me in the mirror. His hands started drifting down and were tugging the hem of my bridesmaid dress up.

"There are a lot of people in this house right now, you know," I warned him.

"None of whom are allowed in this part of the house." He kissed the crook of my neck and got a hand under the skirt of my dress. His fingers caressed my thigh. "We can be quick, I bet."

"Oh, well, isn't that promising?"

Edward chuckled, his tongue poking out to tickle my skin and his fingers teasing at the edge of my panties.

"Edward!" Alice's voice was loud and getting louder. "Edward!"

Super. My mother was officially the last to know. My soon-to-be dead husband pulled his hands out from under my skirt and protectively placed himself between me and the door.

"In here!" he shouted. We waited for one very angry looking bride. My sister-in-law did not look happy when she came barreling into the master bathroom.

"You always have to be first, don't you?" she accused.

"Alice, it was not about being first. It was about not dealing with all the madness. I love her and wanted to marry her, so I did. Plain and simple."

"I shared my day with you, but you didn't even tell me about yours? That...that...sucks," she stammered.

"Sucks? You graduated top of your class from Stanford and the best you can come up with is *sucks*?" Edward teased. Alice glared at him. "I'm kidding. I'm sorry. We planned the fake wedding for all of you. We wanted to share, too."

"It's not the same and you know it." She folded her arms in front of her. I knew she would be mad. I didn't think about how hurt she would be.

Edward stepped towards her and opened his arms, waiting for her to accept his comfort. She dove in and buried her head in his chest.

"I love you, Al. Mom would have been so proud of you today. She would have bawled her eyes out. She was there in spirit at both of our weddings. That's something, huh?"

"That is something. All I ever wanted was for you to be happy. I'm glad you're happy."

"I'm more than happy. Much, much more."

My heart clenched, watching them care for one another. These two siblings had been through so much pain and loss. They used to be the only family they had. Now, their family included me and Jasper. Forever.

Alice pulled back and opened up an arm. "Come here, Bella. Group hug."

I joined them and whispered my apologies, all of which were shushed by both Alice and Edward.

"Alice? Edward?" Jasper called from the hallway, sounding nervous again.

"In here!" all three of us said at the same time.

Jasper came in the room and was immediately drawn into our group hug, in between me and Alice, of course. His apologies to me were not shushed but were accepted in the end.

Edward was the first to encourage an end to the lovefest. "I think there's a party going on and the guests of honor need to make their entrance."

Just as we made our way into the bedroom, his phone rang. I saw him wince when he looked at the display. He pressed the button to answer and closed his eyes.

"Renee," he said in the sweetest voice he could muster as his hand pulled on his hair. "Renee...no...I...Renee...it wasn't like that...Renee...Renee...I am sorry...yes...no, but...but...I know, but...yes...she's right here."

I waved my hands and shook my head. There was no way in hell he was going to make me talk to her when she was ready to kill. I bolted from the room, following Alice and Jasper down to the ballroom. My husband might as well get used to handling his mother-in-law. She could talk to me tomorrow when cooler heads would prevail. I laughed when I heard him still stammering.

"My sister's wedding...yes...it was lovely...I'm sure you would have enjoyed our wedding, too..."

Edward pulled my hair, wrapping the ponytail around his hand and yanking my head back. He kissed my neck as I pushed down on him, feeling the muscles within beginning to tighten.

"That's it, baby," he urged me on. He sat comfortably on the chair while I did all the work. I bounced up and down on his lap until I came with mouth open and the f-word falling from my lips. I wanted a Tantric chair in every room. Every. Single. Room.

He couldn't hold on after I let go. He grunted behind me as his hands glided down the sides of my body. He pulled me down on him, my back to his chest. I reached back over my head and wrapped my arms around his neck. He kissed the inside of my elbow and slid his hands down my thigh.

"I needed that after the day I had," he said smattering kisses along my arm and shoulder.

"The day *you* had? I think we had the same day."

"You didn't have to talk to your mother," he reminded me.

"True, but that was your own fault. If you hadn't told my father..."

"I know, I know," he relented. "At least it's all out in the open now and we can forget about having a fake wedding."

"We should still have a party. You look so hot in a tux."

"Really?"

"Hotter in nothing at all but hot in a tux, for sure."

His hands moved up to my stomach. They gently skimmed my ribs and under my breasts. "I'll have to keep that in mind."

"Any regrets about eloping?" His voice was tinged with worry.

"None. It would have been nice to have the people who love us there to witness it, but I kind of like that it was all ours."

"Me, too," he said, kissing under my ear.

