

Through Glass

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Summary: Bella's loved Jasper since the day she saw him. Only problem? He's loved Alice for that long as well. When she says goodbye to them at their wedding, who will help her over her broken heart? AU/AH/OOC

1. Through Glass

Soo... this is Chapter 1 of Through Glass, rewritten, kind of- Project Team Beta has been nice enough to go through this chapter for me. I'll replace the chapters as they help me to fix them. And anyone out there looking for a beta- I would absolutely recommend that you visit their webpage and seek out their help.

Still my first story though! And it's kind of my baby... so- thank you for giving it a chance!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

I'm looking at you through the glass,
Don't know how much time has passed,
Oh God it feels like forever,
But no one ever tells you that forever feels like home,
Sitting all alone inside your head.

-Through Glass, Stone Sour

I don't know how I got here. Seriously, I've tried and tried to remember all the ways and reasons and words and *wisdom* involved in my resolve to *not* get here. Yet, here I sit, aptly cursing myself while recounting all the bad decisions that I've made in my life, all while realizing that *this moment in time* will top them all. Here I stand, watching my best friend marry the only man we've ever loved. Here I stand, watching the only man we've ever loved, stare at her with the same expression that I'm quite sure is reflected in *her and my own* face. Here I stand, preparing myself to feel my heart split completely in two. Here I stand, watching everything I've ever wanted, go to her.

I know this will hurt. He's smiling at her with that same smile he let loose on the two of us the day he moved into this shithole of a town. The sun shone that day, something that rarely happened in Forks, and his blue eyes were the brightest I'd ever seen. He looked at me first. *God*. How many times have I repeated that to myself in the past seven years? He looked at me *first*. I saw those eyes and that smile and the dimple in that right cheek. He looked at *me* first. I saw the cowboy boots that he wore and didn't even think to laugh or joke or anything, because, boots and all, he was perfect. *He saw me first!*

And then he saw her.

I've seen that smile many times since, and never once has it been directed at me. For Jasper, it's always been Alice. For Alice, I will accept that. I can't think about this right now.

Oh God, he just said "I do."

It's really real. It's really not me he just said 'I do' to. I've known this was what would happen, I've prepared for it. *Fuck*. I apparently didn't prepare well enough. I wonder if anyone has ever died of a broken heart. Surely not, surely with all of the time I spend on the internet, searching for this and that, I would have run across a news article or something. Huh. Maybe I could be the first. I'm obviously good at being first. After all, he saw me first. Now, he's marrying the woman of his dreams.

Oh God, she just said "I do."

I can't hate her. This would be so much easier if I could hate her. Alice is the sweetest person I've ever met in my life. That's one of my favorite things about her. That's one of Jasper's favorite things about her. *Gah*. Maybe that's not one of my favorite things about her after all.

Okay Bella, what the fuck?

I fucking know it is one of my favorite things about her. I mean, with Alice it's impossible not to notice it. She is that person-we all know one-who would do *anything for anyone*. That's why I'm keeping my big mouth shut right now, and that's why I've kept my big mouth shut since the day he turned his gaze from me, to *her*. *Alice deserves Jasper*. Neither will ever know how I feel.

Fuck! Move on Mr. Preacher Man, nobody here is gonna protest this union. Not even me.

Jasper's eyes have never been so bright. I should know, I like to think of myself as a connoisseur of all things Jasper Whitlock. I specialize in his eyes and smiles. Right now, instead of his eyes being the grayish-blue they normally are, they are almost a sky blue. *And the motherfuckers are sparkling...*I've seen them this color before, of course. The day we met Jasper Whitlock, his eyes turned this color, right after he turned to Alice. I swear to God the sun fucking shone on those two alone. Oh my, that's the panty-dropping smile right there. Honestly Jasper...in church?

Fuck. Wedding. Jasper. Alice. Whitlock. Maid of Honor Bella Swan. Fuck my life.

"I would like to present Mr. and Mrs. Jasper Whitlock!" The preacher yells out, and I realize that I've completely spaced on them kissing. This is good, because I don't know if I could handle that right now. Someone should shove that cross up that preacher's ass, by the way, he is *way too fucking happy*.

Right, time to leave fina-fucking-ly.

I think I'm numb. They are still staring at each other. They are walking down the aisle, and they are still staring at each other. Oh, this is perfect. From this angle, I can see Alice's expression, too. From this angle, I can see that her eyes are almost blue, the gray is so light. *Jesus, her teeth are white*. If that were me, I wouldn't be able to smile that big, stare at my husband that closely *and* walk down the aisle. So it's a good thing he didn't marry me today, right?

I follow as they exit the church and run through the "politically-correct and easily digestible, I used it at my wedding" birdseed. Thank you, Rosalie. I stop just outside the church and watch as Jasper opens the door to the limo for Alice. I prepare myself to say goodbye with just a wave to the best friend I've ever

known. I cry as she shrugs at me and waves, mouthing 'You're next!' I laugh and return the blown kiss she throws at me, and for a second, I forget that Alice has just married Jasper, and I am *so fucking happy* for her. And then my heart seizes up as I see Jasper grab her and give her their first non-church kiss as a married couple.

Fuck that hurt. Like actual physical pain.

I compose myself again as I watch Jasper stuff Alice's *ridiculous* wedding dress into the limo. I can't help but smile as Jasper kisses first his mother and then his bitch of a sister. I laugh as I see Jasper's father and his brother-in-law pop the top of a champagne bottle and drench him with it. I panic as I think that this might be the last time I ever see him.

I decided not too long ago, that the time has come for me to distance myself from Alice and Jasper. They don't know; I couldn't bear to bring their happy day down at all with talk of my leaving. It's just, I'm actually starting to resent Alice. There are these thoughts that run through my head time and again, that make me disgusted with this person that I'm becoming. I've never thought I was a spiteful person. Hell, all these years, I've smiled that smile and talked that talk for both Alice and Jasper, so that they wouldn't know how I really felt. I just think sometimes, 'why the fuck should I have to do that?' I remember the first day we saw Jasper, and it's always accompanied by 'he saw me first.' Sometimes when I'm out with Jasper, I think 'what if I just kissed him one time?' If he had just one kiss from me, maybe he would question his relationship with Alice. Maybe he would think about me like I think about him. Sometimes, I find myself wishing Alice had never been born. Those times, I truly hate myself.

And so I can't go on like this. I think it's only gonna get worse. The only solution is for me to leave. These two, they belong here. They belong together. I belong...somewhere else.

I look up and see Jasper staring straight at me. Did the world just stop spinning? *Oh my God.* He's giving that look. That look that makes the rest of the world fade away. He's giving that look to me. Wait, what? He's giving that look to *me*. His eyes aren't quite as bright as they were, but the smile is. This smile is what I like to call the "Jasper Whitlock Trademark Smile". Big, wide, mouth just a tad higher on the right side than the left, but not so high that the dimple comes out. He's smiling my favorite smile. He *knows* that is my favorite smile. I know he knows because I told him, drunkenly, but still. He laughed and told me he had to go pick up Alice. I cried for three days and only stopped because Alice told me she would be over in two hours with "the most exciting news I've ever had in my whole life, Bella! Just wait 'til you hear!" I saw the ring as soon as she slid out of her car. It's the ring that I would have picked for myself. White gold with an emerald cut diamond. Simple. Elegant. Perfect.

I'm brought out of my thoughts once again by Jasper. He's tipping his head to me. Huh. He's mouthing to me, 'Thank You.'

I smile and can't help but laugh a little. *God what he does to me.* I mouth back to him, 'Thanks for what?'

His smile grows a bit, and a tenderness takes over his features.

'For Alice.'

And then he's gone.

It is actual physical pain. Heartbreak *is* actual physical pain. I don't know if I can stand anymore. So I sink to the church steps. I'm trying to reign in my tears, as it wouldn't do for the Maid of Honor, to start sobbing uncontrollably over the absence of the *groom*.

I wonder if my dad is still around; I don't think I could drive myself home at this point. Bad idea. Then I would have to hold myself together for even longer and *still* run the risk of having to explain myself to my father.

Well, he hasn't been Chief of Police since you were five for nothing; the man has eyes like a hawk.

Jake! Oh dear God in heaven, if you love me at all, please oh please let Jake still be here. Jake would understand, and he certainly wouldn't judge my good-for-nothing-ass. He was only pining for me until last year when Leah finally got fed up with waiting and went after him herself. I always knew that they would be good together. Huh. I'm pretty good at bringing happy couples together, now that I think about it. Jake and Leah. Alice and Jas-fuck. Let's not think about him right now. Okay, breathe Bella. Think about something else. Okay, so technically, that's only two couples. Whatever. I should still get some kind of reward, or someone should at *least* throw me a goddamn pity party. I mean-

"Well, well Bella. Hate the dress so much that you want to ruin it on the church steps, like, right after the fucking wedding? I thought you would at least wait until this whole thing was over before you threw it in Alice's face how much you hated her wedding. Or maybe it's not the wedding you hate so much as the fact that it's not *your* wedding." Ah, Rosalie, love her.

"What are you talking about, Rosalie? The wedding is over, my dress is far from ruined, I loved Alice's wedding, and anyway," breathe Bella, "I'd appreciate if you took yourself and your insinuations, and just, went.. away."

There, that should do.

"Really, Bella," Rosalie laughs as she says this, "are you just a tad retarded or did you really *not know* that you were, as MOH, *required* to attend the reception?"

Fuck, I knew that, I just chose to forget it in my lapse of sanity.

"O-of course I *know* that I'm supposed to be at the reception," I stutter. "I just needed to sit for a minute- the shoes are killing me. I'll be along shortly, and my dress will be *just fine*, thank you Rosalie."

"Mhm, shoes, *right*. You look like you are about to break down Bella. Hell, your eyes are so glassy, I'd think you were high if I didn't know how in love with my brother you are," Rosalie snaps at me. "It's time to bury that torch Bella, it's *been time*."

Wait, what?

“What are you talking about, Rosalie?” I breathe out. Seriously, I’m not that fucking transparent, there’s no way she could know. Right?

“Please Bella, don’t insult my fucking intelligence. I’ve always known. You’re like an open goddamn book around my brother,” she snaps at me. “I don’t know how Alice has been able to stand having your pathetic ass around all the time. You practically drool all over my brother whenever he’s around. Everyone else might be blind or gracious or what the fuck ever with you, but I’m not gonna be, not anymore.”

She’s starting to piss me off.

I remember the first time I met Rosalie McCarty née Whitlock. Alice had been over to visit Jasper at his house many times, and she was always telling me how awesome his family was. She wanted me to meet them, so did Jasper, and that was what decided for me. I mean if he wanted me to meet his *family*, then I really meant something, didn’t I? Jasper’s parents- ‘Don’t call us Mr. and Mrs. Whitlock hon, you’ll insult us without knowing it, Peter and Charlotte, that’s our names, use ‘em,’ were gracious hosts. They hugged me and smiled, and I knew where Jasper’s smile had come from right then. They were the most easygoing people I’d ever met, and I loved them instantly. Then, I met his sister.

I felt like I’d just collided with a brick wall. Seriously. One minute I’m standing there smiling at Jasper’s parents, the next I’m struggling to breathe and my body feels like it’s caught in a vice.

“B! We’ve been waiting all day for you! I’m fucking hungry, let’s eat now!”

“Emmett put that poor lil child down, she don’t know you from Adam!”

Who the fuck is Emmett?

“Emmett, so help me God, if you don’t put that girl down, I will put you down,” a voice said. A lovely voice, like Jasper’s only feminine. Slight southern drawl, lilting at the end. This voice, however, had an edge to it.

This Emmett person put me down, and I saw exactly why I felt like I’d had the life squeezed out of me. He was huge, like Gerard Butler 300 huge. Solid muscle, but his face, wow his face could make anyone smile. It was the kindest face I’d seen outside of Alice. Big blue eyes, easy smile, and dimples for days.

“Sorry ‘bout that B, I get a little crazy when I haven’t eaten,” Emmett laughed out. He held his hand to me and said, “Emmett McCarty, nice to meet ya, B!”

I took his hand and felt washed in warmth. Then he said, “And this is my Rose!”

I turned and was met with a sight like no other. The only thing I could think was- this is the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. She had long golden blonde, wavy hair. I swear the light bounced off her hair and made her look unreal, like an angel, sent straight from heaven. Her eyes were so light blue they almost looked like diamonds. Her face was flawless, and she had a body that made anyone else in the world look like dog meat.

I was at once in awe and utterly terrified.

“Nice to meet you Rosalie, I’m Bella, Alice’s best friend,” I said to her as I held my hand out.

She looked at my hand like I had some incurable disease and she’d rather not risk touching me.

I didn’t know what to do, so I looked back to Alice and Jasper. Alice looked just as awestruck as I had felt a moment ago. Jasper though, winked at me, and mouthed ‘It’s okay.’ I blushed, of course, and turned to look back at Rosalie. Imagine my surprise when she was staring at me with narrowed eyes, and she looked ready to tear me limb from limb.

“Nice to meet you,” Rosalie ground out, and proceeded to brush past me to the dining room, “Come on Emmett, let’s get you fed.”

Bitch never liked me, and I had never done a fucking thing to her.

“Look Rosalie, I don’t know what the fuck I’ve *ever* done to you, and I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, but it’s about time you backed the fuck up off me,” I spat at her. *That bitch is smiling at me!* “I’ve never given you a reason to dislike me, but you’re bound and fucking determined to do so with me. Could you please just give me a break for one more day, and then-”

Fuck Bella, do NOT tell Rosalie that you’re leaving, that would just add fuel to her nastiness.

Her eyes were narrowing again, someone should tell her she’s gonna wrinkle early if she keeps that ugly, pinched look on her face.

“And then what, Bella? And then it won’t matter anymore? Why? Because they’re married now? Because you’ve finally given up? Why Bella?” Why won’t she shut-up? “You’re right, I’ve never liked you. I knew that first day, that you were in love with my brother. I know that you’re just biding your time until he tires or whatever of Alice. Well, guess what, Bella? That’s *never gonna happen!* Alice and Jasper were meant for each other, always have been,” she sniffed out that last part.

Like I don’t fucking know that!

“You know what, Rosalie? Fuck you. I’m sick of sitting here and listening to your accusations. Yes, I’ve been in love with your brother for as long as I can remember, but you should know,” breathe, Bella, “that I *never* asked for it. I would never do anything to cause him or Alice pain, and I’ve kept this shit to myself all this time, so I don’t know why you are making such a big goddamn deal about it now. In fact-”

“Kept it to yourself?!” Rosalie cackles, “Kept it to yourself, huh, Bella? That’s why, not three days after you tell Jasper how much you love his ‘Jasper Whitlock Trademark Smile’, he’s asking Alice to marry him? Why the fuck would you tell him that?! You were trying to get him to leave Alice! You’ve always been trying to get him to leave Alice! End this, Bella! It’s past time, let those two live their *lives* without having to worry about how it will affect poor, little Bella!”

Oh, hell no.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about! Don’t you think if it was that easy, I would have just gone and buried the motherfucker?” The sobs start as I say, “I did *not* ask for this Rosalie! I did *not* ask for my day to start and end by Jasper Whitlock! I did *not* ask to love him! I did *not* ask for my world to be falling apart around me on what should be one of the happiest days of my life! I *love* Alice! I would do *anything* for Alice! I would do *this* for Alice!” My whole body is shaking under the force of these sobs now. And I’m standing, I can’t take this, I’m gonna fall, I just know it. Rosalie looks...contrite. And still I’m not done. “Tell me Rosalie! Tell me how to make it go away! I don’t *want* it! I didn’t ask for it, and I don’t want it! Please, oh God-”

Emmett is suddenly there, catching me as I fall. My dress catches on my godforsaken heels, and the sound of it tearing is *deafening*.

“Bella-“Rose starts, and I’m curious as to what someone might say to a person who has broken down in front of them. She doesn’t get to finish though, because Emmett harshly and abruptly cuts her off.

“Enough, Rose!” He snaps at her. She starts to speak again, as Emmett cuts in once more. “She’s had enough, Rose! I’m taking her home!”

Rosalie nods, and moves to the side to let Emmett and me pass.

“Wait,” I whisper, I’ve suddenly remembered, “Please Rosalie, don’t say anything to them. Please tell them something else, anything else, but don’t worry them or upset them. Please.”

Rosalie looks surprised. *God, she’s such a bitch*. She does nod though, and that’s the best I’ll get. I let Emmett lead me to his jeep, and he has to lift me up so as to not split my dress any further. *Like it fucking matters anymore*. I turn to stare out the window, and hope that he chooses this moment to not to joke or speak or anything. I hope he just drives me home.

The sobs have subsided, for now at least. There’s a clear thought running through my head, and I wish I could make it go away.

He saw me first.

“I knew that; Jas told me that one night when we were out drinking.”

I think I said that out loud.

Emmett just goes on though, like it’s not wrong how I’m thinking that my best friend’s husband saw me first. “Yeah so, Jas and Ali were fighting. Weird, right? Those two like never fight.” It’s true, they *never* fight. I’m intrigued, and highly disgusted with myself. “So Jas starts talking, about when he first met Alice. He said, that he saw this girl in the crowd, and he just felt drawn to her, she had this beautiful brown hair, and the sun was hitting it and throwing off these really pretty reddish streaks. He said she looked like a dark angel or something,” Emmett chuckles. Hold the phone!

“Emmett, Alice has black hair, always has,” I roll my eyes as I say this, and try not to notice how my voice cracks when I say her name.

“I *know* that, B,” Emmett sighs, “Jas was talking about *you*. ”

“*What?!*” I kind of choke out.

“Yeah, B. He said, in that moment, the world stopped spinning, and then you turned around, and all the breath left his body. He said he’d never seen anything as beautiful as you,” Emmett sighs. We were in front of my house by this point; I didn’t even realize we’d driven away from the church. “He walked his country ass over there for *you*, B,” Emmett stops here. This is a lot to take in honestly. I don’t know that it’s helping really, I think it’s making it hurt worse actually.

It could have been me.

“Except it wasn’t you, B, not after he saw Ali,” Emmett sighs. The sobs start again, and I sort of nod to him. “I’m not telling you any of this to make you hate him or her or me, or justify Rose acting the way she does, or anything. It’s just... you’re not fucking crazy, B; it was there for him too. You just can’t ever control these things. If he could make it go away, B..., he would. Please know that.”

“He knows?”

“Everyone knows, B.”

Well that’s just... ugh.

“Well then, I guess it’s good I’m not going to the reception,” I cry, “I don’t know how Alice could stand having me in her wedding, knowing that I love her husband and all.”

“B, come on, don’t be like that,” Emmett sighs. He undoes his seatbelt and leans over to pull me into his arms. I’m probably ruining his tuxedo, and for the life of me, I can’t stop crying. “We all love you, *everyone*, B. We want you there, I just didn’t think that *you needed* to be there. We’ll always be there for you and want you there, and you fucking know it.”

“*Rosalie* doesn’t love me, in fact, I’m pretty sure she hates my ass,” I bite out.

“Yeah well, Rose is a bitch,” Emmett laughs. I gape at him because, well, he just called his wife a bitch. “What? It’s one of my favorite things about her; well, that and that thing she does with her mouth when-”

“Ewwwww! Emmett! Shut up!”

Come on, I had to interrupt that; I so don’t want to know about Emmett and Rosalie’s kinky sex life.

But now we're laughing. Laughing feels good. I can't remember the last time I laughed. Well, laughed and it wasn't forced.

"Do you think they'll hate me if I don't go?" I ask in a small voice.

"Impossible," Emmett scoffs, "It's impossible to hate you, B."

I smile at Emmett, and he hands me a handkerchief. I blow my nose in the most unladylike of ways and try to hand it back to him. Emmett waves me off though, and offers me one of his own trademark smiles. His smile could light up a room; I wonder how the hell Rosalie found such an awesome guy. Lord knows she doesn't deserve him. I unbuckle my seat belt and lean into Emmett, giving him the biggest hug that I can muster at the moment. When I lean back I offer him a small smile and a quiet goodbye, and hop out of his Jeep. I don't even fall. As he is driving off, I lament over the fact that I *will not* ever see Emmett McCarty again. Thinking about that doesn't hurt near as bad as it should, and I'm sad about the fact that I didn't allow myself to know him better.

I walk into my house and take in the small surroundings that have been mine for the last two years. I'm not sad to say goodbye to this house or this town. I'm only sad to say goodbye to him, whether he knows it or not.

And now you know that he does.

I start to take my ugly ass pink bridesmaid dress off before I've even left the living room, but stop when a picture catches my eye. It's of me and Alice; we were ten years old and eating ice cream. The ice cream was dripping down both of our arms, and it was sticky and we just laughed. I remember that day like it was yesterday. Alice was spending the night with me, and Charlie had taken us to the ice cream parlor because Alice turned her big eyes on him and asked in her angel voice if he had any ice cream since it was so hot. Charlie didn't even stand a chance. I love this picture.

I love you, Alice.

Another picture catches my eye right next to it, of Jasper and myself. It was the summer after we all graduated, and Jasper had talked me and Alice and Jake into going camping. I remember Alice whining about no plumbing for days, but we all had a blast. Alice took this picture; Jasper was playing country music on his guitar, and I decided to put us all out of our misery. So I took it from him while his eyes were closed. He, of course, grabbed me before I could get away, and I fell, bringing him along with me. We were laughing and rolling and tickling, and that's when Alice snapped the picture. I love this picture.

I love you, Jasper.

I stare at it for just a moment longer, and decide to take it from the frame. Before I realize what I've done, it's in the trash. I just can't do it anymore.

I should have faked sickness or told Alice I had stage fright. Or maybe I should have told her the truth, she surely wouldn't have wanted me in the wedding then. And I wouldn't be feeling this way.

Fuck yes, you would. Doesn't matter that you were there or not, they were still gonna get married, and you were still gonna hurt.

He saw me first. I've still not processed this...what Emmett said. I mean, I've told my head time and again, how Jasper saw you first, but to *know* that he *really did see me first*.

I can't do this anymore.

2. Big Girls Don't Cry

This is Chapter 2 re-worked now! Many, many thanks to Project Team Beta for helping me out with this. Hopefully, I'm learning-because they had a hell of a lot to correct in this chapter, but they were incredibly helpful.

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them.

And I'm gonna miss you like a child misses their blanket,
But I've got to get a move on with my life,
It's time to be a big girl now,
And big girls don't cry.

-Big Girls Don't Cry, Fergie

"What the hell do you mean, you've moved to Jacksonville?!" Charlie's voice through my phone is the loudest I've ever heard it. It was understandable really, but still, my ear didn't appreciate it. *"You didn't think to tell your old man you were moving?! Jesus H. Christ, Bella! I may not have been the best father in the world, but I think I deserve better than this!"*

Really, I didn't expect a different reaction from him, even though he only found out I was gone two hours ago. It's been a month—a month ago, I watched Alice and *him* get married, and today Charlie noticed I was gone.

Of course, Charlie used to see a whole lot more of me. Before *he* moved into town and into Alice's life, Alice and I were inseparable. Charlie saw a lot of both of us—we were always bugging him to let us do the things Mr. and Mrs. Brandon wouldn't allow—like get dirty, or eat ice cream, or *be kids*. Of course when *he* came along, they went off on their own a lot. They tried to include me; I don't want to sound like they just up and forgot about me or anything...it just hurt to be around them. So I avoided them. I crawled into my head and found I didn't really need anyone else. I withdrew from everyone, and that included Charlie. He didn't know what to do or why I'd changed suddenly, so he let it be.

This is why he just found out today I'm living in Jacksonville, staying with my mom until I get things worked out for myself.

"Dad, calm down! In case you forgot, the telephone works *both* ways, so don't put it all on me that you just found out I'm gone!"

Low blow, Bella.