"I'll be pissed if our daughter elopes, though. Does that make me a hypocrite?"

"Why is it that whenever we have sex on one of these chairs we talk about making babies?"

I laughed and swatted his leg. "I wasn't talking about making babies. I'm just saying, if we have a daughter who chooses to elope, I'll be a total hypocritical pain in her ass."

"I think you want to start having babies."

"I do not."

"You do. You totally do. You were talking about it in your sleep the other day."

"I was not."

"You were, too."

"You're incorrigible."

"If we have a girl, can we name her Penny?"

I laughed so hard that I almost couldn't breathe. "No. We are not naming our child Penny."

"Why not? It's perfect."

"Dream on, baby."

"She'd be our lucky charm. Our little Penny baby."

"What if we have all boys? What would you name a boy? Nickel?"

It was Edward's turn to laugh. "Um, *no*. He could be the future CEO of Masen Corporation. He cannot be named after a five cent piece."

"Oh, but our daughter can be named after one cent? Nice."

He tightened his hold on me and then reached up to tilt my face to his, kissing me on the mouth.

"I don't care what we name our kids, as long as you're happy, I'm happy."

"I like that. You are getting so good at this husband stuff." I kissed him one more time. "Penny Masen," I said, shaking my head. "You do make me smile."

We lay together, exhausted from the day and our silly conversation. I was just about to get up when Edward stirred under me.

"I got it!" The excitement in his tone amused me. "Nicholas. Get it? We could name our son Nicholas."

I fell into another fit of laughter.

Penny and Nick.

Now *that* would make for an interesting story.

Epic A/N: I don't own Twilight.

***wipes eyes* I can't believe this is it. Thirty weeks or so after I began this story, I hit complete. Unbelievable. This story has taken on a life of its own and I'm proud to say it absolutely blew the other stories I've written out of the water! That is thanks to all of you who took the time to review, rec, and pimp this story out all over the fandom. Every one of you that sent out a tweet or posted on FB or blogged about it or voted for it in the different things it was lucky enough to be nominated for, I owe you a huge thanks. This story could be just one of the hundred thousand out there if it weren't for those of you who brought people my way.**

Sequel? Well, you tell me, would that make for an interesting story?

Outtakes? Hell yes. Everyone wants some more EPOV. 3333333333 Maybe a Tyler POV? 222222222222 :) There will be a few more outtakes for sure. I will post them on Fridays until I am all finished. Might not be every Friday, but I'll try.

While you're waiting for those, go read Meet the Masens by FictionFreak95 because I think I love Jo. Or go read Simone and Marie's Beautiful Nightmare so you can read Beautiful Enemy this fall (I'm prereading it and you will love this Edward, but you got to read BN, which is Jasper's story, first!)

To those who asked if they can translate this in another language and I denied earlier, I have had a change of heart as long as you drop me a note letting me know you're doing it and where you're posting it. Thanks!

To all of you who reviewed and shared your favorite lines and general insights, I loved every review (okay ALMOST every one). FF is in fail mode and I cannot reply to reviews. They made me a big old liar when I promised to answer reviews. I tried PM'ing but they have spam filters and you can't send out too many too fast or they freeze you out. TBH, I gave up after getting one too many of those freeze outs. If the review reply ever starts working again, I would love to touch base with every one of you because it does matter to me that you take the time to hit that button.

To the ladies who comment on the blog and on the Twilighted thread - thanks for all the support.

To the O Twimoms - thanks for not looking at me weird now that you know all about this. :)

To the the Pennyward Support Group, you guys make my day - every day, not just on Fridays. I hope we stay connected even if this story ends.

To the IC - there are no words. Never did I expect to make friends through this experience, but I did. Three good, real, hilarious friends. Thank you for listening and never judging. Thank you for thinking exactly like me when I need you to and for seeing the other side of the coin when I need that, too! I love you!

To momoffourlurvntwisaga - I thought I might be considered crazy for sending you a message and asking you to take on this silly, smutty story with me, but it was the best decision I have ever made. Thank you for the hours you have put into making this story better. Even from a hospital bed! Especially at the end here, when I would send these chapters to you with barely any time to spare. Thank you for being my 50/50! Everyone should check out her story, All I Want, which should be updating soon now that she is done being my slave!

And to my RL mom, who has read this story (sometimes with some heavy edits *coughs* chapter 7 *coughs*) and is my greatest supporter and best friend. She sneaks in here sometimes, just to see what I really write compared to what I give her and to make sure people are being nice to me in the reviews. So, I give her this shout out because I love her and she's probably the only one still reading this long ass A/N!

XOXO,

TF