"Yeah, thanks for the news flash, Isabella. I seem to recall telephones do work both ways, and I think my only daughter moving all the goddamn way across the country warrants a damn phone call!" Charlie yells at me. His breathing is heavy, and I am starting to worry a bit because it sounds like he is having trouble breathing altogether. *"Tell me why Alice just showed up here to ask me who the hell was living in your house because it sure as shit isn't you! Tell me why I couldn't give Alice an answer to her question! Tell me why you didn't tell me you were leaving!"*

Ouch. I forgot *he* was back from their honeymoon. *He'd* taken her to Paris for a week, then on to Rome for another week, then London, then New York. I can't believe I forgot. Alice went on for days about how she just knew *he* was going to take her to one of the fashion capitol of the world. Imagine her surprise when he took her to four.

I'll bet he hated it! If he'd married me we would have gone somewhere quiet and nice and just the two of us. He would've loved it.

Stop, Bella.

"Or how 'bout this? How 'bout you tell me why the hell Alice and Jasper ledon't know where you're at?! You don't show up to their reception, and don't think I believe for a second you were sick like Rosalie said, and then you leave town without so much as a goodbye to the two of them?!" He doesn't breathe through that whole speech. I definitely need to get him to stop, or he's gonna have a heart attack. *"I mean, I know you and I aren't that close anymore, but you and Alice—"*

"Dad, stop! Please!" I finally cry. I can't listen to him tell me anymore about how much I mean or didn't mean to him and Alice. I won't even deny how much my heart hurt to hear *his* name come out of my father's mouth. This is why I moved, and I'm still dealing. "It was a sudden opportunity. I'm sorry I didn't say anything to you. So far as Alice and," I hesitate, steeling myself to say *his* name, "Jasper are involved, I didn't want to interrupt their honeymoon, and I honestly forgot they were back. I was going to call her and let her know what was up, I swear. And you, Dad...forgive me for not wanting to hear you try to talk me into staying. Things like this don't happen often—I had to do it."

And another low blow.

"Wow, thanks for thinking so little of your dad," Charlie sighs. He is running out of steam, I can tell. *"But do you mind telling me why you expect me to believe any of that bull you just spewed?"*

"What do you mean? I *am* telling you the truth!"

"Yeah, so that's why when Alice tried to call your cell phone she was greeted by an automatic message saying it was no longer in service?"

"Well, I couldn't use a Forks number in Jacksonville—" I start another lie.

"Yeah, right. Listen, if you're in any kind of trouble you can come to me. You can tell me; I can help you," Charlie says. His voice drops and he asks, *"Is this about Jasper?"*

All the breath leaves my lungs in one fell swoop. *What the fuck?!*

When I can speak again, I ask, “What do you mean?”

“Don’t treat me like I’m stupid,” he hesitates before telling me. “Look, I know it’s not something you probably want to talk about, and I’ve always let it go because of that assumption, but now you’re across the country—no letter, no call, no contact with anyone. What am I supposed to think, Bella?”

“Dad—” I start, but for the life of me but I don’t know what to say next. Very few times in my life can I remember not being able to think of a *thing* to say. Most of those times revolved around *him*. I contemplate hanging up. Knowing Charlie though, he’d be here before I could make my finger actually press the button. Still, what do you say? I mean, I remember *exactly* what Emmett said to me—word for word, in fact. I haven’t processed it though—it’s like my brain has been put on hold permanently. “Dad—” I begin again, only to come up short.

“Look,” he begins, *“I get it, okay? You can’t help who you love and all that. But Alice deserves better. She’s always been there for you. She’s practically your sister, so call her. Get your shit together and call her. She deserves better.”*

With that, he hangs up.

A few days later, my *shit*, as Charlie so eloquently put it, is still not together. How does one put oneself together after a broken heart? It feels as fresh as it did that day. I’m starting to wonder if I will survive this. I might really be the first to die from a broken heart.

Renee is no help. I didn’t expect her to be, but...Renee’s solution to everything is to talk about it, so that’s what she’s been doing for the past month: talking about me and all the things she missed while I was growing up in Forks and away from her. It doesn’t make me feel better, and I wonder if it makes her feel any better, either. I don’t know if Renee just doesn’t notice I’m not responding to her or if she’s talked *over* people for so long she doesn’t really notice other people’s voices. She’s always asking questions, but she never lets me answer.

“Bella, are you hungry? Of course you’re hungry—let’s go get some food.”

“Bella, are you tired? I don’t know why you would be, we haven’t done anything today; let’s go do something fun!”

“Bella, do you like this television show? I just love it! I can’t decide whether Stefan or Damon is cuter though. I just know you’ll love this show!”

For the record, Stefan is cuter.

So imagine my surprise when, three days after my conversation with Charlie, Renee asks, “Bella, have you called Alice like your father asked you to?”

I choke on my cereal. “What? How did you know what Dad said—you *weren’t* listening in on the other line, were you?” My eyes narrow on her, ready to catch her in a lie if need be.

“Of course not!” She laughs. “Jasper called here looking for you, but you were asleep. He asked if you’d called Alice; apparently Charlie told her he would have you call her?”

She was fishing; I knew she was, but she said the magic word. “Jasper called?!”

“That’s what I said,” she huffs. Then she rolls her eyes and asks, “Is that the only part of that sentence that you heard?”

“When did he call?”

“This morning,” Renee replies. “Like I said, you were sleeping. I’m sorry I didn’t wake you, honey, but you’ve been so tired since you got here. I just wanted you to get enough rest.”

Huh. So she did notice I’m not exactly alright after all.

“What did he say?”

I was being short with her, something I would pay for later—I knew that. She will ask and answer questions incessantly for the rest of the night. She will drive me crazy.

“He didn’t really say much. He just wanted to talk to you.” She hesitates. “He sounded worried about you. Is everything okay, baby?”

She doesn’t mean that. He didn’t sound worried about *me*. He was worried about *Alice*. *His wife*. Still, he called, which means I could have heard his voice. I miss his voice so much. I remember the first time I heard his voice.

“Bella! Are you listening to me?!” Alice pulls on my arm, trying to get me to turn to her. I’m not purposely ignoring her; it’s just that Jessica and Mike are breaking up again, and I love watching how uncomfortable the two are around each other right after the words are said. I mean, it’s not like they haven’t done this song and dance, like, five times already. Still, there they are, looking uncomfortable in their own skins, standing next to each other. “Bella! Oh my GOD! Did Jessica and Mike just break up again?!” Alice giggles.

I nod at her. “Yeah, they lasted longer this time though. I wonder how long they’ll stay broken up this time?” As I say this, I’m laughing. They are never apart for long. While they are apart, two things inevitably happen: Mike will ask me out, and Jessica will flirt incessantly with every male that crosses her path in an attempt to win Mike’s affections back.

“Probably not long. I mean, Mike was braver last time—he only waited like, a day before he asked you out,” Alice says, and then she starts laughing, “Look at Jessica! I’ve never seen someone’s face so red before, and oh! If looks could kill, you’d be dead!”

This makes me laugh as well. Suddenly, the sun came out—a rare occurrence in Forks. I take the moment to look around; it never ceases to amaze me how beautiful this place is when the sun is shining on everything—the rain keeps everything covered in moisture and when the sun comes out, it all just...glistens.

And then I saw him.

I've never seen anything like him. He has chin length, wavy, blonde hair, and it shone in the sun. I can see his eyes from here; they sparkle, and they are so blue, I will never look at the sky the same way again. He is wearing old ratty jeans, a pearl snap shirt, and cowboy boots, for goodness sake. I can tell from looking at him that he is built, and built better than any high school boy I'd ever seen before. This...this is a man, and this man is staring straight at me. He's was walking toward me. It looks like the sun was following him. Or I guess it looks more like he's leading the sun. He's beautiful.

I'm vaguely aware of Alice still murmuring about Jessica and Mike, but I can't be bothered to listen to anything more about anything else because this man is still walking toward me, still staring right at me. I can feel my heart beating faster than it had ever beat before. I can feel the blood all rush to my face.

Oh God, I probably look like a fucking tomato.

I'm frozen, like I literally can't move—and my brain won't work.

He stops right in front of me and smiles. I've never seen a smile like his before. I imagine I would willingly do whatever this man asks of me. Hopefully, he'll ask me to lick him. He looks tasty.

"Well, hey there, darlin'," he says and offers his hand to me. "I'm Jasper Whitlock."

His voice is like Frank Sinatra and Billie Holiday and Willie fucking Nelson all in one. It is the most soothing thing I've ever heard in my life, like a hot bath at the end of a really long day. I think I just had an orgasm.

Oh hell, I'm supposed to talk now, aren't I? I should at least shake his fucking hand. Good job, Bella.

"Hi," I say as I take his hand, and I swear to God, I feel an actual physical shock as his hand touches mine. "I'm Bella Swan."

He smiles bigger at me.

"And I'm Alice Brandon! God, Bella! Rude much!?" Alice huffs from beside me.

His smile changes as Alice speaks. It becomes blinding and beautiful and he directs it at the small girl standing next to me.

"Everything's fine," I say as I come back to the present. "I'll call Alice. Don't worry."

She turns from me, and I know that she isn't convinced. This is the best I can give her right now though. I need to get away from her, with her too-wise eyes. When did my mom become wise any-fucking-way? I remembered Renee being flighty and too old to act so young. When did my mom grow up?

It's been a few hours since I left Renee standing in the kitchen, and now I'm in my bedroom—sitting and staring at my laptop screen. *To look or not to look.* My e-mail has informed me that Alice Whitlock had posted pics from her wedding on Facebook. I *want* to look. This is the sad part. I want to see *him*. I want to see how gorgeous he looked in his tux that day. I can still recall it perfectly in my mind. I can still see him at the limo about to leave, staring only at me. It felt like that first day then. Only him and me.

Now that some time has passed...I do realize there is, quite probably, no way in hell Jasper Whitlock never knew how I felt about him. Rosalie was right; it *was* there in my face every time I looked at him. It's not like I could help it—hell, even Charlie said it. You can't help who you love. This does pose a problem, though. On top of wanting to move on from the two of them, now I'm suffering from constant embarrassment, knowing they knew. Well, knowing Jasper knew. Alice was blinded by love, and so it is quite possible she didn't see it. But Jasper loves her just as much and he saw.

Oh God. Alice probably does know.

I'm overcome with guilt as I realize she's probably known the whole time. How could she stomach to be around me, knowing how I wanted Jasper for myself? And then, the answer is quite obvious. Alice is a bigger and better person than I am. Alice never let my stupidity come between our friendship. Even when we were little, Alice would sacrifice something before I would. Charlie was right: she deserves better. She's *always* been there for me, and I'm avoiding her.

However, I could probably be the bigger and better person if I had won the guy too. If the situation were reversed, I would act the same as Alice. She would probably be better at this end of the spectrum too, though. She was always better at everything than I was.

I need to see those pictures.

The first picture that comes up is the bridal party—minus me, since I didn't make it to the reception—with Rosalie in that ugly pink dress and Emmett and Garrett looking handsome in their tuxes. There's Peter and Charlotte looking so happy for their son and Mr. and Mrs. Brandon with their unconvincing smiles. And then there's Alice and Jasper. That right there, that look—that's why I'm here. He'd never looked so happy, and why shouldn't he? It's not every day one gets to marry the love of their life. I would give *anything* if he'd look like that for me.

Alice—her dress is ridiculous, but it's absolutely her: big and full of ruffles and perfect on her. Her smile is contagious. Her skin looks like vanilla ice cream, and her hair is elegant and crazy at the same time. Just like her.

There's the picture of the groomsmen. It's impossible not to smile as I look at Emmett in this picture. His smile is infectious, just like Alice's. You can see the mischief in his eyes, and I wonder what he's planning. Garrett, Jasper's best friend from Texas, looks handsome. I think Alice might have been plotting to get me and Garrett together. That would explain the 'you're next!' comment.

There are the singles of Rosalie, looking far too at home in her bridesmaid dress. She looks like she's meant to wear pink ball gowns every day. I looked ridiculous in that god-awful dress. I allow myself to at least be happy there are no pictures of me in that dress—that is until I read the caption that says, '*Not pictured: Maid of Honor, Bella Swan.*' Then I just feel guilty again.

The following pictures are just various poses of the same people—bridesmaid, groomsmen, parents, bride, groom. The pictures seem to go on forever. Then they change abruptly to the reception. The first picture is of Alice alone, and she looks blissfully exhausted, leaning back in her chair and just...content. Something catches my eye. Jasper and Rosalie are in the background, and they look like they are arguing. I wonder if it has anything to do with me. The only time I ever saw Jasper and Rosalie fight, it was to do with me. For the rest of the pictures, Jasper's smile isn't as easy, and it makes me a little giddy that maybe that had to do with my absence.

Enough, Bella!

I'm not getting any better. In fact, my desire to see and talk to Jasper is stronger than ever. Something has to change.

Since I arrived in Jacksonville, I've been out of the house every day, usually with Renee. There are times though, I've been out alone, looking for a job. Once I graduated with a literature degree, I realized I wasn't really qualified to do much of anything but teach. I don't want to teach. I've always wanted to write, but when I go to write, I always draw a blank. Maybe I should write about this. Surely I could find words enough to fill a thousand pages or more; however, writing doesn't pay unless you actually have something to sell, so I apply for anything and everything. I've been told I'm overqualified to work at Starbuck's and under-qualified to do much else...except teach. Gah.

I need to branch out though. Maybe secretarial jobs. I bet I'd be qualified for that. Maybe I'll just go downtown tomorrow and go to all the really big buildings. Big buildings mean there are secretaries; I know that much. Working is a good thing too, because my savings have seriously dwindled since moving out here—not that I have to pay bills. But everyday expenses are things I have taken for granted because I *had* money coming in continuously. My first-thing-in-the-morning Red Bulls are gonna go bye-bye if I don't do something soon.

A month should have been long enough to get myself going out here. Hell, a week should have been long enough. Like everything in my life though, I've been avoiding.

The chat box pops up. "*Bella?*"

It's Alice; I should have known better than to go onto Facebook, dammit. What do I say to her? I haven't even figured out the excuse I'll use for not calling right after I talked to Charlie, much less moving cross-country and cutting my phone off.

"*Bella, are you there?*" Ugh. I can't just leave her hanging. I have to say something. Think, Bella!

"*Bella, I'm sorry for whatever I did. Please talk to me.*" Oh God, that's even worse. Alice guilt trips are legendary. I know I'll give in now, but I still don't have a fucking clue what to say to her.

"*It's just...Jasper and I brought you something, Bella. From London. Two guesses to what it is. Please just let me know where you are so I can send it, and then I'll give you all the time in the world to tell me what's going on with you. You don't have to talk-talk to me until you're ready.*"

Jane Austen. I know they've brought me back something Jane Austen. The thought excites me. They both know how much I love Jane Austen. Then I remember I don't know what to say to her. Alice, knowing me so well, has offered me an out. She knows something is up, and she knows I need more time before I can talk about it. So I respond with:

"*512 Palm; Jacksonville, FL; 32099.*" Then I quickly close the browser.

I don't really care if she sends the package or not. I just...couldn't leave her hanging like that.

"Are you *kidding me* with this shit?!" I huff as I walk back toward my car, where a meter maid has just ticketed it. It has been two days since I thought to look for secretary jobs. I've been to five of the big buildings in downtown Jacksonville and left twelve applications in total. Surely someone will call for an interview.

"I put money in that goddamn meter—legally you can't ticket me if I paid," I say to her. Oh my, she's sort of scary looking. She's just turned around to glare at me, and I can't decide if she has no eyebrows or if they are just pulled so far down on her forehead that they blend in with her eyelashes.

"You're over the limit on how much money you put in this meter," she says to me. "Clearly, I can legally ticket you in this case."

I want to slap her. "Joan? That's your name, right?" I grind out, glancing at her nametag pointedly for added effect. "I paid for an hour at this meter—I've been gone for an hour; tell me how I'm over the limit?"

"Well, *Miss*," Joan bites back at me, as she too glances pointedly at the spot where a nametag would be if I wore one, "the meter ran out five minutes ago. If you were gonna be an hour and five minutes, legally you should have paid for an hour and five minutes. You have a good day!"

With that, she slams the ticket on my car and stomps off. *Bitch*. Seriously, five minutes? Now, I have to pay a one hundred dollar fine for *five fucking minutes*. Fuck my life.

I growl, snatch the ticket and plop down into my car, rather forcefully slamming the door. I turn the car on and wait the mandatory three minutes before traffic clears up enough for me to pull out. The radio, which is obviously possessed, starts playing the fucking Dixie Chicks. "*Cowboy take me away.*" Really? Is the whole world out to get me today? I jab my finger at the dial, and it turns to some easy-listening station. Okay, this is better. That is, until Jewel starts belting out, "*You were meant for me.*"

Radio. Off. Now.

I roll down my windows instead, and for the first time since arriving in Jacksonville, notice how *nice* everything is. All the colors are so vivid, and the warmth seeps into you. The humidity sucks but whatever—there's a small price to pay anywhere you live. I should go to the beach—maybe a tan would make me look

not so washed out. I mean, pale in Forks is one thing but pale in Florida? That's just sad. I decide to go home and change into my swimsuit, go to the beach, and just lounge for the rest of the day. Sounds like a plan.

Except when I get home, there's a package waiting on the dining room table. I know it's for me without even *really* looking at it. It's so typically Alice. She can't ever send anything in a plain, cardboard box. 'That's so boring, Bella!' This box is decorated with suns and clouds, and I swear to God she colored it blue with a Robin's Egg Blue Crayola Crayon. I don't want to see it.

"Oh! Good you're home," Renee says as she enters from the kitchen. "Did you see?! It's so cute; I can't imagine how long it took Alice to decorate it! She's just the cutest thing!"

Yeah, Renee, I know.

"I saw," I respond hoarsely. "I'm just gonna take it to my room, and then I thought I'd head to the beach for a little while."

"Oh," Renee responds, a bit dejectedly. "You don't want to open it now? I thought you'd be beside yourself, getting something from Alice and Jasper."

She's fishing again. "I already know what it is—just some stuff I left behind at their house," I tell her and grab the box. "I'm just gonna take it back to my room now. Thanks for signing for it. I totally forgot it was supposed to be here today." My voice trails down the hallway as I walk back to my room.

"Are you sure, Bella?"

"Huh?" What a brilliant response. Really, there's no way to clearly define what she's asking about. Fishing—like I said. Best to play dumb.

"That everything's okay," she says quietly. "You're just not yourself these days."

I want to ask her how the hell she knows who I am. She hasn't been there for most of my life. Charlie raised me. , Hell, even Alice's parents were more parents to me than she ever has been. I want to ask her if she can just back off and give me some fucking room to breathe for once, because I'm so fed up with everything in my life being so complicated. I want to tell her to go fuck herself because she's not gonna get the response out of me she's searching for. Most of all, I just want to go to the beach and forget for awhile.

So I tell her, "Yep, everything's great!" and then I walk to my room.

I set the box down on my bed and just run my fingers over the top. Crayola; I was right. I'm sure I'm right about the color too. So typically Alice. I can't decide whether to open it or to wait or to just throw it out. Jasper and Alice thought of me when they bought this though, and I don't think I could bear to disrespect them like that.

Best to just rip the Band-aid off, I decide. I grab the sewing scissors off of my desk and slice into the tape slowly. As I lift the flaps I'm overcome with a smell I have missed so much. Forks. It just smells musty and old and *home*. The box is filled with an insane amount of tissue paper, and after I've waded through it all, I find it: a Jane Austen First Edition. I knew it. *Pride and Prejudice*. My favorite. I sigh as I pull the book to my nose and just inhale. The musty and the old are well at home in this book. I love it. I open the cover and two envelopes fall out.

I set the book down, delicately, and pick up the first envelope. It says, '*From Alice*.' Curious now, I pick up the other. There, on the paper, is his scratchy handwriting. This one says, '*To Bella, From Jasper*.' I can't breathe. I can't even feel any part of my body except the two fingers that are holding this letter. I bring it to my nose in hopes it smells like him. It doesn't, but *still*. He wrote this to *me*. He sat down and wrote something *specifically for me*.

So did Alice. And she decorated this box for me. And she picked the perfect book for me—the perfect present altogether. There it is. The guilt I feel every time I think of him. Jasper *and* Alice—always the two together. Forever. I can't read these right now; I feel another breakdown coming on, and I need to get out. I take them both and the book and put them back in the box. It promptly goes on a shelf in my closet. Out of sight, out of mind. Right?

At least I can breathe a little better with it out of my sight.

3. Shimmer

Chapter 3!-Rewritten (sorta) and revised (immensely) and reposted (woot!). A huge thank you to Project Team Beta for helping me with this! It's truly ridiculous all the mistakes that I'd made- I'm surprised they didn't send it back to me and tell me that I just plain suck!

As always- thank you to all of you that have given the story a chance and are enjoying it- you all make me so happy!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

She says she's ashamed,
And can she take me for awhile,
And can I be a friend, we'll forget the past,
But maybe I'm not able,
And I break at the bend,
We're here and now, but will we ever be again,
'Cause I have found,
All that shimmers in this world is sure to fade.

-Shimmer, Fuel

"Kay, Bella, I think that's the last box," Angela says as she sits down what is hopefully the last of the boxes I'd had in storage since moving here.

"Oh dear God in heaven, *thank you*," I groan out.

I really didn't think I had this much crap. I remember looking around my small house in Forks and thinking to myself how little I actually had. I haven't even bought much since coming to Jacksonville, but it seems like my things have grown exponentially. I don't know what I would have done if it hadn't been for Angela and her husband, Ben. Renee was certainly no help—that's for damn sure. Whatever—maybe she'd marry this one, and then she can get off my back about settling down.

Three weeks ago Renee received a call from her friend, Carmen, inviting her to a theme dinner at the country club. Theme dinners and Renee go well together. She came back raving about some minor league baseball player named Phil Dwyer. He's three years older than me...I didn't know how to feel about that at first. Then I remembered Renee acts three years younger than me, and that made me feel better. Obviously, they're perfect for each other.

So Renee had been gone a lot. Off to dinner with Phil. Off to watch Phil play. Off to go shopping with Phil. Worked for me—she wasn't around to ask and answer questions to and for me. Phil didn't mind, apparently; he was an alright guy, and he'd put me in contact with the field office for a friend's company. Now I'm a receptionist (not secretary, but I'm not complaining) for Cul de Sac, Inc. They deal primarily in real estate but also branch into interior design. It's a lovely company; I have to say—I'm happy there.

My job is how I met Angela. She's one of their chief real estate agents and a genuine sweetheart to boot. She found the listing for this apartment for me, in fact. So here I am, two and a half months into living in Jacksonville, and I'm *finally* on my own again.

"I don't know what I would have done without you two—at least let me take you guys out to dinner," I tell Angela and Ben. Dinner sounds pretty good right now. *God, moving makes me hungry*: "I mean, it's the very least I could do—you guys have done so much for me."

Really, it is the very least I can do. On top of Angela finding this listing for me, she's introduced me to everyone at work, and I've made some good friends. The only person I have yet to meet is the owner: the elusive Esme Cullen. Angela says Esme doesn't come into the office much; she prefers to work from home, but she does check in often. I know one thing: Esme Cullen does *not* call the office through the public line. I would have answered her call, and surely if she had called she would have introduced herself. Right?

Then there's Angela's husband, Ben. Ben is a psychiatrist. Angela got me talking one night about my past *transgressions*, as I've taken to calling them. She asked if it would make me feel better to talk to an unbiased person and referred me to Ben. I've been seeing him once a week since, and we're working to keep my panic attacks in control now. During my first visit, he probably couldn't even understand me through all the sobbing.

I'm not better though, not really. It's still hard at night and sometimes during the day, too. Mostly, it's just when the stars are bright and the wind is blowing just so...I lay in bed and dream. It's always the same *kind of* dream. Sometimes it's a wedding. Sometimes it's a date. Sometimes it's just sitting on the couch reading. Always though, it's about Jasper.

Ben has been trying to make me see it's okay to dream about it. I never acted on my impulses or desires. I feel remorse for my thoughts. I would never hurt Alice like that. I'll never have Jasper Whitlock. These are the things Ben tells me to say to myself throughout the day. He says if I say them enough, I'll believe them. Right now—and for a long time—my brain has just been stuck between what I want and what is actually happening around me. It wants Jasper, but knows it can't have him. It wants Alice as a friend, but knows she might not want me as one if she knew, for certain, how I felt about her husband. It wants to have that perfect relationship—like Alice and Jasper—but knows it won't get it *with* Jasper. It's confused, as am I.

I'm coping, which Ben says is just about all I can do right now. He says my brain will move on, but I can't *make it* move on. Then he says my heart will catch up. Is it so wrong of me to want my brain to move *just a little faster*, though?

"Don't be silly—we wanted to help you," Angela says, and Ben nods at me from her side. "And really, what kind of friends would we be if we demanded food in return for services rendered?"

They laugh, and I laugh along with them as I reply, "Hungry friends! Come on, guys, I'm starving! Don't make me beg you to come eat with me, so I don't have to dine alone," I urge them. I throw in an innocent fluttering of my eyes for added effect.

“Okay, okay!” Ben laughs. “We can’t have you dining alone! Come on, Ang—let’s show Bella the delights of La Popular.”

“Oh my God! Seriously, Ben? I’m on a freaking diet, and you want me to go to La Popular?!” Angela teasingly yells at him. “Whatever—when I’m all fat and bulgy-like, I don’t want to hear a peep from you, mister!”

This is why I love these two. I mean, they’re adorable!

“I wouldn’t dream of it, oh dearest dictator wife person!” Ben replies and then sends a mock salute to her.

“Kay, that’s what I like to see. C’mon, Bella. I’m hungry and he said La Popular,” Angela says and proceeds to urge me toward the door. “Oh, but you *might* wanna take your own car as there may not be room in ours when I’m done eating.”

The drive to this famous La Popular is short; it’s less than ten minutes from my house. I’ll have to remember where it’s located if it’s good. I’ve always been a sucker for good Mexican food. Of course, I’ll refrain from telling Ben and Angela it was Jasper who introduced me to it in the first place.

“C’mon, you promised you’d try it,” Jasper drawls. “And I promised you’d like it.”

It’s not that I’m protesting or anything. I mean, I’ll do whatever he asks of me. It’s just...has he seen this place?

“Jasper, have you seen this place?” I ask. “I mean, it looks a little—”

Suddenly, he is in my line of sight and staring straight into my eyes. He asks, “Don’t you trust me, Bell?”

My mouth opens and closes and then opens again, but I can’t think of a response. His eyes are too blue and his grin is too wide, and I can’t think when he’s this close to me. He throws in a wink, and my head is bobbing up and down, telling him I trust him. Then I’m following Jasper into this run-down Mexican restaurant.

This is quite unusual, Jasper and me out by ourselves. Alice is grounded; her parents caught her and Jasper in a ‘compromising position’ and grounded her for a whole month. If they had their way, she’d never see him again. If they had their way, she’d probably marry Tyler Crowley; his father is Mayor of our small town, so Tyler is an acceptable boyfriend for their daughter. Jasper and his parents are ‘outsiders’ in the eyes of Alec and Jane Brandon, and they don’t want their daughter to have anything to do with him. If I had my way, she would suddenly find herself in love with Tyler, too...and Jasper would find himself suddenly in love with me. I don’t want to even begin to think of what Alice and Jasper were doing when Mr. and Mrs. Brandon caught them.

Jasper lasts a week before he becomes bored of sitting around his house by himself. Then he calls me and asks, “I feel like some enchiladas. You game, darlin’?”

Of course I am.

He picks me up, and we drive for two and a half hours to God only knows where. The whole time I sit trying to think of something to say, failing miserably. Jasper doesn’t hold it against me though, or at least he doesn’t say he does. He just cranks up Hank Williams, Jr., and we drive in relative peacefulness. Only with Jasper would I willingly listen to Hank Williams, Jr.

The things I do for him.

Once inside the restaurant we seat ourselves, just as the sign tells us to. I’m surprised at how crowded the place is, and I’m sure my surprise shows on my face. Jasper must notice my expression because he shakes his head at me and smiles when I stop looking around and look back toward him. Our waiter comes—a semi-attractive young Hispanic man named Javier. At least Javier is what his nametag says. He looks to Jasper on one bench of the booth, then to me on the other, and his whole demeanor changes.

So does Jasper’s.

It takes one smile, a wink, and a suggestive, ‘What can I do for you today?’ from Javier to me...for Jasper to hop up from his side of the booth, knock the young man out of his way, slide into the seat next to me, and throw his arm onto the seat back.

Then he says, “Why don’t you run along and get us a couple sweet teas. We’ll be ready to order when you get back with that.”

I’ve never heard Jasper’s voice sound like that before. It is all at once completely sexy and completely uncalled for. I mean, I might find Javier attractive! Oh, and Jasper isn’t my boyfriend! ‘He belongs to Alice,’ I remind myself bitterly.

“What gives? Were the springs popping into your ass or something?” I ask the question, but I know the answer already. Anytime another guy throws a glance in my direction, Jasper gets like this—to an extent. I’m fairly sure that’s why I’ve never been asked out on a date...aside from Mike Newton, of course. “Because if that’s not the case...the big brother act is getting a little old.”

He doesn’t even have the decency to look apologetic as he says, “That dick is only out for one thing, and I’ll be damned if he’s gonna get it from my Bell.” My heart stops for a second when the words ‘my Bell’ come out of his mouth. “Besides, you can do better.” Well, that fixes the heart-stopping problem. Ass!

Seriously, Jasper?

“And who are you to decide if I can or not? Seriously—big brother act is getting old, like I said.”

He turns to me then, and his eyes are the darkest I’ve ever seen them. I swear to God, I think he’s gonna just explode on me right then. Suddenly, I feel his hand on my neck, tilting me fully toward him; then I think he might just kiss me. I’m torn—I’ve longed for him to kiss me. I know he is just seeing me as a substitute for Alice at the moment, though. I know if he kisses me now...he will never kiss me again, and our friendship will be utterly ruined. Then I remember Alice. I think about how awful of a friend I’m being just sitting like this with Jasper. I think of how Alice would never do this to me. Alice would never let this happen to me. Luckily, I don’t have to make the decision of whether to let him kiss me or not—the waiter comes back with our teas.

"Have you two lovebirds thought about what you want to eat tonight?" Javier snips at us.

And the spell is broken.

"Two plates of sour cream chicken enchiladas with extra rice and beans, two orders of guacamole, and an order of flour tortillas," Jasper says as he turns from me to face the table again.

The waiter nods and scurries off, and it's quiet for a bit. All I can think about is how good Jasper had smelled and the way his lips looked as he licked them. I just know he was about to lean in and kiss me. The thought thrills me, and I feel guilty for it.

When Jasper does move again, it's to move back to his side of the booth. He looks apologetic, and I feel bad for snapping at him. He looks up toward me, and I can see the conflict in his eyes as plain as day. He asks me, "Is it so bad I want better for you?"

"Earth to Bella! Come in, Bella!"

Oh right, we're here. At a Mexican restaurant. I'm suddenly not hungry anymore.

"Uh uh, you're not getting out of this. I don't care what JW fantasy you were just reliving," Angela has taken to referring to everything Jasper as 'JW'. "You talked me into going out; we're at my *favorite* restaurant, and *you* are eating a carne asada burrito with me right now! Trust me—everything is better after a La Popular carne asada burrito!"

Okay, I can do this. I nod and follow Angela inside, with Ben trailing behind me. I feel as if he's waiting for me to bolt, and he's ready to stop me at any moment.

This place is nothing like the Mexican restaurant Jasper took me to—I'm instantly in love. There are red, green, and yellow sombreros hanging all over the walls, along with the bull fighter jackets in the same colors. The booths are all circular, and there are orange and yellow candles burning on all of the tables. We still seat ourselves though, and as I'm walking to our booth I notice this place is crowded too...but it's *much* cleaner looking.

"Kay, I know what I'm having!" Angela says, as soon as we sit down. Ben and I laugh at her, and she blinks at us and responds to our hysterics with, "What? I have good taste. You both should just have what I'm having. I mean, I chose you as a husband, Ben, and you as a best friend, Bella. Any more questions?"

So we put our menus down and resolve to eat whatever Angela's having. The waiter comes to take our order, and we joke around a bit. When the conversation hits a lull, I let my eyes roam the restaurant again. There's a couple across the way, and they obviously aren't happy to be in that booth together—they're shooting daggers at each other with their eyes. I can't imagine what it would be like to *hate* to be with the person you're with. Why can't everyone be like Angela and Ben, and—I sigh as I think this—Alice and Jasper? I wonder why people don't just hold out until they find the one. Then I wonder how to *know* if the person is the right one. Maybe I'll ask Ali-Angela next time we're alone.

Yes, yes, I know—I'm being a horrible friend to Alice...I still haven't called her. I haven't e-mailed her either, and I've avoided Facebook like the plague. Ben says it's okay to wait on this call. He says I owe it to Alice to be completely honest with her when I do talk to her, and in order to that I have to be completely honest with myself first. Still, every day that goes by without any contact with her makes me feel worse. I need to hurry up and get my shit together so I can do this for her.

"So, Bella, do you have any plans for next weekend?" Ben asks this gently; he knows when I have that far off look on my face...I'm not really here.

"Um, no, I don't think so," I reply. "I'm pretty sure if Renee wanted to do anything with me, she can screw off because she didn't help me move. Why, what's up?"

Angela is the one to respond. "My parents are having a barbeque next weekend—there's always tons of food. A lot of the family is coming in from out of town, but everyone is bringing friends. My parents love having a full house."

"I haven't been to a barbeque since I moved from Dad's to college," I tell them. "But I don't want to impose—"

"Bella," Angela huffs, "I *just said* there are gonna be a lot of people there! Please, Bella!? Please, please, please!?"

She's adorable when she whines like that—I wonder if there is anything about her that isn't cute. I find it highly doubtful.

"Yeah," Ben says while scarfing down the last of his food. "When Ang says a lot of people, she means *a lot of people*. Her family is huge. Trust me—you'd be more than welcome, and we'd love for you to come. So would Ang's Mom and Dad! Swear."

God, they're nice. What did I do to deserve them?

"Well, since you begged," I laugh. "I'd love to come, but please make sure it's okay first, Angela!"

"Kay!" she responds. Shortly after, we decide to call it a night.

Once at home I'm totally discouraged. Moving the boxes in here was one thing, but now I have to unpack them. Ugh. I can't decide if I want to start on it tonight or try to sleep and start fresh tomorrow. In the end, I decide to *try* to get some accomplished tonight. I return to work on Monday, and I'd really like to have everything I need, at least, unpacked and in place.

Really, once I get going it's not as bad as I had been thinking it might be. I've unpacked the bathroom, living room, and part of the kitchen when I start to really tire out. I decide it's probably best to find my sheets—I feel like I'm going to pass out while standing soon, but a bed with sheets sounds so much better.

I sort through the rest of the boxes until I find one labeled 'Bedroom.' It's while I'm rummaging through this box that something blue catches my eye. It's off to the side and still un-taped but folded in on itself to keep it closed. It's the box Alice sent to me. My breathing stutters but doesn't stop completely...and I think to myself it might be time to re-open that box, so I do.

I pull out both envelopes and my book and make my way to my bedroom. I set all three down on my desk and go about making the bed. Once I'm finished I pick the two letters back up and run my fingers lovingly over my *Pride and Prejudice* before jumping into bed and burrowing under the covers. I hold the letters up in my hands, contemplating which I should try to read. I know once I finish one...I won't be able to read the other tonight, so I'm making sure to choose wisely. Ultimately, I decide it's time to give Alice her due. I put Jasper's letter in the drawer in my night stand and prepare myself for what waits in this letter.

Bella-

God, it feels like forever since I've talked to you. I'm gonna be honest and tell you I'm not entirely sure why you've left me like you have, but I'm also gonna be honest and tell you I have an idea. I'm so scared to tell you what I think it is, in fear it actually isn't that, and I've misjudged you and hurt you with what I'm going to say.

A lot happened on our honeymoon. It was amazing and perfect and everything I ever wanted. I know Jasper didn't have as much fun as I did, but he was a good sport about it. I know he just wanted to make me happy, and I love him for that. All I could think of in London was you, and I know you were on Jasper's mind as well. When we saw the book, we both knew it would be perfect for you. No matter what happens...please know we chose that book for you out of love, and I sincerely hope you enjoy and cherish it.

I miss you—I've never gone this long without seeing you before. I have a feeling it will be a long time before I do see you again, too. I've accepted that...sort of, but it's still hard to think about. Nothing is the same without you, and I do mean nothing...even Jasper isn't the same without you.

I know—without you ever having said anything, it was always there. It was always in the way you looked at him. This is where I'm gonna tread carefully because there is actually a chance I read the situation wrong all along. It's just...I always felt you had feelings for Jasper. I can't blame you for that—I want you to know that. Please, know that. I couldn't blame you anymore than I could blame myself for loving him or him for loving me. But I know we hurt you, and I'm so sorry for that.

It could have gone either way. I know the first day we met Jasper...he was on his way over to charm you, not me. I don't know if you know that or not. It's true—he told me about it once. He thought you were the most beautiful person he'd ever seen...he called you a dark angel! It's sweet, really. I can't blame him for finding you attractive, for feeling drawn to you. I've told you your whole life how beautiful you are, and I've always been by your side. Magnets, you and I, that's what Charlie always called us. He was right. That old man of yours is a smart one.

You should know Jasper has...struggled with that day in his head for so long. I know he has, even though he's never said anything about it. It's just...whenever he talks about that day, this sadness creeps into his face that is so foreign, and I know. I get it, I do. I just want him to be happy though, and I think he'll always regret his actions on that day. I mean, he gave you his panty-dropping smile and laid on the accent! He was so coming on to you! One day I hope he understands...I've never blamed him for any of it, and I hope one day you can tell him you don't blame him, either.

So where does that leave us? That's the question. The answer lies with you—I'll take whatever you want to give me, and I'll take it gratefully. I hope you do still want me in some corner of your life, and I hope nothing I've said in this letter has offended you. If you should decide there is no place for me...well, while I can't accept that...I will respect your wishes. I only want you to be happy, Bella.

Jacksonville, huh? How is Renee? I'll bet she's just the same—some things never do change. Does she have a new boy toy? Oh! Does she still do the thing where she asks a question and then answers for you? I always thought that was so funny. Annoying, but funny. Well—funny after you're away from her. Where are you working? Charlie said you'd received a really good opportunity, and you had to take it. I don't believe that, but I do hope you've got something worked out. You know if there's anything you need—I'm just a call away.

Speaking of calling...please call your dad. Every time I see him around town, he just looks so sad. He misses you, even if he won't say it. It's implied, though. It's just...whether you realize it or not, he was always comforted by the fact you were close enough to get to in a car in a day. Here, across town, at UW in Seattle. Well, I'm sure you get it. I never did have to spell things out for you. Please call him.

Last thing, I swear. Rosalie asked me to tell you she's sorry. I don't know for what, and I don't want to. But I know when Rosalie McCarty née Whitlock asks for forgiveness...she really is sorry.

I'll leave it there and let you know my number; e-mail, and Facebook are still the same. Please let me hear from you, Bella.

I miss you,

Alice

I'm reaching for the phone before I realize one: it's five in the morning, and two: Alice wouldn't be able to understand me through the sobs. How could I deny her for so long? Charlie was right—she deserves better.

Fuck it. It's Sunday morning, and Alice can sleep in—I'm going to wake her up.

I dial the number from memory and when I hear the ringing, I sober myself. I haven't prepared for this at all, and I don't know what I'm going to say to her. She deserves to know something, though...something like...it doesn't really matter what resolve I had before I read that letter—she *is* my sister, and I couldn't live without her.

"Hello?" I hear through the phone and realize I absolutely did *not* prepare myself for this.

I'm frozen again. My mouth won't work, and my brain isn't responding to any attempts to form speech.

"Hellooo?" sounds again through the phone, and I want to say something—truly I do. If I could get my body—most importantly my mouth—to just do what I want...this would be so much easier.

"Look, I don't appreciate prank calls at—" I hear rustling and know they are checking the time, "two o'clock in the morning. Some people do sleep at night,

you know.”

Say something, Bella!

“Uh...” Finally something comes out of my mouth, and I feel a tad victorious.

I hear a sort-of-gasp come through the line, followed by a quiet, “*Bell? Is that you, Bell?*”

Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Do what Ben told you to do. Breathe, Bella!

“Hello, Jasper.”

4. Never Too Late

Here's Chapter 4 rewritten and reworked with the help of Project Team Beta! Love you guys! Especially you, TaintedIngenue, who kicks my butt into shape when it comes to tense! I'm going to go ahead and put this warning back at the top of the chapter, for those reading through the story for the first time: Yes! This is a Bella/Edward story, just as the tag says...they just have to get there, first. Besides, the ride is half the fun, isn't it?

My every thanks to those of you out there, who have been kind enough to give the story a chance, and left me some kind words in return- you make my day!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

This world will never be,
What I expected,
And if I don't belong,
Who would have guessed it?
I will not leave alone,
Everything that I own,
To make you feel like it's not too late,
It's never too late.

-Never Too Late, Three Days Grace

"*Thank fucking Jesus! Fuck! Do you have any idea how worried about you I've been?*" Jasper's voice is even louder than Charlie's was when he was yelling at me through the phone. I cringe at the volume of it. "*Out of my fucking mind—that's how I've been! Are you okay? Are you hurt? Where are you? Are you still in Jacksonville? Or did you come home? You came home, didn't you? You need a ride? I can be where ever you are in less than five minutes, you know it —*"

"Stop!" My voice isn't as loud as I wish it to be; it sounds more like a croak than a yell. I wish I could say more, but Jasper's words have choked me up, and I'm slightly worried about him now. I mean, he didn't pause at *all* through that whole spiel. "Just, *stop for a second—*"

He doesn't let me finish and I cringe again at his loud, angry voice. "*Fuck no, I won't stop! Did you not hear me? I've been out of my fucking mind! You can't just do that to me! I come back from New York and you're fucking gone?! What the fuck? You couldn't be bothered to send me a text message or something? I've been sick worrying about you! Do you have any idea—*"

"I was actually calling to talk to Alice," I cut him off this time. I don't think I can take much more of him telling me how worried he's been. It seems too... unreal and amazing; I need to get him off the phone so I can talk to Alice. "So...can I talk to her?"

He spits out his response in anger. "*You're shittin' me, right? I haven't seen you in almost four months, and you want to usher me off the phone? Jesus! What part of 'out of my fucking mind' did you miss? Worried fucking sick! Tell me what the fuck you were thinking?! Worried sick!*" He stops there, and I think maybe he's done yelling at me when he asks, "*Where are you? Start fucking there!*"

I know the answer to that question. I can answer him. *Thank God.*

My voice sounds entirely too small as I answer, "I'm in Jacksonville. I really just wanted to talk to Ali—"

Again, he interrupts me, "*Okay, Jacksonville. Are you okay? Answer that one now.*"

Well that poses a problem, doesn't it? I *know* I'm not okay, but I'm *positive* I'm not ready to tell him that.

"I'm fine," I tell him. I wish my voice would stop shaking; it makes me feel even weaker.

He doesn't say anything for a while. When he does speak again his voice is different—calm and cold. "*Why haven't you called me?*"

Why does he keep referring to only himself? Geez, I've called for Alice. I *need* to talk to Alice. I *need* to not be on the phone with him anymore.

Silently, I curse my shaky voice as I avoid his question with one of my own. "Is Alice there?"

"*Answer my question,*" he replies harshly. I sigh, wishing he would quit questioning me. "*Or better yet, answer this: did you read my letter? Because if you did, there's a lot we need to talk about, obviously—*"

"No," I interrupt him again. "I've just read Alice's letter; I need to talk to her, please."

This sets off his yelling, angry tone again. "*What? You haven't read my letter yet? Why the fuck not?! You need to read it, we need to talk! I've realized some things and I wrote them in that letter; but I need you to read it! Please, there's so much—*"

"Look, just..." I'm being rude and I know it, but his voice is making me light-headed—I need to get him off of the phone. "Can you please put Alice on the phone? I promise I'll talk to you after I've had time to read your letter."

He starts laughing as he continues to berate my lack of communication. "*When you've had time?! I've given you almost three months! Renee wouldn't give me your number or I wouldn't have even given you that much time! I've been fucking patient! I'm done. Pull that fucking letter out and read it right fucking now. It's time we talked about it—it's been time!*"

That sounds familiar—like sister, like brother. Except Rosalie was telling me to forget all about Jasper, and it sounds like Jasper wants the exact opposite to happen. Also, what the hell does he mean Renee wouldn't give him my number? She's never said a *fucking thing* about Jasper calling again since that first time. Interesting. She's going to have to answer for that one.

"Look, I don't know what Rosalie told you—"

"*Nuh uh, we're not talking about my bitch of a sister right now, darlin',*" he drawls in his too-sexy, Southern accent. "*I've dealt with her, and she's sorry for everything she said to you. Right now, it's about me and you, and all the things we need to talk about because—*"

"There's nothing for us to talk about, not right now," I say, sighing. "I need to talk to Alice right now, please."

"Too fucking bad. *Right now you're talking to me,*" he bites out. "*And stop insisting on talking to Alice, she's in Seattle. You called, I answered, and I take that as a sign. Talk to me!*"

"Please don't make me do this, Jasper," I whisper.

"*Please don't make you do what? Please don't make you own up to leaving without any explanation? Please don't make you take responsibility for breaking my heart?*" He hesitates, and then his voice drops low as he continues his questioning, "*Or is it that you just don't want to admit what's there? Because I've admitted it. I admitted it in that letter, and I'm admitting it right now. I lo—*"

"No," I cry, cutting off whatever he is about to say. My throat closes up while saying that one word. I can't breathe again. If the next words to come out of his mouth were going to be what I think they were...well I just can't think about that. I'm openly crying now; I haven't cried like this since my first visit with Ben. I don't know what to say now and I don't think I want to hear him say anything else either.

His voice is choked and teary sounding when he speaks again. "*Oh God...please, baby...don't cry.*"

This makes me cry even worse. How many times have I dreamt of hearing him call me baby? He's called Alice that their whole relationship. That—there—Alice—sobering thought. What the hell is he talking about right now, anyway? He has everything he's ever wanted in Alice! Why is he talking to me like this?!

"Where do you get off, Jasper Whitlock? Do you even hear the words coming out of your mouth, right now?! What the hell are you thinking? You've been with Alice since we were *sixteen*! She's everything you've ever wanted! Quit talking to me like this! I'm throwing that fucking letter out right fucking now, and then—"

He interrupts me again, yelling back at me, "*Don't you fucking dare! C'mon! I'll beg. Is that what you want?! You've waited all this time for me; you want me to wait for you now? Fine! Done! Whatever you want! You—you're it for me! I'm sorry it took me so goddamn long to see it—*"

"That! That right there! Are you listening to yourself? You're talking six kinds of crazy right now—"

"*Hell no, I'm not! I'm telling the truth! Extend me the same fucking courtesy!*"

Then we're both quiet for a bit, but I know he's still there; I can hear his breathing, and I'm sure he can hear mine as well. I'm unsure of what to say now—he's telling me everything I've ever wished to hear. I feel as if I should be shouting from the rooftops, yet here I am...crying.

When he does speak again, it sounds as if he's begun to cry. "*Just...tell me I'm not fucking crazy. Tell me...tell me you love me too, Bell.*"

A sob bursts from me—it sounds something like moaning and choking at the same time, and I'm unable to respond through my tears. After a moment of listening to me do nothing but cry, Jasper finally says, "*You know what? It doesn't matter. I know you love me. I'll wait until you're ready to admit it.*"

More time passes and I'm still not able to rein in my sobs. The whole time Jasper sits on the other end of the line, listening and whispering reassurances to me. I feel as if my whole world has come crashing down—not like the day Jasper and Alice got married, this is completely different. It's what I've always secretly wished for—well, I guess it isn't secret after all.

Jasper loves me. I can't believe this! I haven't any idea what to do with this information. I feel so fucking terrible for Alice—wait! What about Alice? He said she was in Seattle...what's she doing there? Has he talked to Alice about anything he's talked to me about tonight? Maybe he hasn't. Maybe this can be salvaged.

"Jasper," I begin slowly, I'm still crying but at least able to speak again. "What about Alice?"

He sighs, "*Alice has moved to Seattle. We're...*" he hesitates again, "*well I guess the best way to put it is to say we're separated, for now. We're getting a divorce though. I've made my decision, and Alice has to live with it—whether she likes it or not.*"

No! Oh God, no!

"This is what I didn't want! It's why I've *never* said anything! Alice is probably suffering right now!"

"*Like you've been suffering for seven years?*" I don't know how to respond. I mean, yeah it's the same thing, but still.... Alice deserves better than her best friend stealing her husband. *Oh God. "Wait, did you just admit to loving me too?"* I can hear the smile in his voice as he asks.

"What's the matter with you? You've *loved Alice* every day since you met her! How can you just cast that aside?! Look, I know from her letter and from talking to Emmett about that first day. I know you were coming to meet me—not Alice. I know you've been conflicted about that, but attraction and *love* are not the same thing!" Holy wow, I sound all grown up and wise. "*You love Alice, and you fucking know it!*"

I hear him start coughing on the other end of the line—it almost sounds like he's choking. I'm just about to ask if he's okay, or call Charlie to go check on him, when he asks, "*You knew about that? I mean, that I was coming over to ask you out?*" Bless him, he actually sounds embarrassed.

“Yeah.” I laugh, remembering Emmett’s description of Jasper that day—*country ass*. “You run your mouth when you’re drinking, apparently.”

He barks out a laugh on his end. *“I’m not the only one! What did you call it? The Jasper Whitlock Trademark Smile?”*

Now it’s my turn to be embarrassed. I’m beyond relieved he can’t see me right now. I’m sure my face is the color of a tomato. On top of that, he’s flirting with me! Jasper Whitlock hasn’t ever *purposely* flirted with me...that I know of. I don’t know what to say or do.

After a few moments of me not responding, he speaks again, *“Too much? Sorry. I just...I’ve been thinking about this conversation a lot. I’ve been thinking about you a lot. I just...miss you.”*

Without my permission, a giggle bursts from my mouth and I’m telling him, “I miss you, too.”

Ugh, stop Bella.

“Still...I don’t think I can do this. You and me, I mean. You and me *together*, I mean. I mean—I just don’t think I can do this to Alice. She’s like my sister—I love her too, you know. I just...don’t see how this can work—”

“Bell, baby, calm down,” he sighs, he sounds tired now. *“Look, we don’t have to figure out everything tonight—just don’t discount it altogether. So far as Alice goes...I still talk to her almost once a week; she knows how I feel about you, and I’m pretty sure she knows how you feel about me too. She just wants us to be happy.”*

“What about her happiness though?” My throat is threatening to close up on me again. I can’t believe we’re talking about this right now.

His voice is soothing as he suggests, *“Look, why don’t you just get some sleep for now, okay? Tomorrow when we’ve both rested, we can talk about this some more. What were you still doing up by the way? It’s like almost seven in the morning there now, isn’t it?”*

He’s right; it is almost seven. I’ve spent almost two hours on the phone with him. I can hardly believe it. The sun has risen by this point, and I doubt I’ll be able to sleep—not because of the sun, which is shining directly through my un-curtained windows, but because of this conversation.

“Oh! I just moved out of Renee’s today—well...yesterday. I was still unpacking when I came across the letters again.”

“How’d that go? I’ll bet it was interesting having Renee there to tell you how to arrange your furniture so your energy is centered just right.” He laughs at my mother’s antics, and I can’t help but laugh with him.

“Actually Renee didn’t help, she’s got a new man. He’s only three years older than me! Whatever—doesn’t matter, but that’s why she didn’t help. She was at one of his games today—or yesterday...I’m so confused right now.”

“Wait, you mean you had to move all of your things by yourself? What the hell? You should have called me, I would have flown there to help you!”

My heart skips a beat thinking about Jasper here, with me, in my apartment—all sweaty while moving my furniture around. “No, I didn’t have to move it all by myself. My friends, Angela and Ben, helped me. They’ve been incredible, actually. I work with Angela—she’s introduced me to just about everyone at the office. And I’ve been going to see her husband, Ben, once a week for therapy—”

I stop myself abruptly, clearing my throat awkwardly. I really didn’t want to let that slip out, dammit.

“Therapy?” He chokes on the word. *“You’ve been going to therapy? Is it because of me? Please...tell me I’m an arrogant prick for even thinking you’ve been going to therapy because of me...I don’t know how I’ll deal with it if that’s the reason.”*

I don’t want to lie to him, but I know the truth will hurt him. I hesitate long enough for him to make his own assumption.

“Oh God, I am, aren’t I? I drove you to fucking therapy, didn’t I?”

My voice is quiet as I address his concerns. “Jasper, don’t do that. Don’t put it all on you like that. I have...*issues*. It’s not all about you and Alice, I swear.”

“Then why? What are the other reasons—don’t lie to me, either. I want to know what I need to fix.”

“You don’t have to fix anything—I’m fixing myself.”

“I didn’t say I had to do anything...I need to do this for you and me. It’s the very least I can do for us. It’s a start, at least.”

What he doesn’t realize is, he *has* fixed it—in part at least. He’s telling me everything I’ve ever wanted to hear from him. He’s fixed the broken part of my heart in less than a day. There is something nagging at me though, and since I don’t have the answer to his question, I decide to ask, “Where do you see this going? I mean, I’m not trying to sound like a bitch or anything, but...you live in Forks, I live in Jacksonville; I can’t move back, there’s too much...of the past there. And you can’t move here. I mean, what if we don’t work? What if—”

“Don’t. Don’t talk about us like we’re destined to fail. I don’t have all the answers. I don’t know how we’re going to do this. Rest assured though, I’ll do everything in my fucking power to make it work.” My heart feels as if it’s in my throat at this point. His voice drops as he tells me, *“I love you, Isabella.”*

His words are straight out of my best dreams, and it’s the very first time he’s *ever* called me by my full name. Tears spring from my eyes; I don’t recall ever feeling this happy. I know I’ve loved him from the moment I first laid eyes on him; I’ve held out hope one day he might return the sentiment. All I can hear in my head is Jasper telling me he loves me. It’s on repeat—it will likely stay that way forever.

“I love you too, Jasper.” My smile feels like it might split my face in two.

I can hear his breathless chuckles through the phone and join him; he sounds as happy as I feel.

"Baby, I'm going to let you go for the night." I want to tell him no. Now that I have him, I don't want to let him go. I will gladly keep this phone to my ear forever, just to hear his voice telling me he loves me...and calling me baby. *"You need to get some sleep and so do I. I promise to call you as soon as I wake up. I might even let you get something else accomplished tomorrow—aside from talking to me."*

I can hear the smile in his voice, it makes me giggle again.

"I love when you laugh." Oh my. I've always wanted his voice to sound like that and be directed at me. His voice in my ear is deep and husky—just...*fucking* sexy. *"You don't know what you do to me."*

"I think I might have some idea," I reply. *Holy shit!* Was that *my voice*? I've never heard my voice sound this way before—breathless and lower than normal. "You do the same thing to me."

"Oh yeah, baby?"

"Yeah..."

It's quiet on the other end of the line for a second; I begin to worry if I have freaked him out until I hear, *"Good to know."* This he follows with his sexy chuckle. *"Go to sleep before you get me all riled up, woman! We have plenty of time for that, and I want you awake enough to know what I'm doing to you."*

Oh my...sweet baby Jesus...motherfucking fucker...bastard...Southern-accent-having-man-sent-from-heaven.

"Uhhh..."

I think my brain has left the building.

"Go to sleep!" Jasper laughs, most likely at my inability to form coherent speech. *"I promise you won't miss me for long."*

We say goodnight—well he does, I think I whimper a bit in response to him. I'm pretty sure I'll never be able to fall asleep, but I'm wrong. As soon as my head hits the pillow I'm gone. I have the sweetest dreams; they are of Jasper and me...and they're beautiful. When I wake up, the feeling of giddiness doesn't go away. I don't have to feel guilty about dreaming about him now—he is mine.

I still need to talk to Alice; I have no idea what to say to her now. If she really isn't okay with me being with Jasper...I know I'll have to let him go. The thought saddens me, but not nearly as much as having to watch the two together did. I really am a selfish bitch.

I want this so much though, and I deserve a chance, don't I? I can't answer that myself, but I don't really have anyone I can ask. I'm pretty sure Angela will think I'm crazy for this. I know Ben will give me the best advice, but I don't want to insert a problem into his relationship with his wife should their opinions on the subject differ. Renee will be no help at all; she'll tell me something about free love—I just know it. Alice is most definitely out. I can call Charlie...but advice on love coming from Charlie just doesn't sit well with me.

I don't know who to talk to. In the end I decide to call someone who will be completely, brutally honest with me.

Rosalie answers on the first ring, almost as if she's been expecting my call. *"Hello?"*

"Rosalie, hi, it's Bella." This is where I fall flat—I probably should have thought a bit longer on what to say before I called her because I have no idea what to say now. This woman hates me; she won't want to listen to me ask advice on what to do about her brother, who I've been in love with since I was sixteen.

Her voice is clipped and bordering on irritated. *"Can't say I'm surprised, I've been expecting your call. What do you need? I apologized. I meant it. Why are you calling me now?"*

God, she's such a bitch.

"I need to talk to someone. I'm sure you don't want to hear anything I have to say, but..." I hesitate, drawing in a deep breath. "Can you just...just listen, and then tell me what you would do?"

There is only silence on the other end of the line; I wonder if she's hung up on me.

"Go ahead."

So I do—I tell her all about my history with Jasper. I tell her I never wanted them to break up, no matter how much it hurt. I tell her of my decision to move away, and how I thought it was best for me. Then I tell her, as close to word for word as I can, about the phone conversation with Jasper this morning. I tell her about reading Alice's letter, knowing how much I've hurt her, and needing to let her know how much I love her. I tell her my plan to call Alice, but Jasper answering instead. Then I ask her what the hell I should do.

"So you haven't talked to Alice about this yet?" I'm shocked because Rosalie actually sounds...compassionate.

"No, I haven't yet. I'm not even sure what to say to her...I mean, what do you say to your best friend after you've stolen her husband away?"

"That's where you're wrong." She curses under her breath before muttering, *"You didn't steal him. He chose to leave her. He chose to ask for a divorce. As much as I hate to say this,"* she begins cursing under her breath again, *"he chose you, Bella. You didn't have a hand in it. Honest."*

"How do you know, Rosalie?"

"Okay one: stop calling me that, everyone calls me Rose because I hate my full name. I've never called you Isabella, and you've never invited me to call you Bella. I know how much you hate it though, so I don't—I'm not a complete bitch. Two: I know because I saw him at the reception. I knew at their wedding reception I was wrong; when Jasper's face fell as I told them you were sick, and wouldn't be attending. He proved me right when he cornered me shortly after

the pictures were taken, and asked me what the hell I'd said to you. He loves you—he's in love with you, you truly didn't do anything... except be you, and apparently you're who he wants."

Huh. I'm going to honestly say I never expected any of this to come from Rosa- Rose's mouth. I figured she would tell me to go fuck myself. I figured she would tell me how awful a person I am for doing this to Alice. I figured she might gloat on how she's right about me wanting Alice and Jasper to break up. Yet here I sit while she takes the blame *completely* off of me.

"Look," she starts and I hear her take a deep breath before continuing, *"I was wrong, okay? I said some really fucking awful things to you. Not just at the wedding, but throughout our acquaintance. I am sorry. I don't expect you to forgive me, not yet at least. But...we're going to be in each others' life now. That much is obvious. He loves you, and I know you love him too,"* she sighs. *"I do think you owe Alice a call though. I get it if you need to wrap your head around all that has happened. I know you probably need to take some time before you can take that leap."*

"Yeah, I know," I sigh back to her. "Listen, thanks for listening and telling me what you honestly think. I really do appreciate it."

"Of course. Just...don't break his heart, okay? Promise you'll try not to do that. You hold it in your hands right now."

Well that's just...awkward. I've never held power over anyone else before. The way Rose is talking makes it sound as if it's exactly the case.

"Can I ask you one more question?"

"Sure."

I hesitate; I don't *want* to ask this question but know I need to. "Does...does Alice know? That he wants to be with me, I mean?"

She inhales sharply. "Yes."

"Does she hate me?"

"That's two questions. And that's one only Alice can answer for you," she huffs. Then she hangs up on me.

Guess that relationship still needs a lot of work.

She's right though—until I buck up and actually call Alice, I won't know the answer. Alice deserves that much from me, anyway. In fact, she deserves a lot more.

I decide to set forth again unpacking my apartment. I really want to try to get it all finished today, if possible. I want this place to feel like my home. I head to the kitchen and start there, and like last night, it isn't so bad once I got myself going. I finish the kitchen fairly quick, and move on to the bedroom. Last night I'd unpacked my sheets, but there's still quite a bit to put into drawers and such. It's almost five in the afternoon when I finish, not too bad considering I slept until almost two. My body hurts though, and I am hungry. I have yet to go grocery shopping and even though I needed to, I just don't want to. That leaves delivery, take-out, or drive-thru. After looking myself over and realizing how badly I need to shower...I really don't want to do anything else but put on some shorts and a t-shirt, and lounge on my couch. So I call a Chinese restaurant that delivers, and retreat to my bathroom for a shower.

After my shower I plop down on my couch in front of the television, unbelievably exhausted. The move and the phone calls and all the revelations this weekend has really taken it out of me, but it feels so good to have everything done. Speaking of phone calls...Jasper has yet to call me today.

I panic. *Oh God.* What if something I said to Rose got back to him and scared him off? Or, did I say something on the phone he didn't want to hear? I run around the apartment, searching for my cell phone—maybe my phone is set to silent. *Please God, let that be it.* It's on the counter in the kitchen, where I set it after talking to Rose. I breathe a sigh of relief.

0 Missed Calls.

0 Voice Messages.

0 E-Mail Messages.

Huh. That answers that question of whether he called or not. He has my phone number because I called him last night, so I know my number is on his Caller ID. *No. No. No. He changed his mind!*

As I'm internally falling apart, the doorbell rings to signal the delivery is here. I'm not even hungry any more—all I want to do is cry again. I was *so* happy when I woke up this morning; now I realize all I get is *one day* in which Jasper Whitlock belongs to me? *It's not fucking fair!*

Why?!

I grab my wallet and stomp to the door to get the food I don't even want anymore.

"\$32.75, right?"

"I'm not sure, darlin'. Don't you think I'm worth just a little more than that?"

My heart stops. Completely. Like I'm going to pass out in a second.

I raise my head and stare straight into the sparkling blue eyes of Jasper Whitlock. He's giving me that smile. *My favorite smile.*

When I can breathe again, I tell him, "Depends what you're selling, cowboy."

His smile widens. “I’d give it to you for free, beautiful.”

I want to kiss him *so badly* right now! I belatedly wonder how he’s even *here*. He doesn’t even look tired—he looks *perfect*.

“How did you know where I lived?” I ask him suspiciously.

He looks guilty as he replies, “I might have used that Trademark Smile on Renee to find out. I’m sorry, I just wanted—no...I *needed* to see you, baby.”

He’s really here; he even went to Renee to find me. I knew she wouldn’t stand a chance against him in person. She’s never met Jasper in person; she’s talked to him on the phone, obviously, and seen pictures of him. The full force of Jasper Whitlock’s charm is only effective in person.

I’m going to have to thank her.

“So...am I going to get an invitation in?” He grins at me, I feel faint. “Or...do I need to convince you?”

All the blood in my body rushes to my face and my lady bits—he *really* shouldn’t be allowed to talk like that.

“Uh...”

Really, I’ve got to stop responding like that! When he talks like that though...I can’t fucking think straight, at all. How am I supposed to respond?

He’s playing with me—I know that, but then his hand is on my neck and he’s pulling me to him. My body is pressed from breasts to knees against him, and my hands grip his forearms of their own accord. My breathing is ragged and so is his. He brings his other hand up to my jaw, and he tilts my head back and up toward his face. His nose skims my left eyebrow—it feels as if my *whole fucking body* is on *fire*. He places his lips on my left temple, dragging them to my ear. I *so* hope he doesn’t want me to do anything because I wouldn’t be able to right now—I don’t think I ever want to move from this position.

“How am I doing, baby? Convinced yet...or do I need to show you a little more?” He huskily whispers in my ear.

Jasper doesn’t wait for a response; instead, he starts walking me backwards. I notice, somehow, he’s slammed the front door shut with his cowboy boot. How can he do *that* and *this* at the same time? While I’m thinking about how multi-talented Jasper Whitlock is, he successfully pins my body against the wall of my hallway. His hands have moved from my face, to where I’m unsure because I can’t move my gaze from his eyes. I begin to wonder where he’s put his hands, when I feel them both grab my hips and pull me toward him. I blink; there are his eyes, no longer roaming, now staring directly into mine. His face is coming toward me and then—*oh!* The moment his lips touch mine, my body goes from on fire to a goddamn inferno. My hands go to his hair, and my right leg lifts up to pull his hips to me.

I hear Jasper groan, and I can *feel him* pressed right where I want him. I moan and feel Jasper slide his tongue into my mouth at the opportunity. *Holy fucking shit*. I never knew it could feel like this! I feel Jasper’s hands crawl down, skimming over my ass before he realizes that my shorts are *short*, and then his hands are on my *bare ass*—I’m tingling all over. He grabs hold and pushes my center into him, eliciting another loud moan from me. I bring my other leg up so he’s just holding me there and rubbing, and it *feels so fucking good*. I’m about to stop him and suggest we move it back to the bedroom when the sound of a very loud, very unwelcome knock brings us out of our lust-induced stupor.

I slide down his body as he huffs out a frustrated breath. I give him an apologetic glance, and he grins back at me. I answer the door and pay the Chinese delivery guy, and when I turned back around, Jasper looks a bit more composed. He’s smiling easily at me as I gesture toward the couch. He nods and takes a seat while I grab some plates and napkins for us. Good thing I ordered a lot of food. I take everything back out and sit beside him, but apparently I don’t sit close enough for Jasper—he grabs me and pulls me closer, until there is no space between us at all.

Then he turns his head to me and asks, “So does that mean I’m welcome to stay for a while?”

I find this incredibly funny for some reason, and burst out laughing. He joins me.

I haven’t felt this good in my whole life.

5. Deliver Me

And now! Here's Chapter 5- revised(a lot!) and rewritten(even more!) and reposted(again!)! Many, many thanks to Project Team Beta for looking through my hot mess of a chapter, and helping me make it this! All of the team is amazing, I want to thank TaintedIngenue (who I'm happy to say is my perma-beta for this story- woot!) and ElleCC (who I fangirl squealed when I saw her name at the top of my chapter- if you haven't read her story *A Murmur of Fire in the Vein*- go! now! must read story!) as they were the beta's responsible for this chapter, and they did an amazing fucking job!

Thank you ladies (and any fellas that may be out there...) for reading this story, and those reviewing- big Mwah's to you all!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

All of my life I was in hiding,
Wishing there was someone just like you,
Now that you're here, now that I've found you,
I know that you're the one to pull me through.

-Deliver Me, Sarah Brightman

Jasper and I eat the delivered food quietly, sneaking glances at each other the whole time. I'm still amazed he's here, and the amazement doesn't fade as he helps me clean up our mess from dinner. He's adorable as he asks me if he can take a shower. I can't decide whether to pinch his cheeks and make cooing noises at him, or ask if I can join him. Ultimately, I decide it's best if we talk before doing anything more...*intimate* with each other. So here I sit, waiting, doing everything in my power to keep myself from *actually* joining him. I'm trying to keep myself busy with a book, but it's not working.

For one thing, anytime I manage to maintain focus on the book, thoughts of a naked, wet, and soapy Jasper spring into my head. Anytime I *do* think of naked Jasper...I remember Jasper pinning me to the wall, and me grinding on him. Then, I think of the noises he makes when I do that. I'm trying to keep my breathing in control at these thoughts, but it's not easy. Oh, and now, of course, I need a shower myself...and a fresh pair of underpants.

I'm also distracted from my book by the questions in my head. I realize it would probably be best if I just go get the damn letter while he's in the shower and read it. It might have some of the answers in it I need, and it might save me from having to ask him any unnecessary, embarrassing questions. I just don't think I can concentrate well enough to read it right now, so I decide I just need to see how Jasper feels about answering these questions. I really don't think he'll mind. Jasper seemed so determined this morning on the phone, and then he flew *across the country* for me not twelve hours later.

He even braved Renee for me.

He even left his wife for me.

Ugh.

That's the other thing occupying my mind—*Alice*. I want to know what she's doing, and how she is, and if she hates me, and how much she misses Jasper, and...if she misses me at all, anymore. I want to ask her all of this, but every time I ponder these questions, I realize how selfish every single one of them actually is. For the life of me, I don't know what else to ask when it comes to Alice. In fact, the more I think about it, I *need* to ask these questions—well some of them, at least—in order for all of us to move forward. What if she doesn't want to talk to me though? What if...what if she hates me?

The thought of Alice hating me is almost unbearable. Like Charlie told me—Alice has *always* been there for me. I, at least, owe her the chance to tell me to go to hell.

"You look like you're thinkin' awful hard over there, baby," Jasper drawls as he walks into the room. I look up to smile at him, but when I see him, I'm not able. I'm not able to do anything, but sit with my jaw hanging down around the floor because he's walking into my living room, still glistening. His hair is dripping, there's no shirt to be seen, his feet are bare, and those jeans are hanging so low, I think I almost catch a peek at what's hidden below. I'm just frozen, again. He notices, of course, and grins at me. The grin breaks me from my stupor, and I roll my eyes at him before returning his grin with one of my own. "What are you doin', beautiful girl?"

I giggle because, obviously, I'm twelve years old again. At least one would think so, as often as I have been giggling today. "Well, I was trying to pass the time by reading, but you kept distracting me."

His grin becomes *my smile*, and I feel all the blood rushing down, south of the border. He *really* shouldn't be allowed to smile like that. I imagine he gets anything he wants from that smile alone.

"Oh really?" I nod. "How exactly was I distracting you? I was in the other room."

My breath catches at the flirty, teasing tone of his voice. *He knows exactly how he was distracting me!* "Oh! Uh...just...you know..." I sort-of-stutter, and he chuckles at my lack of coherency.

"No.... Why don't you tell me?" His voice becomes deeper, husky.

He walks over to the couch and stands in front of me. Then he pulls my legs out of their folded position, and spreads them before kneeling between them. His hands run up the outside of my thighs until he reaches my waist, and he leaves them there, tightening his grip. It looks as if his eyes run over every part of my body at once, but he pauses as he takes in the place between my legs before moving his gaze up and lingering on my breasts, then my lips, and finally settling on my eyes. Jasper catches me staring at him, as I have been the whole time he's been studying me, and one side of his mouth lifts in acknowledgment. His tongue comes out to swipe his lower lip, and I moan at the sight of it.

He knows exactly what he's doing to me.

"You should have joined me in the shower, baby," he drawls, his voice even deeper than before—if that's possible. "Then you wouldn't have been so distracted."

I choke on my cough of embarrassment as he winks at me.

"Really, I *wanted* you in there with me. Next time I take a shower here" —he pauses, and his smile turns downright *deadly*— "you *will* be in there with me."

I hesitate because I *need* to ask him this question, but I'm afraid of the answer. "Um...Jasper, how long *are* you staying?"

My face tilts down, and my eyes close—I'm afraid of the answer. I know what I want him to say; I want him to tell me he's staying forever...I want him to tell me he's moving in...I want him to tell me how he can't bear to be away from me, but I'm afraid he won't say any of these. Realistically, I know that I need to be grateful for whatever he says. I can't help this fear though; everything is still so new, and we have yet to talk—there's so much I need to ask him.

His hands move up to my jaw, and his thumbs brush my cheeks. He tilts my head back up to him, but I can't open my eyes. I don't want to see him tell me he can't stay.

"Bell," he whispers. "Bell, baby, look at me, please."

I can't. It's too much. He waits a few seconds, and then I feel his breath on my face as he brushes his lips against mine tenderly. *Will I ever get used to his lips on mine?* It's an unbelievable and incredible thing to realize *Jasper* is kissing *me*. He moves his lips to my nose, where he leaves another kiss before pulling back just enough to rest his forehead against mine. "Please let me see your eyes. It hurts when you hide them from me."

So I open them slowly, and look into his eyes. I stare in amazement at the tears, the love, and the *absolute adoration* I see there. "If I could stay forever, I would," he whispers. *How does he know everything I want to hear?* "This time, I can stay a week. Then I'm going to go back to Washington, and I'm gonna talk to Dad about working from home, so I can move here near you. I just...don't want to be away from you, anymore."

Oh my God!

"You can't mean that," I whisper back to him, shaking my head. "I mean, your whole life is in Washington. I can't imagine your father will be supportive of you moving across the country. Especially not for someone like *me*."

He blinks; his surprise is evident in his features. "What do you mean by that? When you say someone like *you*?"

My reply sounds bitter even to my own ears. "I *mean*...someone like *me*. Someone who loves her best friend's husband, and takes him from such a wonderful person."

I want to cry again now. Why am I such a horrible person?

"Isabella!" He hisses at me, sounding angry. "Do you really believe you did *anything* wrong? You didn't do anything! I realized, on my own, that I love you. I left Alice of my own accord. I decided to pester you into giving in to me, and it's *my* choice to move here and be near the woman I love!" His breathing grows heavy. "My parents *love* you, they always have. They know I'm here, and they know what I want. They also trust that *I* know what's best for me, and I know that it's you. You've *always* been the best for me."

Now I'm crying, again. I can't help it—he's so fucking sweet, and his words are everything I need to hear. He pulls me into his arms, and buries his nose in my neck before I even realize I've moved. "Please, don't cry. It hurts me so much when you cry."

I nod against him and work to put my crying back under control. It's not nearly as hard to stop when he's near me. I feel Jasper move, and look up in time to see him reach behind himself before pushing me gently away from him. A Kleenex is positioned in front of me as he tells me to blow my nose. I can't help but laugh; no one has held my Kleenex for me while I blow since Charlie, when I was a little girl. It's incredibly sweet, really. He smiles at me, and joins in my laughter. When my tears are all dry, and my nose blown, he sets the used tissue on the table before pulling me back to him. This time, it's my turn to put my nose against his neck. He smells like my body wash and shampoo, but still like him—sandalwood, and salt, and sex. I love his smell; it reminds me of *home*.

We stay like this for a long time, both perfectly content to just hold one another. I know if we stay like this much longer, we'll fall asleep. I can only imagine how tired he is. He's traveled across the country today. *For me*.

"Jasper?"

"Yes, baby?" he murmurs against my hair.

"How are you here?" I laugh out. I mean, I could have asked that in a different way, but I wasn't completely sure how. Still, it sounds ridiculous, and I roll my eyes at myself.

He laughs with me. "Funny way of asking me that," he muses. "But to answer your question...when I got off the phone with you, it took me all of five minutes to have some shit packed and my car on the way to Sea-Tac. I had to wait a bit for a plane, and then I had a couple layovers, but that's how I'm here. By plane and automobile. And the grace of God."

I instantly feel bad. He's been all over the place today, like all over the *country*. *For me*.

He must feel my frown because he pulls back and looks straight in my eyes. "Don't you *dare* feel bad. This has been one of the best days of my life. Everywhere I went today led me one step closer to you. That's all that matters. I'm right where I want to be."

He certainly doesn't look tired; he looks amazing. *He always looks amazing*.

“Jasper?”

“Yes, baby?” He smiles as he answers me.

“Are you scared?” My question makes him frown. Quickly, I try to explain. “I mean, doesn’t this all seem like it’s happening in like, fast forward or something? Yesterday, I thought you were still happily married, and I was ready to spend forever without you. Today, you’re here, half-naked in my apartment, *across the country*. I mean...am I even making sense? There’s so much I want to ask you, and it’s all jumbled in my head. I’m sorry.”

He puts his hands on my shoulders and squeezes. “Hey, I *don’t* feel like it’s going too fast, to be honest.” This time, it was my turn to frown. “No, no, wait. Let me explain what I mean. Okay?”

I nod to him and his brow pulls down. I know what he’s doing; I do it all the time—he’s trying to figure out where to start.

“Okay, we both know about the day that we met. How I was coming over to ask you out—”

I can’t be blamed for laughing. I have a flashback to Emmett and me in his Jeep, and Emmett telling me that Jasper “marched his country ass” over to talk to me. Really, I can’t help myself, and it feels good to think about that day and not instantly feel awful.

Jasper, however, doesn’t know what I’m laughing at. His lips pull tight as he rather stiffly asks me, “You find it funny that I was going to ask you out or something?”

Oh my, sensitive much?

I sober myself, and explain my memory of that day. Then he’s chuckling with me and muttering, “Fucking Emmett,” under his breath. When we both calm down, he looks back into my eyes. Like he’s asking *me* permission to go on with whatever he is going to tell me. I’m surprised, but like I said, I’ve never held power over *anyone*. I realize he’s waiting for me, so I quickly nod for him to continue.

“Okay, so we both know what I said about you. It’s all still true today. You are the most beautiful thing I’ve *ever* seen, and I think you always will be, actually. Anyway, where I’m going with this is...I’ve *always* gone by my first instinct. My first instinct that day was to go to you, make you notice me, make you *want* me, make you mine.”

I pull him to me because what he’s saying is what my dreams are all made of. I want him to know how much he means to me.

He doesn’t pull back from me, he just continues talking. “I don’t really know why I turned from you. I know you probably don’t want to hear any more about mine and Alice’s relationship, but it’s going to come up in just about everything, darlin’. I’m sorry for that.” I shake my head to let him know it doesn’t bother me, which is a lie. Of course it will bother me, but I know it’s necessary. He picks me up, sitting down with his back against the arm of the couch, and pulls me to sit in his lap. Then he grabs my head and turns it to him, pushes my hair back, and kisses me slowly. With his lips still pressing against mine, he says, “Know that I love you, okay?”

I nod, and try to control my breathing as I tell him, “I love you, too.”

He pulls in a sharp breath, and lets it out slowly. “Alice was something entirely different from you. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you. Hell, you know her as well as I do.” He pauses for a second, most likely considering how much he wishes to share with me. “She sounded like...a song—like that Christmas song...‘Carol of the Bells’ or whatever, you know?” I nod at him, thinking how odd his comparison is, but it’s sorta true, too. Alice *does* sound like bells; her voice is beautiful. “Yeah, so, I turned to her—which I *can’t believe I did* when you were standing *right fucking there*. You were still holding my hand for fuck’s sake!” He makes a disgusted noise in the back of his throat; he’s always done this when he’s mad about something.

“Hey,” I say, tugging on his hair to get his attention. When he turns to me, it’s with sad eyes. “Don’t downplay things just for me. I *know* that you loved her, or still love her, or whatever. I love her too. Don’t make yourself or her into a villain just because it’s me you’re telling this to. Okay?”

His eyes are still sad; I think they will be until he finishes whatever he needs to tell me, but he nods to let me know he understands.

“Okay,” he starts with a rough voice. “So, for whatever goddamn reason, I turned to face Alice. I didn’t know what to think. I do remember the only thing in my head was ‘whoa.’ She wasn’t what I’d call pretty or beautiful, not to me at least, she was just...unlike anything I’d ever seen. You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?” I nod. “I wanted her because she was different. All the girls I’d dated, which was a lot for my age before moving to Forks...they all were closer to you. Short, but not overly short, at least, not Alice-short. Usually they had brown hair, but I did date a couple blondes.” He pauses and his voice drops low when he continues. “Your eyes are different though, I’ve *never* seen eyes like yours before, not then and still not now. They’re not brown, not really. More like...chocolate, and hazelnut, and caramel...all in one. That’s not why I love them though, I love them because everything about you? I can see everything through your eyes—they tell your whole story.” He breathes out slowly, looking at me like he’s remembering seeing me that day, and he’s looking for changes, maybe? I don’t know nor do I care; I just want him to keep looking at me. “Anyway, that’s why I asked her out. It’s not why I stayed with her. I stayed with her because I *did* and *do* love her—I’ll always love her. I hope you can accept that...she was my *first* love after all.”

“Of course I understand,” I tell him, and I *do* understand. After all, I’m staring at *my* first love. I blush as I say, “You’re my first love; how could I not understand?”

“First and *only* love. I’m never going to let you go, I hope you realize that,” he informs me.

His declaration only makes me blush worse. To cover up my embarrassment, I tell him, “Besides, it’s impossible to *not* love Alice. I should know.”

He barks out a laugh and says, “While I do agree that she is very lovable, I’ve got to say, there’s days you just want to wring her fucking neck. When I met her, I thought her voice was incredible. When I married her, it was like nails on a goddamn chalk board sometimes. She just...ugh...she can be so irritating! I actually noticed that about her pretty early into our relationship, but I figured it was just a matter of working out the kinks, ya know?” I nod. “So, I let it go. Eventually, it didn’t bother me as much, but there were still times I just had to *get away from her*. Oh God, I remember one time—shit, forgive me for telling you this, but it’s like a prime fucking example.” I nod, again. “Okay. So, one time, I made sure that Alice’s parents caught us in a...well, they called it a

‘compromising position.’” My breath catches; I know *exactly* which time he’s talking about. “So, I earned myself a month long vacation from Alice. I needed that, bad.”

“I remember that,” I say in a small voice. “You took me out for my first taste of Mexican food while she was grounded.”

“I wanted to fucking kill that goddamn waiter,” he grinds out. “I’d never come so close to snapping on anyone in my life.” I can see him trying to calm himself down, to draw himself out of that particular memory. I can’t remember how many times I’ve had to draw myself out of the past, and I wonder how long Jasper has kept all of this pent up. I want to ask him, but I think that may have to be left for another night. “I wanted to kiss you so bad that night.”

I gasp, “*I fucking thought so! God!* You’re an ass, Jasper Whitlock! Do you know how badly I wanted you to kiss me that night?!”

“Well then, let me make it up to you,” he says as a grin forms on his face. “Let me take you out this week. Let me give you the version of that night I’d have liked.”

I think he just asked me out on a date.

“I *did* just ask you out on a date.”

I have really got to stop talking to myself in my head.

“Well then,” I say while trying to keep my blush under control. “Since you asked so nice and all...” He huffs, and I laugh at him. “Did you really think I *wouldn’t* go out to dinner with you?”

“Well, you said we were moving too fast—I didn’t know if that qualified.”

I roll my eyes at him, and try to hide my grin. “Continue with your fucking story! I do have work in the morning, you know!”

“Look, I don’t want to go all fucking into it tonight. I’m too fucking tired to rehash all the shit Alice did to me, or I did to her. I promise I’ll answer any questions you still want to ask, and I *will* tell you all about it, soon. Just...let me sum up, okay?” I roll my eyes again, but nod to let him know I’m fine with only a summary tonight. “You keep rolling your eyes, they’re going to get stuck like that. Anyway, here it is: we dated for seven years too long, we were married for four months too long, and it took me a day to realize I’d made a mistake.”

“You do realize you make it sound like you *never* loved Alice, don’t you?”

He thinks about my remark for a second. “I guess it does sound that way. Which we know isn’t true. I just wasn’t ever *truly* happy with her; I was always *acting*, at least, that’s what it felt like. Case in point? Our honeymoon—I did that for her. If it had been my choice honeymoon, we would have gone to a ranch, or a private beach, or just...somewhere where there was no one else around. Somewhere private, where it was just me, my wife, and my Corona.”

I knew it!

“You two always seemed so happy together, though. I mean, Emmett even made the comment about how you guys never fought. You were always so...*aware* of Alice, and vice versa. You two seemed, well, you seemed perfect for each other—soul mates.”

“I *know* that.” He sighs. “Acting, like I said. Or, at least over half of the time we spent together in public was acting. And we fought a lot; we just kept our private shit private. It wasn’t anyone else’s business, anyway. The only person that *did* know about it was Garrett, and that’s why he was so withdrawn at the wedding. He thought I was making a mistake.”

“Then why’d you do it? If there were so many problems with the two of you, why’d you ask her to marry you?”

He looks right into my eyes. “Because of you.” *What?!* “I know you remember. You and I were sitting at your house, Alice was shopping in Port Angeles, but neither of us wanted to join her. We spent the day drinking, and having a blast with each other. Then some commercial came on television, and it made you blush. I pinched you, and smiled—”

“*Oh God,*” I groan. He’s talking about the day I drunkenly admitted to naming the “Jasper Whitlock Trademark Smile.” “Just go on, but know I don’t really want to relive that embarrassment.”

He laughs at me. “Oh c’mon, you were adorable!” I laugh with him, partially out of embarrassment, and partially because his laugh just sounds so nice. *Note to self: don’t drink around him anymore.* When his chuckles subside, he continues, “Anyway, I never got over my attraction to you. Surely, you know that. And I *knew* you’d *been* attracted to me as well...but I didn’t think you were anymore. It was easier to be around you when I wasn’t thinking about stuff like that, anyway. I’d convinced myself you saw me as nothing more than a brother or a best friend. Then you popped off at the mouth with that comment, and blew my thinking out of the water. I know you only said it because you were drunk; you’d *never* let anything slip by me before then. I would have remembered, trust me.” He winks at me, making me blush again. “It just...completely fucked me up, and then you grinned at me and *blushed*, and I knew you were thinking *dirty thoughts* about me and you. So help me, it was all I could do to choke out some excuse, and get the fuck out of there.”

That day could have gone *so* differently, I realize. If he had stayed, we would have ended up in bed together, I just know it. A lot more than is now ruined, could have been. I admire his resolve.

“So, I go to Emmett’s to just... get my mind off of things. Rose is there, of course. She *knows* something is up with me, and badgers me until I finally tell her. She gets ten kinds of pissed off, and calls you a bunch of shit, and I swear I almost hit her. Emmett came in at just the right time, and dragged her ass off. *Thank God.* Then he came back and talked to me. He told me I needed to get my priorities in order. He told me you’d been in love with me since he knew you. He told me I was on the verge of breaking both Alice’s *and* your heart. Told me I needed to make a decision.”

A smile forms on my face as I remember how awesome Emmett is at handling certain situations. I remember the day he talked me down from a ledge, and I’ll be forever grateful to him—for helping me, *and* for talking to Jasper.

“Of course, I was thrown. Because he said *love*, Bell. I always thought you were just attracted to me. But...Emmett is an observant fuck, and if he said it, I had no reason to doubt it. So, I went home and thought. I called myself all kinds of names, just... beating myself up and getting nowhere. I didn't even leave the house for two days. That's how fucked up Alice and me were, she never said a thing about the stinky mess that was me, moping around the house for two days. Of course, I didn't even *think* about that then—I was trying to figure out how things *should* be. When I woke up on the third day, I'd made my mind up. I'd decided if you and I were meant to be together, then I *wouldn't* have turned away from you when we first met, and I thought you and me would already be together. So, I went against my gut, again, and thought Emmett just called this one wrong. I figured there was no way you'd ever *really* loved me, he was just mistaking your attraction for love. Then I went and bought the ring, and asked her to marry me, thinking I was doing the right thing. I thought if I said anything to you about your feelings it would ruin our friendship, and at that point I was still discounting my feelings for you as nothing more than attraction. I also thought it would ruin your relationship with Alice, and please believe, I *never* wanted *anything* to happen to y'all's friendship.”

I believe him, and I even understand his reasons. Like he said, he was still discounting his feelings. I *am* curious as to what happened to change that.

“So, then what happened? I mean, you guys lasted a little over seven years with each other. *You married her*. You were pretty sure of how I felt before you even asked her, so what changed?”

He looks down as he continues, “At the wedding, when you were walking down the aisle, I found I couldn't look at you. After that day at your house, every time I would look at you, it hurt. I just...I couldn't watch you walking down the aisle...and know you weren't walking to *me*,” he whispers, and my heart skips. “Then at the limo when I forced myself to look at you, I knew I'd made a mistake—”

“But you thanked me! *For Alice!*”

“*I know that.*” He sighs, shaking his head. “I saw you, *really* saw you, and you looked *so fucking broken*. I realized...you looked...how I felt. That's when I knew I loved you, and that I'd just made the biggest mistake of my fucking *life*. But, what could I do? The marriage was final, all of our family was there, and I was pretty sure I'd already *completely* broken your heart.”

“But why thank me? I mean, that was the first time you'd *ever* looked at me like that, and I didn't know what to think. But then you thank me for *Alice!*” I snap at him. “I don't get it—you say you knew how I felt, and you say you knew how you felt...so you had to know how that would hurt me!”

God, did it hurt—physically *and* emotionally.

“I was thanking you for loving me. I couldn't exactly yell that out at my fucking wedding, but it's what was going through my head. And...I was telling you goodbye, in the only way I could think of. By telling you I'd take care of her, just like you'd always taken care of her. I know that meant something to you, and I didn't know what else to say or do. I kept thinking maybe I could catch you at the reception, and make sure you were okay. Well...okay enough. Then fucking Rose shows up without Emmett, and thirty minutes later, Emmett shows up alone, but you never show. I overheard Rose telling Alice during the pictures about you getting sick after the ceremony. I knew she was lying; she twitches when she lies. I flipped my shit, asked what happened, asked what she'd done, and then I told her off when she told me about yelling at you after the wedding. Rose and I haven't really spoken since, though it's my understanding she passed her apologies along via Alice.”

This is a lot to take in. Like a lot, a lot. I can't *even* begin to think about this tonight, but I'm incredibly glad that he's explained a bit of what was going on in his head, and what had happened in his life. I'll bet he's exhausted now. *God, Bella!* You're such a *bitch!* Here he is, most likely about to pass out, and you're demanding answers.

“Look, I don't mean to sound like a dick or anything, but,” he pauses to let out a huge yawn, and then asks, “can I answer the rest of your questions tomorrow? I have some I'd like to ask you, too. But...I can't do this anymore tonight, baby. I'm fucking wiped.”

That's exactly what I was thinking.

“Of course.” I sigh. “I should probably get some rest, too, or try, at least. I'm not sure my brain will turn off.”

He chuckles. “I love your brain; don't ever turn that shit off.”

I stick my tongue out at him, making him chuckle louder. He walks over to his bag, grabs a shirt, and starts to put it on. *What is he doing? I don't want him to cover up!*

“Jasper, what are you doing? Bed time is usually shirtless for you, isn't it?”

He grins at me. “How'd you know that?”

“Alice.”

He grimaces and nods; obviously he doesn't like to talk about intimacy and Alice. While I share his sentiments, I'm not going to keep my knowledge of his habits a secret because of how I learned them.

“Well, darlin', I prefer to sleep without a shirt, yes. However, the cab driver might not like me riding around without one on. I don't think the hotel would appreciate me walking through their lobby shirtless, either.”

“Wait, *what? Hotel?* Jasper, you are staying here, cancel your reservations.”

He smiles my favorite smile as he responds, “I don't think that'd be a good idea, baby. I know you probably couldn't tell from earlier, but I *try* to be a gentleman. And if I stayed here tonight...well, that just wouldn't be possible.”

“*But Jasper—*”

“And before you argue with me—no, there's no amount of exhaustion that would keep me from making you mine tonight. That's why I need to go.”

Fuck, he's sexy...and annoying because he's making my decisions for me. Why does he just assume I want him to *not* take advantage of me?! I only dream about it *every fucking night*.

"So...before I say anything else...I just want to make sure of something. Are you leaving because you think I want us to wait before we"—I motion back and forth between the two of us with my hand—"you know...?"

Please say yes. Please don't say you want to wait.

"Yes."

Thank you, God!

"You love me, don't you?"

His face, which was controlled and calm, breaks into an easy smile. "You know I love you, Bella."

"Tell me you love me. Say 'I love you, Bella.'"

Horniness makes you act in strange ways.

"I love you, Bella."

"You called me Bella!"

"You told me to!"

"Still!"

We just stand there, smiling at each other like two idiots. I don't want to dance around this anymore, dammit.

"Show me you love me, Jasper," I whisper. "*Make love to me.*"

His face shows his shock; he thought I wouldn't be so bold. I wonder if he'll turn me down. *God, I hope not.* I bite my lip and look down because I fear he might just do that. I know if he does, it's only because he thinks we're not ready...but *shit*, we've got like, seven years of pent up sexual frustration. It's time to do something about that!

His boots come into my vision; he's standing *so close. He smells so good.*

"When you wake up tomorrow walking funny, remember you asked for it."

6. Come On Closer

Yay for Project Team Beta! I love them all - they teach me so much, but they probably don't think so - I however, know so! This is Chapter 6, rewritten, revised and reposted! (with the help of PTB)

All of you still reading this nonsense - Thank you! Your alerts and reviews mean so much to me!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Come on closer, I wanna show you, what I'd like to do,
You sit back now, just relax now, I'll take care of you.

Hot temptations, sweet sensations, infiltrating through,
Sweet sensations, hot temptations, coming over you.

Gonna take it slow, babe, do it my way, keep your eyes on me,
Your reaction, to my action, is what I want to see.

Rhythmic motion, raw emotion, infiltrating through,
Sweet sensations, hot temptations, coming over you.

And now you're satisfied, a twinkle in your eye, go to sleep for ten,
And anticipating, I will be waiting, for you to wake again.

-Come On Closer, Jem

"When you wake up tomorrow walking funny, remember you asked for it."

Jasper's hands are in my hair pulling me toward him before I have time to really process what he's said. *Oh thank you, Jesus!* His lips touch mine; it feels like fire is coursing through my body the moment they touch. All thoughts of the conversation we just had are gone, and all I can think about is his lips on me. My hands grab the hem of the shirt he's just put on and jerk his hips toward mine. As soon as they make contact with my body, Jasper groans and slides his hands from my hair, and down my neck to my shoulders, as he pulls my chest flush against his. My nipples harden on contact and my head falls back as I moan.

God! That feels so fucking good.

Jasper's lips never leave my skin; they travel down the side of my face to my neck, spreading kisses all over the right side, back up to my ear, and then down to my collarbone. His hands creep their way along the outside of my arms and around as he grabs and pulls them up, linking my hands behind his neck. Then sliding his hands back down, he grips my shoulders from behind, pulling me away from him in such a way as to make my back arch. His lips move from my collarbone, skimming across my clothed chest until he reaches the top of my breasts. He bites down gently on the top of my right breast before pulling back and looking into my face.

I'm sure I look a mess; my body is *so* hot that I'm sure I am covered in red. My hair is probably in knots from having his hands in it, but I can't bring myself to care about any of that or anything else either. The way he's looking at me, I'm sure he won't even have to touch me again to send me flying over the edge.

Jasper moves his hands to the hem of my t-shirt and lifts it slightly. His eyes are momentarily diverted from my own; he's staring at the little sliver of skin peeking out, but he quickly returns his gaze to meet mine. There's a question in his eyes; I'm glad I'm not *that* brain dead to realize—he's asking my permission to continue. I refrain from rolling my eyes at him, and I think I nod.

If he stops to make sure I'm okay one more time...I might have to hit him.

Whatever motion I make must be enough to satisfy him; he begins pulling my shirt up slowly. I can feel the knuckles on his hands drag against the skin on my sides, and it feels like they're burning me. He stops his progression just below my breasts, swallowing noisily.

"Last time, baby." His voice is deep, and his accent is thick. "Last time I'm going to ask this...I go any further, and I won't be able to stop myself. Tell me you want this. Tell me you want me."

I blink at him; his voice cuts through the haze of lust I'm lost in. *Is he serious?*

"I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my *life*," I tell him, putting my hands on each side of his face to get his full attention. "Please. Take me. I'm yours, Jasper."

Jasper nods and smiles...he really needs to stop giving me that smile; my heart can't take the voice, touch, and smile. My shirt is dropped to the floor and I'm standing in front of him in only my shorts; he's staring at my chest like he's never seen tits before. *They're nothing special; every third person in the world has them.* I'm tempted to shake him because he stops breathing and moving and then *oh!* His hands are cupping my breasts and squeezing gently, and I think I might pass out. All of his breath leaves him at once as his thumbs brush over my nipples. The touch goes straight to my center—no one has *ever* made me feel this way just from touching me like he is. I didn't even know it *could* feel like this.

Jasper raises his head to me once again and looks into my eyes; his own are hooded, the normal sparkle of blue looks almost black. *He looks so unbelievably sexy.* His mouth is parted slightly, his breathing sporadic; my own is completely dry, and I want him so much. I watch as his tongue comes out to wet both of his lips before hiding back in his mouth—I want to bite it. *What the fuck, Bella, biting tongues?* Really, I can't be blamed for the things running through my head. I have *only* enough reason left in my brain to realize this is *Jasper*; the thought makes me giddy.

Jasper's hands move from my breasts, down to my ass again as he pulls me flush against him and lifts me up. I wrap my legs around him and finally put my lips on his skin; it's soft, warm, and he smells so fucking good. He tastes like warmth and spice and country—I can't get enough of him. Kissing and licking my way up his neck to his ear, I whisper, "Door by the bathroom."

Jasper is walking that way almost before I've finished talking; his breath coming out in hot gasps.

He's just as turned on as I am.

The door to my bedroom is closed when we make it there, and he *almost* drops me while trying to get it open. His fumbling leaves the two of us breathlessly chuckling...we've waited so long for this. He finally opens the door, immediately rushing to my bed as soon as he's through it. I'm dropped on top of the comforter, which makes me giggle until I look up; I'm met with the sight of Jasper Whitlock standing at the foot of my bed, staring confusedly at me. He's panting and hot and everything I've ever dreamed of. My giggles break off abruptly; he smiles. *Fucker.*

Jasper pulls his shirt off, making my breath catch again. He walks around my bed to the night stand, and flips the lamp on before turning back toward me. The turning on of the lamp confuses me, and it must show on my face because his steps falter as he's walking back to me. Realization dawns as he stares at me and my *smile* comes back in full force.

"You really didn't think I was going to spend our first time together in the dark, did you?" He shakes his head, chuckling. *He even sounds sexy when he laughs.* With a wicked gleam in his eyes, he informs me, "I want to be able to see *all* of you."

The inevitable blush forms on my cheeks, embarrassing me, so I turn my head away from him. He's lying beside me, more quickly than should be possible, and pulling my face to him. "Baby, you *really* shouldn't be allowed to blush like that...it's sexy as hell.... It's hard enough to think as it is with you laying here half-naked. Stop that insecurity bullshit right fucking now. We're doing this; I want you, and I want you to pay attention only to what I'm doing to you. No being embarrassed about anything that's going on. Okay, darlin'?"

I nod slowly, raising a hand to his face where I trace the lines of his lips, nose, and cheeks before resting my hand against him. "Okay, cowboy," I tease, "but you better not keep me waiting."

Jasper's answering grin sends my heart into overdrive. "You keep calling me cowboy...you're going to get more than you bargained for, beautiful girl."

Oh, God. Please?

His lips press against mine again not allowing me to respond, which is good as I can't think of a response anyway. *The things this man does to me.* Our lips move together slowly. It's almost as if we're savoring the taste of each other. I could kiss this man forever. *Who needs to eat anyway?* His tongue strokes against my bottom lip, so I open my mouth to allow him access; he realizes what I've done and begins *devouring* me. He tastes so fucking good.... We take turns with each other; my tongue in his mouth, his tongue in mine. We explore kissing each other; figuring out what works, what he likes, what I like, and it feels so damn good.

Our hands are in each other's hair and roaming each other's face and neck. His hair is shockingly soft, and his skin is incredibly smooth; both facts I've always wondered about. Suddenly, his left hand drops lower; his fingers are tentative and slow as they make their way to my breasts. They finally reach their destination and he immediately cups my right breast, squeezing and kneading me. I moan loudly; apparently, the noise encourages him. His thumb starts circling my nipple slowly, making it hard as a pebble. I'm so fucking sensitive under his touch—my skin feels raw. His head begins its journey down, leaving open-mouthed kisses and licks in its wake. I feel as if I'm going to explode as his mouth closes around my nipple, biting and sucking. My involuntary scream of response is probably heard by the neighbors. I feel him smile around my nipple.

"I never pegged you for a screamer," he drawls. My eyes roll back into my head at the sound of his voice; mix that with the breaths his words leave on my wet nipple, and I'm in sensory overload.

Jasper isn't looking for a response; that much is obvious as he moves his head to my other nipple to begin the same ministrations on it. A moan leaves my mouth—everything just feels so good. His hand creeps away from my breast, stretching out and sprawling on my stomach. It begins to move even lower; my breathing stops completely. I know exactly where it's headed and I *can't fucking wait*. His fingers crawl into my shorts, and one finger slowly dips *in me*. My hands fly to his hair, and my breathing accelerates.

Much to my disappointment, he pulls his hand back out quickly and lifts his head from my breast. I whimper in protest, somehow unable to speak. *Huh, Bella, I wonder why you can't speak.* Of course Jasper doesn't help my situation any; his eyes are hooded, but it's clear he's looking at his now-soaked-finger. "So wet," he says breathily, sounding amazed. I watch as he pulls his finger into his mouth; his eyes close, and he groans as he licks and sucks the wetness off. His voice comes out as a growl. "You taste *so fucking good*."

That is...so...fucking...hot.

Jasper's body leaves mine; my head jerks from one side to the other, quickly and confusedly, and then my eyes find him. He's standing at the foot of the bed again with an intense and determined expression on his face. My eyes meet his; he nods and grabs at the fabric of my shorts, accidentally (maybe intentionally) hooking his finger around the strings of my thong as well, and pulls them both off at once. They get thrown somewhere behind him as I feel one hand then the other run back up my legs, stopping at my knees to pull them wide apart.

I'm spread out in front of him; I should be embarrassed, but the look of hunger he's giving my body overrides anything else in my mind. Jasper leans forward, bringing his nose to my center and breathing in deeply. Again, he takes me by surprise; before I really register the fact that his face is dead-center with my pussy, his mouth is on me.

His tongue slips between my folds, licking and sucking and driving me fucking crazy. He flattens his tongue, dragging it up and down and up again. He curls his tongue, probing my entrance and pushing inside of me with it. He sucks on my clit, biting me hard and biting me soft. He takes two of his fingers and puts them inside of me, curling them slightly and hitting me right where I need it. I'm orgasming suddenly. I know he can feel me tightening around his fingers, but he doesn't stop; he continues with this sweet form of torture for so long...I can't remember my *own* name when he finally pulls away. My body is arched in such a way I can see the headboard of the bed, upside down. I can't move from my position though; I don't know if I'll ever be able to move again. My

breathing is erratic, and my whole body is throbbing; I feel like I'm glowing.

I'm vaguely aware of a thudding, but my lust-filled brain can't register the sound. It stops, and I look around my bedroom, realizing I'm alone. *What...* The thudding starts again, and Jasper runs back through my bedroom door with a strip of condoms lodged between his teeth. *OH!* He stops abruptly when he sees me looking at him; his face transforms from a guilty expression to one of awe.

"You look so fucking hot like that, baby," he rasps. "I am *so* going to enjoy this."

I moan at his statement; my eyes roll back into my head at just the sound of his voice. I hear a zipper and bring my head back up just as Jasper drops his jeans to the ground. *Fuck. Me. Running.* It's confirmed now—he *is* perfect in every way. I gasp at finally being able to see him in all his glory, and his head snaps up to look at me again. A smug look overtakes his face. *He knows he looks damn good.*

He stalks the rest of the way to the bed with a predatory look on his face. He puts one knee up on the bed, throwing the condoms up toward the pillows, but not before removing one from the strip with his teeth.

I think it might be a long night.

"Oh, I plan on making it a very long night, darlin'," he informs me.

Ugh, there I go again. My filter is completely broken.

I recover quickly; my turned on mind is focused only on the man in front of me—wanting all the things he's going to do to me. "Get on with it, cowboy," I teasingly tell him.

Jasper growls and slips his hands underneath me, lifting me slightly so he can push me up toward the pillows where he sets my head down gently on top of one. He lowers his lips to mine, kissing me gently before ghosting them across my face to my ear, where he whispers, "I love you."

"I love you too, Jasper," I whisper back to him. A kiss is pressed right below my ear before he pulls back from me completely. I look at him in confusion, but I see his fingers ripping open the package to the condom. My confusion is replaced by anticipation. My hands come up to grab it from him, and I tell him, "Let me do this part."

Jasper sucks in a sharp breath and clenches his eyes shut. I take the condom out of the package but stop myself from putting it on him just yet. *I want to feel him.* My fingertips run from the base to the tip before stopping and spreading the moisture that's there. Jasper huffs a breath as my hand closes around his shaft; I begin to move it up and down slowly, the moisture under my hand making my path easy. All of a sudden his hand reaches out, grabbing my wrist. He begs, "Bell, baby, *please*. I *need* to be inside of you, *now*."

A moan escapes again at the sound of his voice, and I nod—I need him inside of me now, too. So, I roll the condom on to him. He's immediately between my legs; his shaft is poised to enter. I watch fascinated as he lines up—he's so sure in his movements. His lips press against mine, kissing me; it's perfect—lazy and wet and *so hot*. Abruptly, he pulls back and pushes his forehead against mine, staring straight in to my eyes. His eyes are filled with love and want and lust and awe and then *oh!* Jasper enters me for the first time; he's pushing into me slowly and steadily, and he's perfect. I gasp once he's fully seated, amazed at how wonderful he feels inside of me—I never even dreamt it could be like this.

My hands reach out blindly to grasp his biceps in an attempt to keep myself grounded as he begins to pump slowly in and out of me. Our breath is coming out in short moans and pants. Of their own accord, my hips start to move against him; I'm answering his languid thrusts with my own. It's as if he's made to fit inside of me—I've never felt so full in my life. When my orgasm finally does come, it's overwhelming, leaving me breathless. I thought Jasper might come with me, but instead he stops moving altogether.

He's absolutely still; his eyes are shut and his jaw is clenched. My hands can feel the muscles in his arms—they're strained and tight beneath my fingers. From this angle, I can see the veins in his neck pulsing below the surface, and the muscles in his chest and stomach are completely defined and bulging.

I raise my hands to cup his face; the motion makes his eyes pop open. I whisper, "Are you okay?"

His answering grin makes me gasp. "I'm a little more than *okay*, baby. I just don't want this to end yet. Give me a minute."

I grin back at him and squeeze my muscles around his cock, causing him to groan. "We have all night, cowboy," I tease. "Let yourself go."

He growls as he answers me. "You asked for it, *cowgirl*."

A giggle sounds from me but stops quickly when Jasper pulls back and starts *slamming* into me. He lifts my leg up between us, giving him better leverage, and starts thrusting even faster. Short screams burst from my mouth with every snap of his hips. *Holy shit.* Jasper is relentless; all I can do is grip the sheets and hold on tight. I come twice more before he finally reaches his own peak—I'm fucking spent. Jasper finally stills inside of me, and I take the moment to really look at him.

Jasper is even more beautiful right now; his eyes are shut tight again, eyebrows slightly furrowed, jaw clenched, lips are parted just a bit. We're both covered in sweat; the sheen of which makes Jasper look as if he's glowing—the light is bouncing off his skin and his hair, and he looks amazing.

He finally recovers from his orgasm; his eyes open slowly as he grins down at me. I'm quite sure I look like hell, but if I do, Jasper doesn't say anything—he only looks at me with love. He puts my leg back down, leaning forward to press his lips against mine. It's just a brush, but it still makes my heart flutter. Then he pushes his forehead against mine and lets out a long, heavy breath.

Jasper pulls away from me slowly and slips out of me. Leaning back, he removes the condom and gets off the bed to dispose of it. I frown as I watch him; he stops and scratches his head, letting out another long breath before turning back to me and smiling lazily. He walks back to the bed, crawling between my legs again. He's being careful though—trying to keep his weight off of me; this makes my frown deepen. I don't want that; I want to feel him against me, flush with my body.

God, Bella, clingy much?

Jasper distracts me from my inner bashing by kissing me again; his tongue peeks out to taste me. We kiss for a bit longer; moving our mouths slowly with each other, enjoying just being together after our experience. Eventually he pulls back though, eliciting a whimper from me. He drawls, "That was *well* worth the wait."

I can't help but laugh at that and he joins me. I pull him into a hug, whispering my agreement. He moves from me then, rolling off of me and to my side on his back, pulling me with him to lay my head on his chest. We don't really talk; his fingers ghost along my arm, but he stops now and again to squeeze me or run his fingers through my hair. I, like the twelve-year-old-girl I've turned into, trace patterns of hearts on his nearly hairless chest.

After awhile his hand stills, and I think he's fallen asleep. I look up to him, finding he isn't asleep; he's staring at me and smiling. He mouths, "I love you." Then he pulls me to his lips again.

Jasper shows me how much he loves me three more times, each better than the last. I sleep like a baby when we finally exhaust ourselves; my hand is firmly grasped in his, I hope it stays that way all night long.

~*~

I wake with a smile; Jasper has moved at some point during the night, and his head is lying on my stomach—his short breaths tickling me. I'm afraid of waking him when I move to shut the alarm off. Obviously, my fears are unfounded as Jasper just grunts and rolls over.

I take a shower, rushing through my morning routine; I'll do well to make it to work on time today. I really can't be blamed, every time I walk past the bed, Jasper distracts me. *He's just so fucking gorgeous.* I brush a kiss on his cheek before I leave, making him reach out blindly, searching for me. I push my pillow to him, watching as he grabs it and pushes his face against it to breathe in my scent before settling in again for more sleep. He mumbles, "Love you, Bell."

Awwwww.

"I love you, too," I whisper, and then I make myself walk out the door. It's harder than it looks.

The drive to work is frustrating; I'm constantly assaulted with images of last night so that by the time I make it to work, I'm more than ready to go back home and take advantage of Jasper again.

I'll never get enough of that man.

Thankfully, it's a very busy day at the receptionist desk. I find myself fielding phone calls left and right, which keeps my mind from wandering *too* much. Around ten, Angela comes rushing through the lobby, mouthing, "Talk to you later," before disappearing back toward the offices.

A feeling of dread washes over me when she's gone; I don't know how Angela and Ben will take the news of Jasper. They are my friends; I want them to like him. I don't know if they will or if they even can, seeing as they both know a lot about Jasper's role in my past.

I don't get to dwell on the subject for long though, as the phone rings again and such is the day.

Just as I'm trying to figure out what to order for lunch, the private line rings. I immediately become excited thinking Jasper is calling me before realizing he doesn't even know where I work. My curiosity is piqued. Who could be calling *me*? All private calls to agents go directly to *their* private line.

"Cul de Sac, Incorporated. This is Bella. How may I direct your call?" I answer the phone with the standard greeting. I mean, this has to be the wrong number. Right?

"Oh! Bella, dear, good," a delicate voice says on the other end of the line. "I was afraid I might have dialed the wrong number; it's been so long since I've called anyone at this number."

Who the fuck?

"Um...hi?" I respond awkwardly.

"Oh, my!" The voice on the other end laughs. "How rude of me! This is Esme, dear. Esme Cullen."

Oh!

"Oh! Hello, Mrs. Cullen!" I chuckle nervously, wondering why the hell Esme Cullen is calling me. How does she even know my name?

Uh, you answered the phone and gave your name, Bella.

Right.

"No, no. My mother-in-law is Mrs. Cullen, and she'll insist you address her by that. *I* insist you call me Esme."

I giggle awkwardly. *Way to go, Bella.* "I'm so sorry. Esme it is."

"Oh! There's nothing to apologize for, dear. That you would call me by a proper title means your parents raised you right. I was calling you because Angela told me she invited you to our house for the barbeque this weekend." Wait, *what?! Angela said that barbeque was at her parents' house!* "Angela did invite you, didn't she? I asked her to. She and Ben have been talking so much about you; I just had to meet you for myself."

Uhhhhhhhhhh...

“Yes!” I squeak and clear my throat before continuing. “Excuse me, I just.... Well, I just didn’t know that Angela was your daughter.”

“Oh!” Esme laughs again; her laugh, much like her voice, is delicate sounding. “No one ever does. Angela doesn’t tell *anyone* because she doesn’t want special treatment. I believe she was going to tell you today, in fact. I’m guessing she’s been too busy to make it out to talk to you?”

“Oh,” I breathe and then chuckle. “That makes sense, I suppose. And yes, it’s been very busy today.”

“Anyhow, Angela tells me you wanted her to make sure it was okay if you came. I’m calling to tell you I would take it as a personal insult if you didn’t!”

So nice...now I know where Angela gets it.

“Well, then, I’d love to co—oh crap!” I can’t go to the barbeque! Jasper is here! *Oh, God...*

“What is it, dear?” Esme sounds alarmed at my sudden burst of rudeness.

“It’s just...I had a friend come into town unexpectedly yesterday. He’ll still be here this coming weekend and I can’t impose—”

“Oh, that’s no problem,” she interrupts. “Just bring him along with you.”

“I couldn’t do that,” I croak. *Is she serious?* “I mean, you are very nice for the invitation, but it’s too much.” Plus, I don’t know what to tell Angela and Ben. I bet they’d just *love* for me to show up with the man I’ve been crying over for months.

Yeah, no.

“Nonsense, dear,” she sniffs. “I insist. So, that’s going to be at one o’clock on Saturday. Angela will give you the directions. Our home can be a little hard to find. Oh! Wardrobe is whatever you want to wear, but I’ll be in my jeans.” She laughs, and for some reason, I get the feeling she would be winking at me if she were standing before me.

Oh, hell.

“Are you sure? Because really—”

“I never ask unless I’m sure, Bella, dear,” Esme interrupts again. *She sounds really excited to meet me for some reason.* “I can’t wait to meet you. Oh! And my son, Angela’s brother, will be here as well. He works out of a different office than you so you probably haven’t met each other yet. But, I just know that Edward will adore you.”

7. Bless The Broken Road

Here's Chapter 7! - Brought to you with help from Project Team Beta! And my lovely fic-wife, Beausoir, who keeps me in line! Thanks to all of you still reading - especially after the naked-naked time last chap... Stick in there! -I SWEAR it's a B/E story!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Every long lost dream led me to where you are,
Others who broke my heart they were like northern stars,
Pointing me on my way into your loving arms,
This much I know is true,
That God blessed the broken road,
That led me straight to you.

-Bless the Broken Road, Rascal Flatts

I'm on my way to Angela's office as soon as I finish the call with Esme. I'm not mad; shocked is a more accurate description of my feelings at the moment. I understand why Angela doesn't tell anyone she's Esme's daughter, but *still*...I can't say I'm entirely comfortable going to the barbeque knowing who is holding it, which is probably why Angela hasn't told me yet—she got me to commit before she dropped the bomb. *Ugh*. It's one thing to go to a party at a friend's parent's house; it's entirely another thing to go to a party at a friend's parent's house who happens to own the company in which you work. *Ugh!*

Then, of course, there is the issue of Jasper. I'm pissed at myself for agreeing to attend something with him without asking if he even wants to go. I'm pissed because he'll be leaving Sunday, and attending this party means we'll have one less day to spend together—holed up in my apartment—living in our Bella-Jasper-bubble. I'm irritated as hell he has to go back to Washington at all. I don't want to let him go!

Also, I have no fucking clue what to tell Angela and Ben. I'm worried about what they'll think—that pisses me off too; I've waited so long for happiness—seven fucking years, to be exact. Now that I have it I have to justify it to everyone! It's fully understandable that some people deserve explanations; most definitely Alice and Charlie, and possibly Renee need to hear the story from me. I need to explain what happened, and how I felt, and why I kept it to myself all those years. I'll answer whatever they want to ask...when I find the courage to tell them in the first place. I'm pissed that I need to explain the situation to anyone else though. It's my own fault and I know this. I'm the one who cried to Angela and Ben. I'm the one who called Rosalie. I'm the one who let Emmett comfort me. I *know* I've brought it on myself, but it doesn't make me any less upset.

I knock and wait a few seconds before hearing Angela's voice through the door telling me to come in. She's busy; I can see the papers piled up, and her Blackberry buzzing on the table as she clacks away on her laptop. She looks up as I walk through the door, and smiles.

"Bella! *God*, it's crazy today, isn't it? I've been trying to get caught up all day so I could get out there to tell you—"

"That your mother is Esme Cullen, the owner of the company?" I ask flatly.

She looks guilty which makes me feel bad. It wasn't my intention to make her feel guilty; I just wanted her to tell me. I guess I could have actually given her a chance before I opened my mouth. "Shit. That didn't come out quite right. I'm sorry."

"No! It's totally okay," she responds. "I *should* have come in earlier so I could talk to you before she got a chance to call you. I really thought she would wait until closer to closing time though. I thought I would have time. I'm sorry."

Nice, Bella. Really, way to go.

"You really don't have to apologize for anything. My head is just all...fuzzy today. I've got a lot on my mind, and when Esme called...I just...broke? I guess? I mean, I guess 'broke' isn't really the right word. I don't know what the right word would be though. Like I said, my head is fuzzy. I don't know. I'm rambling. I'm sorry. I'll go."

Angela laughs as she tells me, "You're cute when you ramble. No worries. I *am* sorry for not telling you sooner. Ben chewed me out for inviting you without telling you first."

"Oh no! Hell, I didn't want you to get chewed out. Or for you and Ben to fight, or for you to have any trouble, or for any of this, and I'm so sorry."

"Oh my God, Bella!" Angela is in hysterics now—I can't help but chuckle at her. She's holding her stomach as she laughs, and it looks quite comical the way she's bent over at her middle. "Ben and I didn't fight! Ben doesn't talk, so I talk with him. Really, stop overreacting about silly stuff."

That makes me feel better. "Okay, I'm glad. I just...I don't want to cause any problems."

"No worries, like I said. Sooo, how was my Mom?"

A smile breaks out on my face at the thought of Esme Cullen. She really is a sweetheart; Angela favors her mother. "She was lovely, actually. So nice."

Angela gasps as her eyes widen. My eyebrows furrow as I look at her, trying to figure out what she's thinking. "Why, Bella," she drawls in an exaggerated Southern accent. I bristle. "You look almost chipper! Did you run over a small child or somethin'?"

My answering laugh is one of relief and amusement. "I'm telling Ben to take away your copy of *Steel Magnolias*, Clairee."

"I'm sorry." Angela giggles as she says, "I can't ever pass up a chance to quote that movie."

“That’s okay. It has a lot of memorable ones.” I grin and roll my eyes at her. She’s such a goofball.

“Mhm sure does,” Angela hesitates and I can see the wheels turning in her head. “So...are you going to tell me why you have such a *lovely*, post-coital glow today? Or do you want me to start guessing? If it’s a toy or pill—I want it.”

I laugh nervously, but she keeps talking. “Oh my God! It *is* a pill, isn’t it!? Where’d you get it!?”

“Angela!”

“What!?”

“That’s just...why would you want a pill to give you a post-coital glow? Don’t you have a husband at home that takes care of that for you?” I tease her. I’m stalling; I hope it’s working.

Angela’s eyes narrow as she studies me closely. A blush burns into my cheeks as I try to figure out what she’s thinking, and what I’m going to tell her.

“That’s funny,” she says slowly. “Yes, Ben does take care of that for me. So, mind telling me who took care of it for you?”

Fuck.

“Uh...” I stammer, mentally berating myself for the fact that’s the only word coming out of my mouth. *Think, Bella.* What do I say to her? This is the moment of truth—she probably won’t even *want* me at the barbeque after this. *Shit.* She probably won’t even want me *here* after this.

“Well...” I begin again, but still can’t think of how to start. I don’t want to lose Angela so soon, but I won’t give up Jasper. I don’t think I could even give up Jasper for Alice anymore—not after what we shared last night. My whole world shifted last night.

“Bella.” She sighs, shaking her head. “I’m not going to think badly of you. Whatever and whoever put that shine on you is a winner in my book.”

Huh. *Just wait, Angela.*

“Okay then,” I whisper. “So...when I tell you this you’re going to think I’m crazy. I’m just giving you fair warning. Just...just hear me out. Okay?”

She hesitates; I watch her closely and see the resignation settle in her features. I’m pretty sure she knows. “Kay. I’m all ears.”

“Well...it’s not a toy or a pill.” She nods and frowns. I take a deep breath and tell her, “Jasper is here.”

I might have to pick her jaw up from the floor; I guess she hadn’t figured it out. I wonder what she thought it was. I continue, “You promised you’d hear me out.”

“Wait! Wait, wait, wait!” she stammers. “*Jasper?* Like *Jasper*, Jasper?”

I nod. Her mouth snaps shut and she breathes in sharply through her nose. “You’d better get to the explaining part. Like now.”

So I do; I take a deep breath and tell her everything. Everything from the letters, to the call, to Rosalie, to Chinese food, to last night, I tell her. Panic sets in when I’m done; I can’t read her face, and I’m so afraid she’s going to hate me and not want anything to do with me now. Finally, she shakes her head and says, “So let me get this straight. He’s here now. Jasper is here now. Jasper wants to be with you now. Jasper left his wife, your best friend. And he’s here. To be with you. Now. That’s all right, right?”

Oh God, she’s pissed.

“Yes,” I say quietly. “That’s all correct.”

“Kay. Gimme a sec to get this through my head completely.”

I stand there fidgeting while waiting to hear what she’ll have to say. I’m pretty sure she hates me now. What will she do? Can she fire me for this? No, I’m pretty sure she can’t even though it does give me ‘questionable character.’ Still, I can’t get fired for that. *Right?*

Right.

“So,” she says suddenly. I was so lost in my head that I actually jumped when she spoke. “That’s a lot to take in.” Then she bursts out laughing—am I supposed to laugh with her?

“Um... yeah, it is.”

“You haven’t called Alice yet, have you?”

I grimace, looking down as I answer. “No.”

“Kay. Well, it’s my opinion you should do that. Soon-like.” I nod, and Angela takes a deep breath. “Bella, no one should ever tell you what makes you happy. You find your happiness in your own way. Different strokes for different folks, and all that. So,” she pauses, lifting her eyes to stare into mine, “are you? Happy? Does having him make you happy?”

“Absolutely,” I reply with no hesitation.

She nods and smiles. “Then...that’s what matters. You’ll never be judged by me, Ben, or my family—please know that. You can come to any of us, anytime. Just...just be careful. You’ve got blinders on right now, and it sounds like Jasper does too. You two are going to get a lot of bull thrown at you from a lot of

sides. Prepare yourselves. And don't wait too long to call Alice. Nothing good can come from that, and you and Jasper have enough stacked against you as it is."

When I walk through my front door that night, I'm assaulted by the smell of food—fried food. Jasper's fried food. Jasper's momma always told him that if he couldn't cook anything else, he needed to at least be able to fry chicken. She stressed how important it was, and then took it upon herself to teach him. I laughed when he told me the story of standing behind the stove for a week straight while she coached him from the side. I stopped laughing, however, the first time he actually made it for Alice and me—it was delicious. I made sure to thank his mother.

"Seriously? You're making me fried chicken, Jasper? You realize I'm probably not going to ever let you go now, right?"

He spins around with the spatula still in his hand to smile at me. "That's sort of the point, baby."

I walk to him and wrap my arms around him. "Mmm, that smells so fucking good. I'm starving—wait! I didn't have groceries! What the hell?"

His voice drops as his grin widens; he tells me, "You'll just have to forgive me. I didn't really want to share you with anyone else tonight, so I got groceries. Not much—just the stuff for tonight and some beer. I figured we could go—maybe tomorrow—together and get some more. But tonight, you get my fried chicken. So...go do...whatever you do, and this'll be ready soon."

I push my nose into his neck. "I don't have anything to do though..."

His breath catches, making me grin. "You trying to get me to ruin my Momma's recipe? 'Cause if you keep that shit up it's gonna happen."

I pull back to pout. "I love your Momma's recipe. Why would I want to ruin it?"

"Exactly. You need to go find something to do. You're distracting, and I'm hungry. Let me finish this up real quick, baby."

My bottom lip sticks out further. "And stick that lip back in your mouth. I'm liable to bite it, or lick it. Then dinner *would* be ruined because I wouldn't stop there."

I giggle and brush a kiss against his neck before turning to walk out of the kitchen. "I'm going to go change. Hurry up."

Once I changed my clothes and tortured Jasper a little more in the kitchen, he finally finished what he was cooking. Now, we're sitting on the floor in the living room chowing down on fried chicken, corn on the cob, and mashed potatoes with gravy. It's decided: I'm forcing him to make this every night from now on. The television is on, but we aren't paying attention; it's just background noise. When he finishes eating, he asks, "How was work? You said you were a receptionist, yeah?"

I nod while wiping my mouth. "Yeah, Cul de Sac, Incorporated? Have you heard of it?" His eyes widen and he nods. "What?"

"That's a pretty well-known place, Bell. My dad's company has worked with them before."

Jasper's dad owns his own architectural firm; it isn't a huge place or anything, but they do very well for themselves. "I didn't know that Cul de Sac worked with architects too. I haven't been there for long."

He nods and tells me, "Most real estate companies consult with architects when selling plots of land. They like to give the client an idea of what it *could* look like. Ya know? Anyway, we only worked with them once. Mrs. Cullen had some land that she'd inherited in Washington. She wanted to get some ideas before she decided what to do with it. She's a classy lady. I'm glad you're working for a reputable company."

"You got to meet her?"

"Yeah, like I said, she wanted some ideas and she made sure to ask if we had anyone fresh out of school. She said she liked to give newcomers a chance; that their ideas were usually more of what she wanted because they hadn't decided on a signature style yet. I was that person."

"Yes, she seems very nice. So is her daughter."

Jasper looks confused, so I explain about Angela, and what I found out from my conversation with Esme today.

"Angela is the one with the husband you see for therapy, isn't she?"

He looks upset as he asks me, so I tell him yes, and then I tell him all I talked to Ben about in our sessions. I tell him about my feelings of rejection and inadequacy. I tell him what Ben said about my head and my heart. I tell him how awesome Angela and Ben have been to me, and then I tell him about my conversation with Angela today regarding him.

"She sounds like a good friend," he says when I finish. His voice is quiet and unsure—something I've never heard from Jasper before. "She probably hates my ass."

I slap his arm. "Jasper! Did you not listen to me just now? She doesn't hate you! She doesn't *know* you. When she does, she'll love you. Trust me."

"How? Why? Really, Bell. She *should* hate me after everything I've put you through—"

"Stop!" I refuse to sit here and listen to him bash himself. "Stop right fucking there. Listen to me! Angela blew my thinking out of the water today. She's the least judgmental person I've ever met. So...don't sell her short. Give her a chance to know you. Okay?" I look pointedly at him; I wasn't going to continue until I got a response. Finally, he shakes his head, bringing himself out of the stupor he was in—he'd just been sitting there staring at me all slack-jawed and wide-eyed. He tilts his head toward me to continue. "Stop acting so...dejected. It's not like you, and it's pissing me off. I'm the girl in this relationship."

His mouth drops open again. "You callin' me a girl?"

I laugh while shaking my head at him. “No, but I will if you keep acting like one.”

“You’re going to pay for that, ya know.”

I shiver at the deep, husky tone his voice takes. “I look forward to it, cowboy.”

My smile pops on his face making my breath catch, and I know from the smile he was feeling better. I lean forward to press my lips to his, and he eagerly returns my kisses. My senses shift into overdrive again. Unfortunately, I remember what I needed to talk to him about—our plans for Saturday. *Why, brain? Why can't you just shut-up and let me enjoy this?*

“Wait,” I say breathlessly as I pull my lips from his. Jasper groans but stops, and leans his forehead against mine. “I forgot to tell you something.”

He opens his eyes to look at me; they’re sparkling and electric-looking—my breath catches again. I look down—away from those beautiful blues—and smile. “On the phone earlier with Esme—I tried to get out of it, I swear, but she was insistent. She wants us to come to her house this weekend. Apparently she’s having a barbeque. Angela already invited me, but I didn’t know *Esme* was her mom. Anyway, I told her I had company—I tried to get out of it. Swear. So, um...”

Jasper stiffens and looks away from me too. Quietly, he asks, “Do you not want me to go with you?”

“What? Why would you think that? Of course I want you to go with me.”

“Then why do you keep telling me how hard you tried to get out of it?” He sounds pissed.

I thought he would want to spend the day with just me. Was I wrong?

“I just...wanted us to have that last day together...just us. I thought that would be what you wanted too. If I could have gotten out of going, I would have.”

He pushes his brows together as his eyes narrow. I’m confused by his angry expression. Quickly, so as to not upset him anymore, I carry on. “Never mind though. I can see I was wrong. It obviously doesn’t matter whether we spend that day alone or—”

“Bell.”

“—not. So, don’t worry. Esme said it was no problem at all, and Angela will give me the address—”

“Bell.”

“—and I know Angela won’t forget. It starts at one o’clock, and runs all day so we shouldn’t be bored. Oh, and she said there would be—”

“Bell, baby.”

“—a ton of people there. So, that’s good. Right? Lots of people to talk to, no chance of getting bored—”

“Bell, baby, stop.”

“—and you won’t have to worry about how much I want or don’t want you anywhere with me—”

“I swear to God, woman, if you don’t stop...”

“—because I’ll make sure everyone knows who you are, and that you belong to me.”

I stop just like I started—suddenly; it surprises him. He grins at me though, and tells me, “I love when you ramble, baby.”

“That’s good. I’m really good at rambling.”

Jasper laughs. “Yes, you are. So...”

“So...” *Spit it out, Jasper.*

“So...you didn’t want to go because you wanted me all to yourself. Yeah?”

I nod and look down again. “Well you could have just said that, baby. Originally—instead of being so adamant about telling me how much you tried to get us out of it. That’s what I would’ve wanted too—to stay home with you. It just sounded like you didn’t want me around these people. It sounded like you might’ve been ashamed of me.” He looks down and away from me.

Tears threaten to spill over my eyes. My voice is raspy when I speak. “Jasper, look at me. Please.”

My heart breaks when he does; his eyes are dull, sad, and tired, his mouth is set in a frown, and he looks ready to cry. “I could never be ashamed of you.”

He laughs only it sounds like a sob. “Really? So, then when these yuppies at this party ask how we met and got together...what are you going to tell them? Are you going to tell them you stole me from your best friend after I married her? Or that I fell in love with you after I married your best friend, so I left her for you? One of those is the truth, but I know you believe them both. Neither sounds good. Both are reason enough to be ashamed of me. Either way, I’m a despicable son of a bitch that left his wife for her best friend. I’m what Jerry Springer is made from. So, you tell me...why? Why aren’t you ashamed of me?”

Holy shit.

“How about you calm the hell down?!” I snap. I take a deep breath, calming myself before my brain explodes. I really hadn’t known this is how he felt. He

seemed so...decided when I talked to him on the phone. Last night as well—I'm shocked at these insecurities. "Jasper, I could give a fuck what these people think. Angela and Ben know what's going on, but they respect our decision. If you want to tell everyone else the truth then fine; you can tell them how you saw me your first day at Forks High, and felt a pull toward me. You can tell them that we've been friends all these years, but that we decided that we didn't want to be apart anymore. That's what you tell them because that's the truth."

He pulls me into his lap, and hugs me tight as he cries. I just sit there; stroking his hair, and whispering my love. I'm not sure how long we stay that way, but Jasper loosens his grip on me at last and pulls back to look at my face. "Sorry, I just let my worries get the best of me."

There are still tears lingering in his eyes so I reach up to wipe them away. "Jasper, baby, I understand. You're looking at the biggest worrywart around. Don't be afraid to tell me how you feel, please."

He nods and leans forward to kiss me again; it's gentle and short, but reassuring. We talk about the things he worries about in more detail—I hate that he feels this way. I always thought things were so cut and dry for Jasper. I was obviously wrong, and I want to help him however I can. He tells me all I can do to help him is to stick with him, to not give up on him, and to love him.

I can so do that.

"Do something for me?"

I look to him and nod; I would do anything for him. "Can you just...like hold off on talking to Alice yet? Like until I go back to Washington, or maybe a little longer. I don't care really just...can we have this week somewhat drama-free?"

"Does Alice know you're here?"

Jasper looks down before nodding slowly. "Yeah, she called while I was stuck at DFW. She's pretty pissed," he says quietly. Then his head pops up and his eyes widen, and he blurts out, "At me! She's pissed at me! Not you! Well, shit, I don't know...she might be pissed at you *now*. Fuck, I'm so goddamn sorry if she is—"

"Okay," I interrupt. "I'll wait a week before calling Alice. I just want to be prepared. I mean, Rosalie told me she said she knew you wanted to be with me. But, I just—"

"Wait. Wait a second. When the fuck did *Rosalie* tell you this?"

Uhhhhh.... Whoops?

"I forgot to tell you I talked to Rose, huh?" I laugh nervously as he raises an eyebrow, so I tell him about our conversation and that Rose had actually been helpful. The angry expression fades from his face when I tell him that. "So don't be mad at her about that, okay? I mean, about telling me that Alice knew—"

"Yeah, but, I'd already told you on the phone that Alice knew. Did you not trust me?"

What?

"When did the issue of trust come up? I'm not allowed to ask your sister a question? She *does* know some things about Alice that you probably don't. And she's a *girl*. She's more sensitive to the situation than a guy is. I was trying to check on Alice for goodness sake. Am I allowed that?"

"Of course you are!" he snaps. "I'd just appreciate shit not being *kept* from me. I spent a long time in a relationship where that was one of the major fucking problems. Sofucking sue me for caring!"

He's really starting to piss me off. "Well, I'm not *her*, Jasper! So fucking sue *me* for not wanting to be blamed for everything she did!"

He growls as he asks, "Are you serious with this right now? All I asked was for you not to keep things from me. That means anything, even something you'd write off as nothing—like talking to my sister without me knowing. Asking her shit about us. About me. And about Alice."

"This is ridiculous!" I yell before stomping out of the room with the dinner plates. He's being absurd with his 'keeping stuff from me' bullshit. Seriously, we've spent less than a day together. It's not like I had time to tell him every single intimate detail of my fucking life.

I'm surprised I don't break anything the way I'm throwing around the dishes. I'm sure he can hear me, and that pisses me off more. *He knows I'm mad*. I haven't done anything wrong. What's his deal? I'm not going to sit there and take it though, and I'm afraid of what I might have said if I had stayed in that room with him. Seriously, what's his problem? I can't figure him out and it's making me even madder. I don't want to fight with him while he's here, but I don't want him to think our relationship is like that. I don't want him to think our relationship will be like *theirs*.

The dishes are almost finished when I hear him tread quietly into the kitchen. He walks up close behind me, and cautiously wraps his arms around me. "I'm sorry, baby," he whispers against my hair. I lean back slightly. "I don't know what came over me; I don't compare you to her—I promise. It was a temporary lapse of sanity at the mention of my sister, I think. I'm so sorry."

"S'okay," I whisper back. "Just, please...don't compare *us* to what you had. We're not going to work if you do, baby."

He nods and leans forward, brushing a kiss below my ear. "I know that. I guess it's because it's kind of fresh, and I'm still processing that you're actually mine." I understand that—I feel the same way. He hugs me tightly, keeping his mouth just below my ear. Then he starts to move his hands from around my waist, creeping lower until they reach my thighs. "Let me make it up to you?" he asks before pulling me back flush against him—he's already hard.

Make-up sex, yum.

My hands are still wet from the dishwater, but neither of us care. I raise them up and fist them in his hair, keeping his mouth on the skin at my neck. He's leaving open-mouthed kisses, licking, and sucking me there, and it feels so good. I moan as he bites down; my ass jerks back against him. He grunts and slides

one hand into my panties. I'm already wet, so he spreads the moisture around and starts to work, tirelessly, on my clit. I have to lean forward to hold on to the counter because my legs are shaking and weak, but he's not stopping. My head falls back when he hits a particularly sensitive spot, and he uses the opportunity to take my earlobe into his mouth. The combination of the circles he's drawing around my clit, and the sucking and biting he's doing at my ear is leaving me dizzy.

I can feel my orgasm building; he must have known I was close because he leans forward more, and sticks two fingers inside me, moving his thumb to my clit. "Fall apart, baby," he whispers huskily in my ear, and I was gone—flying and falling at once. Jasper wraps his arms around me and nuzzles his nose in my neck giving me time to steady myself again. When I can stand on my own two feet, I turn my head and grin at him. He grins back, devilishly, and whispers, "Am I forgiven?"

My grin widens as I nod...and then he rips my shorts off.

Uh...

He pulls a condom out of his pocket, and drops his jeans. Then he pulls my ass back against him, grinding against me. "Good, I don't know what I'd have done if you'd said no." He leans back, just for a second, and then pushes into me abruptly. I'm soaked from his ministrations, so he slides in easily. This is nothing like last night; this is rough, dirty, and so fucking good. He grunts every time his cock hits home, and his fingers are gripping my hips so tightly, I know I'll have bruises tomorrow. I can't bring myself to care. I'm overwhelmed with so much sensation from every push. It's like he knows exactly which angle to pump in to me to give me maximum pleasure.

One of his hands comes up and pushes me down further to the counter, so that my head is lying there. He groans as he commands me, "Stay." Then, he puts both hands back on my hips to lift me higher. *Oh dear God.* I can hear every time his hips meet mine—he's thrusting so hard I don't know if I'll be able to sit tomorrow. All I can feel are his balls slapping against my clit with every surge forward. I come, screaming out his name, and Jasper gives one, two, three more pumps before stopping and holding me to him. I can't breathe.

His chest comes down to lean against my back, and I can feel his heart beating rapidly; I know he probably feels the same way I do.

Bliss. Fucking bliss is what this is.

"I might have to fight with you more often, cowboy," I pant.

Jasper lets out a quick and breathless laugh, pulling out of me and spinning me around quickly. "Let's wait 'til tomorrow to fight again. Takes too much time, and I've got a *lot* of condoms to go through."

Well, if he insists...

8. Still Frame

Annnnd! Here's Chap 8! Brought to you with help from Project Team Beta! Love those gals! Many, many thanks to them for the invaluable service they provide!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

A small reflection on when we were younger,
We had it all figured out 'cause we had everything covered,
Now we're older it's getting harder to see,
What this future will hold for us,
What the fuck are we going to be.

-Still Frame, Trapt

The rest of the week feels like it's flying by. Tuesday is a normal day for the first half; I wake up and shower before going to work, but the rest of the day passes in a somewhat dream-like state. I come home to find Jasper smiling and half-naked on my couch, and proceed to wrap myself around him. We do make it to the grocery store, which results in the two of us dancing around the kitchen together while making dinner. Dinner is followed by hours of time spent in bed, naked, and I sleep even better than I did the first night he arrived.

Wednesday is much of the same, with the exception of dinner. Jasper takes me out on our promised date—the one to make up for our failed date together in high school. Well, I guess it wasn't altogether a failed night...he was still dating Alice at the time, so that doesn't really count as a date. Right? I want to take him to La Popular, but he insists we try some place downtown he read about online. The food is delicious, but the whole dinner is just one big session of foreplay. We fall asleep wrapped around one another after hours upon hours of sex.

Thursday follows the same routine as the previous days. The exception being that Jasper is frisky before dinner *and* after. He practically strips me of my work clothes at the door before dragging me to the closest possible surface—the back of my couch. We make dinner together, and Jasper falls in love with my lasagna. I promise to make it for him again, which earns me another one of *my smiles*, and slow, tender love-making for the rest of the night.

By Friday I'm becoming irritable, but for the life of me, I can't figure out the reason. I'm pretty sure it has to do with Jasper's impending departure, and the worry about what will happen after he leaves. He acts as if I'm not being a raging bitch, and takes me out on a second date. When we arrive home, he ravages me.

This morning I realize why I'm acting so irritably. Jasper and I haven't talked all week. I mean, there was talking—but not what we needed to talk about. Small talk is what was had, and murmured pleas to each other during the hours we spent entwined in bed. We have no problems in that department; we're well in tune with the wants and needs of each other—sexually. I won't lie and say this week hasn't been dream-worthy...I am, however, beginning to regret wasting the hours spent doing other things when we could have been talking things out. Figuring things out.

We're avoiding. Well, I'm avoiding. I don't want to pop the bubble of happiness we've existed in all week. There are plenty of questions I want to ask him, and on top of questions pertaining to his—our—past, I want to know what will happen when he returns to Washington. I mean, no matter what he says, his family can't really be happy about this. Right?

Then, there's the subject of Alice. He told me he talked to her at DFW; he told her where he was going, but I didn't have any more information on her except that she was pissed. He also said that after his fight with Rosalie he hadn't really talked to her, but Rose seemed to know enough when I talked to her. So was she learning it all from Alice? That would mean Alice is learning it all from somewhere—is Jasper telling Alice all of these things? How often do they talk? 'About once a week' isn't as accurate of a description as I would like to have.

He isn't asking me questions either, and he told me he had some for me. Sometimes, he looks on the verge of asking me something only to turn away from me and engage himself in the television or a book, or he'll just talk about something silly. Other times he'll begin a question only to stop himself abruptly. I always ask him what's on his mind, but he just shakes his head, grins, and tells me, "Drama-free week, Bell."

He's happy to be here with me; his happiness is plain on his face and in his actions. I just don't want him to doubt us, or me, at all. So, I want his questions, and I want the chance to reassure him. Most of all, I just want to make him happy.

The bright point of the week is that we don't argue again. I'm still pissed we managed an argument within the first week—strike that, first fucking day—of our relationship, and I'm determined to keep another from brewing. It isn't hard; when we aren't talking about the past—which we haven't, or the future—which we haven't, or Washington—which we haven't, or his sister—which we haven't...again, or Alice—which is a subject avoided like the plague, we're extremely happy.

However, today is Saturday. The two of us are getting ready to go to the Cullen's barbecue, and there is no discussion in sight. Tomorrow, I will put Jasper on a plane and send him away from me. I believe in us, truly I do, but the questions are nagging at me. They're making me short-tempered and irrational. I've snapped at Jasper continuously all morning long, and I can tell I'm wearing on his patience. He keeps asking me if I'm okay, and all I want to do is snap and ask him when we're going to discuss things. Instead, I bite my tongue and assure him that I'm fine.

I'm attributing some of my temper to the barbeque which, honestly, I don't want to attend. Angela's just so damn excited about me meeting her family though, and I can't disappoint her. She's raved about her brother, Edward, who will be there with his new fiancée. She's told me how he used to work out of the office we do before Esme took an indefinite leave, and how he moved to the downtown location because it's more efficient for him. She pouts when she tells me that because, apparently, Edward likes to know everyone who works for the company, and if he were still at our office we would have met already. I don't really see what the big deal is, but I smile and tell her how excited I am to meet him regardless. Also, she informs me that he is a lawyer, specializing in real estate, and some day he'll run the company. I don't tell her it sounds as if he already does.

Angela touches on the subject of Edward's fiancée, Tanya. Angela's dislike for the woman is obvious, which is unbelievable to me. My jaw drops at her snippish tone, but Angela just laughs, and responds, "Just you wait." Little else is said about Tanya, but I'm surprised when she informs me Tanya was hired at Cul de Sac in my position originally. Angela is completely blunt in letting me know how she feels, which is that Tanya slept her way to where she is now—an agent at the same office as Edward. Apparently Tanya has many high name clients, and her commission on sales is bigger than any other agent.

Angela tells me she just *knows* there is something off about Tanya. She says Tanya has never been nice, and in Angela's opinion, she is conniving and has been from the start.

This Tanya-person sounds just *wonderful*.

I sigh and look over at Jasper; he looks as nervous as I am. After the revelations on Monday, I make sure to tread carefully around him on the subject of where we're going today. I know he doesn't want to answer questions about our past. Honestly, neither do I. I don't want to have to justify our relationship to anyone—especially people that know nothing about our situation.

Angela promised she and Ben would pick us up so we would know someone as soon as we arrive, which will hopefully make us a tad more comfortable. Riding with the two of them is fine with me. I'm not looking forward to meeting all these people, save Esme, and I agree it might be easier with Angela and Ben beside us.

We're both ready to go. Jasper is dressed in an un-tucked, but pressed to perfection, pearl-snap, black shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots. I'm in my nicest tank top, jeans, and a cardigan to warm me should I get chilled. I look toward my feet, adorned with flip-flops, and grimace at my toes—I wish I'd thought to polish them. I feel awkward sitting on the couch next to Jasper. He looks perfect, and I look like trash. What does he see in me?

I don't ask because we're not asking questions. We just sit and watch television in silence. I'm sure we're both mulling over what the day might bring, and most likely wondering why we still weren't asking each other any important questions.

Finally, I hear the honk, signaling Angela and Ben's arrival. As we walk out of the house I turn to look at Jasper. He's undoubtedly nervous; his face won't lift from looking at his shirt or the ground. His eyes are narrow, his brow is pinched, and his hands keep fidgeting with his shirt. I grab his arm to stop him, and pull him to face me. His unsure eyes lift to meet mine, and I smile at him. He lets out a long, low breath, and returns my smile before pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"I love you," he murmurs against my skin.

I nod, and raise my lips to his. "I love you, too."

Angela's waiting outside of the car for us, and when she catches sight of us, she claps her hands together and jumps in the air. I laugh at her—she looks absolutely silly. Jasper chuckles next to me and I turn to him with a smile.

Angela starts talking as soon as we're close enough to hear. "Kay, Bella so wasn't exaggerating. You're freaking gorgeous!"

No she did NOT just say that!

Jasper barks out a laugh while pulling me closer to his side. He lays the accent on thick as he tells her, "Well thank you, darlin'. I'm pretty biased when it comes to her, too."

Angela laughs and wrinkles her nose. "She's sorta cute, I guess." My face is covered by my hands at this point, and I'm sure my cheeks are bright red. *How embarrassing!* "But I'm kinda biased, too. C'mon you guys! Hop in! I want to get there before my cousin Felix eats all the deviled eggs!"

So we got in the car. The ride to the Cullen house is...interesting? Jasper is in full-on charm mode; I think I even catch Angela blush once or twice. Ben's very quiet though, and the few times I catch his eye in the car, he looks almost *angry*. He's quick to clear the expression when he realizes I'm watching, but I see it.

What's up with him?

I can't get Angela's attention though, not without Jasper noticing, and I don't want him to worry. Instead, I make a mental note to ask her about it later.

We're both feeling better when Ben turns off the highway. The muscles in Jasper's face are now relaxed, and he looks happy. I'm happy as well because it's impossible to stay unhappy around Angela and Ben.

I realize quickly that what I thought was a street, or a gravel road, is actually the driveway to the Cullen home.

Home isn't an accurate description of this place though, it's enormous. The house is all white, brick, and windows. A porch stretches across the front of the house, and spread across the length of the porch are white-wood, wide-plank benches. Bright, white shutters frame all of the windows, and flower boxes reside in front of every single one. A house this size *should* looked cold and imposing, however this house is anything but. On further inspection, I notice the same 'welcome' mat in front of the door Charlie has at his house in Forks.

I guess home is an accurate description after all.

"It's pretentious," Angela drawls, in an exaggerated, put-on, Southern accent. "Remember what daddy says—an ounce of pretension is worth a pound of manure..."

"Ben—" I begin.

"I know, Bella." He sighs, shaking his head. "But I don't know if disposing of her copy of *Steel Magnolias* would do any good. She knows it by heart, I think."

Jasper busts out laughing. We all turn to look at him as he—in a real, honest-to-goodness, Southern accent—says, "If ya don't have anythin' nice to say, come

sit next to me.”

Angela blinks once, and when her eyes re-open, they’re glazed over. “Ben, I want a divorce. Bella, I’m sorry but I’m going to have to take Jasper now. Any man that can quote Clairee Belcher…”

I laugh and make a fist, waving it in her face. “Watch it, woman. I will fight you for him.”

Ben sighs again and tells her, “Ang, I *do* quote Clairee.”

“No, you don’t. You quote Ouiser Boudreaux. *Everyone* quotes Ouiser Boudreaux. The way to my heart is through Clairee. You remember that,” she says before jumping out of the car. “C’mon you guys! My Mom knows we’re here. I don’t wanna listen to her tell me how rude I’m being by keeping her company from her.”

If I had any doubts to the hominess of this house they vanished upon entry. It is amazing! The walls are painted in a creamy khaki color, with eggshell molding, and the floors are all dark hardwood. The furniture has been chosen piece by piece, I can tell because none of it matches. Somehow though, it all *does* match; not one piece is the same shape or material, but it’s all draped in rich, deep colors that blend well. The windows have silky, cream-colored tapestries, and the light filtering through them lends warmth to the entire room. I never want to leave this place. In fact, I want one just like it for myself.

“This must be Bella!” The lovely voice of Esme Cullen fills the room. I find myself thinking that it must be impossible for this woman to be loud, yet her voice demands the attention of all. Turning my head, I see the face behind the voice. Esme is beautiful. Her hair is a light caramel color with copper-toned highlights peeking throughout the delicate waves surrounding her face. Her skin is fair, like me, she looks untouched by the Florida sun. It’s her eyes that draw you in though, they’re the color of emeralds. “Oh! And Jasper Whitlock, my goodness! What a nice surprise!”

Jasper’s smile is blinding. “Hello, Mrs. Cullen. It’s wonderful to see you again.”

“Oh! Sweet boy! You dare call me that! I told you better the last time I saw you. Do call me Esme, I insist.”

Jasper nods to her, and puts his hand out to shake. She waves it away and instead pulls him in for a hug, shocking both him and me. Then she turns to me. “Ah, Bella, dear, you’re just as beautiful as I imagined. Of course, Angela didn’t tell me about your eyes. Lovely, just lovely.”

She pulls me into a hug, and I *almost* feel like crying. This. *This* is what hugs from mothers should feel like.

My voice is light and breathless. “It’s so nice to meet you in person. Now I can see where Angela’s beauty comes from.”

Esme laughs gently in return. “You’re sweet, dear, but I attribute Angela’s astonishing good looks to her father.”

“*Mom—*” Angela starts.

“Oh hush! I’m allowed to go on about my children. And your father.” Esme smiles deviously, and waggles her eyebrows at me. “He’s *still* quite a catch, you know!”

I burst out laughing, and it was Angela’s turn to bury her face in her hands. “Come dears, let’s get you introduced.”

Ben was right; there are tons of people here, and I know I won’t be able to remember even half of their names. We meet Angela’s cousin, Felix, first, and I know instantly what Angela meant about him eating all the deviled eggs—he’s huge! He reminds me of Emmett, but his face isn’t as friendly. His wife, Gianna, eyes me with disdain. She isn’t jealous; I can tell she just doesn’t like the way I’m dressed because of the way her eyes roam over my clothes, and that her nose scrunches before she finally turns her head from me to Jasper. She doesn’t seem to have a problem with him at all. In fact, she looks as if she wants to eat him. Her eyes widen as a flirtatious grin appears on her lips and when she speaks to him she practically purrs.

I look to Angela, who rolls her eyes and mouths, “Bitch.”

I laugh, unable to stop myself. Thankfully, Esme moves us along quickly. Her distaste for her nephew’s wife is apparent on her face. “I haven’t the slightest idea what he sees in her.”

We run into Esme’s husband, Angela’s father, Carlisle, and I know immediately what Esme meant. Carlisle Cullen is gorgeous; he’s all tan skin, blonde hair, blue eyes, trim physique, and above all, an easygoing smile. Esme introduces us to him as he pulls Angela to his side, hugging her hello. Carlisle claps Ben on the shoulder and then turns to Jasper and me.

“Hello! I’ve heard so much about you, Bella! I feel like you’re one of my own.” He laughs as he tells me this, and I notice how kind he sounds. I stick my hand out to him, but he shocks me by grabbing hold of it and pulling me in for another hug. With an arm still draped on my shoulder, he turns back to Jasper and offers his hand to shake. “Oh! I’m so sorry. I’m Carlisle Cullen.”

Jasper takes his offered hand, tilting his head in acknowledgment. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. I’m Bella’s boyfriend, Jasper Whitlock.”

Boyfriend. It’s the first time either of us have said the word, and my pleasure at the term is written all over me. Angela winks at me, and I smile. Ben won’t meet my eye though, which results in the smile being wiped clean, and replaced with a frown.

Okay seriously, what’s his deal?

I shake my head and look away from him. I catch Esme staring at Jasper’s left ring finger, and realize that you can still see a tan line there, left behind from his forgotten wedding band. *Oh God.*

“It’s so nice to meet you as well, may I call you Jasper?”

“Of course.” Jasper says as he smiles.

"Then you call me Carlisle, and we'll have a deal."

Angela ushers us along before Carlisle can embarrass her with stories of her childhood. Her parents are incredible, and I can literally feel their pride and love for their daughter. It's no wonder Angela has turned out the way she is.

Two hours into the barbeque, I'm pretty sure we've been introduced to everyone. I was right about not remembering most of the names. Angela finally excuses us from mingling duty, and we find a nice, quiet spot to sit under a tree. It's far enough from everyone for us to have privacy, but still close enough that we can be found, if needed. Jasper sits down, leaning back against the tree, and motions for me to sit between his legs. I do and once we're settled, he puts his mouth to my ear and whispers, "Are you having a good time, baby?"

I am having a good time, which is saying a lot. I hadn't wanted to come, but the whole time we've been here, Jasper's hand has been in mine, or on the small of my back, or rubbing my neck. He's keeping me comforted, "Actually, yes," I tell him. "I thought I would hate it. I'm surprised."

"Why'd you think you'd hate it?"

"I just," my voice comes out as a sigh as I say, "didn't really want to come. I wanted to spend the day with you, not all these people. But Angela and Ben have been awesome as always, and Esme and Carlisle have been gracious hosts."

"Yeah they have been," he replies. After a minute he turns my face around to look at him. "Thank you, Bella, for today. I was crazy-nervous, but you made it better."

"I was nervous too, but for a different reason, probably, than you."

"Why were you nervous?"

"I don't want you to go," I say in a small voice.

Jasper sighs, and pulls me tighter to him. He doesn't say anything, and he doesn't really have to. He just holds me and that's all I need.

"Angela is awesome, by the way. Real sweet girl. Reminds me of you. I don't think Ben likes me though."

"I don't think it's that. Something is up with him today. I keep meaning to get Angela alone to talk—"

"Jasper Whitlock! You did not tell me you were an architect!" Angela unknowingly interrupts. I look up to see her walking toward us at a rapid pace. "Come here! We need to talk about this. I need an architect, this wench I'm working with is really grinding my gears, and I didn't know any good ones! Bella, I'm sorry, but I'm stealing your man for a bit."

We laugh at her, and I say, "No problem, I need to use the bathroom anyway. Can you point me in the direction?"

I find the bathroom easily with Angela's instructions, and my jaw drops several times on the way. The Cullen home truly is beautiful, it speaks volumes of Esme's character and taste, and I'm proud to work for the woman's company. When I was finished relieving myself, I went back outside and began to search for Angela and *my man*, but Esme stops me.

"Bella, dear, are you and Jasper having a good time?"

I nod politely, and smile. "How could we not? Your home is fabulous by the way."

"Oh! Thank you, dear! This house is my dream house. It's taken me a very long time to get everything just as I want it."

"Well, you've done a wonderful job. I've never seen anything like it."

She smiles warmly. "So, Angela tells me you're from Forks, Washington. I don't know if you know it or not...my family is from that area?" I gasp. "I take it you didn't know that?"

I shake my head 'no' at her. I knew that she'd inherited land in Washington, but Jasper didn't tell me the land was in Forks!

"Well, maybe you've heard of the Platts? Maybe not, but that's my family. There's no one left there now, but I inherited the land their house sat on. That's how I met Jasper and his wonderful father," she hesitates. I look closely at her, and try to figure out what she's thinking about. The silence is beginning to feel uncomfortable. I take a deep breath, but just as I do, Esme continues. "I also met Jasper's fiancée, Alice."

All the breath I'd just let in leaves my lungs, and I feel sick. *Oh God!*

"I'm going to assume that they married?" I nod weakly, and look down. "I thought so. That tan line on his ring finger is pretty telling."

Tears form in my eyes, and I'm worried about what Esme thinks of me now. She surprises me; she puts one finger under my chin and nudges gently, lifting my gaze from the ground. "I don't want you to feel uncomfortable around me. That is why I'm telling you this. I most certainly don't want you to feel as if you need to keep things from me or my family. Please believe I think you are a wonderful young woman, and what I know of him proves Jasper to be a good guy. Whatever happened in his marriage, and whatever happened to lead you two together, well, it just isn't my business. It isn't anyone's business, but yours."

Esme pulls me into a comforting hug. "Don't ever feel like you need to keep anything from me out of fear that I'll think badly of you. That's all I wanted to say. Don't let anyone make you feel bad for *any* decision you make. We determine our own worth, Bella. Never forget that." She pulls away from me, smiling. "Now run back in and wipe your eyes, dear girl. They're much too beautiful to look so sad."

I catch Jasper's eye on my way back to the bathroom. He can tell I've been crying, and immediately begins to move toward me. I shake my head at him and

smile, letting him know I'm okay. I mouth, "Bathroom," to him, and he nods before turning back to talk to Angela. I stand there for a moment longer, and watch the two of them together. It makes me happy to see them getting along.

It takes me no time at all to find the bathroom this go, seeing as I've just been there. I'm surprised to find that even as big as the house is, I'm already able to memorize the corridors and rooms I pass. Once in the bathroom, I blow my nose with the tissues on the sink counter, and lean forward to examine myself closely in the mirror. My eyes aren't as happy as they were, but I know it's only because I've been crying. I turn the water on to rinse off my face, and when I look at myself again, I look much better. I turn to throw the tissue in the trash when suddenly the door opens, slamming into my head.

"Owww!"

"Holy shit, I'm so sorry!"

I must've forgotten to lock the door...

Goddamnit! That hurts!

"Here, let me see."

"It's fine, trust me."

"I'd feel better if you let me look at it."

"It's fine!"

"Calm down, geez. I just want to make sure it's okay."

"I just told you it was."

"Forgive me for not taking the word of the girl holding her head in pain."

"God, you're pushy. It's *fine!*"

"I'm pushy? Well you're stubborn!"

"That's one of my best traits! Could you move?"

"Not until you let me look at your head."

"Ugh! Fine, look!" I pull my hand away from my head to look at the man behind the voice.

Holy motherfucking shit.

Since seeing Jasper Whitlock for the first time back in high school, I've never met a man who could take my breath away. However...this man did that—plus some. I'm almost sure he's real.

"There. That's better," he says, and my eyes are drawn to his lips—his perfectly pouted, kissable, downright, lick-able lips. I think he's touching me. I'm vaguely aware of a prodding sensation where the door hit me, but I'm too still fascinated by his lips to know for sure what the sensation is. "Does this hurt?"

Yeah, he's definitely touching me.

My brain feels like it's stuck on one of those channels where all they play is static. I feel fingers grip my jaw and move my head around in a circle. The motion diverts my eyes from his lips to his jaw—his perfectly chiseled, strong, lightly covered in stubble jaw. Then to his nose—his adorable button nose which has a slight bump in the middle. Up to his eyebrows that are dark brown, and thick but kempt, and right now they are pulled down low on his forehead. Finally, my gaze moves to his eyes. *Oh! So glad I saved them for last!* His eyes are the color of jade with flecks of gold spread throughout. I don't think he's real, and I'm almost positive I just hit my head really, really hard.

A throat clears. "Miss?"

"Huh?"

"I asked you if this hurt." Oh! His voice is like honey—smooth, rich, and sticky. *I'd like him to stick me with something.*

Oh! Oh God! The gorgeous imaginary man is talking to me. What did he say? Think!

I shake my head and pull away from the illusion in front of me. Breathe in through your nose, Bella.

"So...is it? Okay? I mean, it looks okay, but if you're having trouble breathing I could get my dad."

It's still talking to me.

"Um..." What do I say to the imaginary man?

"Okay, let's try this," he says slowly, like he's talking to someone who isn't all there. "Are you seeing double?"

I shake my head.

“Do you feel nauseous?”

I shake my head.

“Dizzy?”

This time, I nod.

“Okay, let’s sit you down then,” he says as he leads me to the bathtub. He sits me down on the edge, and I take the chance to look up at him. The whole of him is almost too much to take. I can tell he’s tall, 6’3 or 6’4, and he’s built lean but muscular, like a swimmer. His t-shirt is stretching across his chest, and his jeans are hugging him just tight enough to drive me crazy. His hair is something else entirely. It looks like it belongs on a four-year-old little boy, not this unreal man. It’s sticking up in every direction, and, no shit, it’s bronze. I’ve never seen that color on anyone before. I would safely bet women would pay a lot of money to get their hair that color.

“Is that better?” Oh *God*, I wish he would stop talking because his voice is making the dizziness worse.

I hold a hand up to him in hopes he’ll get the hint and shut-up. He doesn’t. “I think I should go get my dad. He’s a doctor.”

I grab his arm to stop him, but am met with a fucking jolt of electricity. *What the...* I look to the spot of his arm I’ve touched, and then to my hand, and finally up to his face. He’s doing the same thing. *He must’ve felt it too.* When his eyes meet mine I feel the strangest sensation of being pulled toward him. He doesn’t look away, and I can’t make myself turn my gaze from him. Suddenly, I feel another jolt, and am forced to turn my eyes away from him. I find he’s placed a hand on my knee, and electricity is pulsing between his hand and me. I raise my eyes to him again, and find him smiling.

His smile is like no other—completely crooked, mouth closed but for a sliver of white teeth peeking out behind those pouty lips. His eyes even crinkle as he grins at me because he smiles with his whole face. I feel his hand squeeze my knee, and it brings me out of my musings. “So, I’m just going to go out on a limb, and say you’re good.”

“Huh?”

He laughs, and I’m dizzy again. His laugh is genuine, amazing, happy, and contagious, and I’m laughing with him—though I don’t know why. “Yeah. You’re good. You’re laughing, so that’s a positive.”

“Huh?”

“I can’t believe I hit you with the door! Why didn’t you have it locked? Anybody could’ve come in!”

“Huh?”

“Really? You’re going to play dumb? You’re just lucky I know everyone at this party, or I’d be really pissed that you would stupidly leave the door unlocked in a house full of people!”

Wait, what? Ass!

“You’re shitting me, right? You’re the one that walked through the door! The one that hit me with the door! And you’re going to bitch at me about it? You could’ve tried fucking knocking!”

“Well, I wouldn’t have had to knock if you’d locked the goddamn door! Most people lock doors—normal people lock doors—when they attend a party at a stranger’s house!”

“They’re. Not. fuck you, buddy. I don’t know who you think you are, but you should take that stick you’ve got shoved up your ass and find a better use for it. Like plugging your mouth so you don’t insult people who haven’t warranted it!”

“Excuse me?! Fuck me? Fuck you! Who the hell are you anyway? I’ve never seen you before so that would, in fact, make you a goddamn stranger!”

“This is my best friend’s parent’s house! Who the fuck are you?”

“This is *my* parents’ house!”

Uhhhhhhhh...

Fuuuuuck.

“Oh God,” I whisper, closing my eyes. I wonder if I try really hard, really, really hard...if I can take back the last few minutes. It’s worth a try. *Concentrate, Bella.*

“What are you doing?” he asks me as amusement filters into his tone.

“Shhh. I’m concentrating.”

“Concentrating on what?”

I sigh as I ask, “Is it like, impossible for you to just shut-up?”

He smirks. “Yep. I’m a lawyer. It’s in our job description to never shut-up.”

I let out a slow breath. “Well, in that case. I’m Bella Swan, former employee of yours.”

I hold out my hand for him to shake. “Former?”

He grasps my hand, but doesn’t shake it, not really; he just sort of, well, holds it. “I’m sure you’ll fire me now. You are Angela’s brother, aren’t you?”

Realization dawns on his face. “You’re Bella! The new receptionist Angela won’t stop going on about!” A laugh bursts out from him. *Nice, at least he’s taking amusement from my discomfort. Dick.* “Shit, sorry,” he says, trying to quiet his laughter. “Oh hell, sorry, I’m Edward Cullen, yeah.”

He shakes my hand then, but still doesn’t let it go. “Hell of a day, huh?”

“Well, it was fine,” I grumble.

My response seems to amuse him greatly, and he asks, “What changed?”

I look at him incredulously. “Where do you want me to start?”

He lets out a short laugh. “I’m sorry, really, for hitting you with the door, and then yelling at you about it. You should try to remember to lock doors from now on though.”

He smiles again as he asks, “You feel alright now? Your head doesn’t look bad at all. I don’t think it’ll even leave a mark.”

His hand is touching my head again, and the fog of static comes back because of his closeness. *He needs to stop touching me.* “I feel fine, really.”

“You’re sure? Because I can go get my dad, it’s no trouble really—”

“Bell?” Cold water pours through my veins. *Jasper. Fuck.*

“Um...yeah, sorry, Jasper.” I clear my throat, and pull my hand from Edward’s to stand. *Oh great, I’m sure that looked really nice—me sitting there holding another man’s hand.* “I um....I hit my head.” I laugh nervously. Jasper isn’t even looking at me, he’s *glaring* at Edward. “This man was nice enough to make sure I was okay.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Jasper says, his voice is cold and hard. “And you are?”

Edward stands and raises his hand to shake Jasper’s. “Edward Cullen. You?”

“Jasper Whitlock.”

Their hands meet, and I watch both sets of knuckles turn white. When they let go, both clench and unclench their hands, trying to get blood running again, I guess. I expect one or the other to say something, but they don’t. They just stand and glare.

Awkward.

“Um...Jasper? I’m thirsty and I have a headache, can we go get my purse? I have some pain medication. Oh, and then a drink. Please?”

He nods stiffly and puts his arm around me; it’s like a vice as he turns us away from Edward. “Nice meeting you, Edward.”

I hear a faint, “You too,” as we leave the room.

Jasper leads me to my purse, and then to the bar, where he orders me a water. I look at his face when his grip loosens, and his expression makes me flinch. He’s looking across the room with murder in his eyes, so I follow his gaze, and find Edward there with an expression that matches Jasper’s perfectly. I shake Jasper’s shoulder, trying to get his attention. It’s like he’s in a daze. I press myself closer to his side, and wrap my arms around him, shaking him again. When that doesn’t work, I run my fingers across his chest, and press my lips to his heart, holding myself close to him. I feel his arms surround me again, and finally allow myself to breathe out in relief.

I’m ashamed of myself. I don’t know what happened in that bathroom, but I knew one thing for sure: Edward Cullen is dangerous to my relationship with Jasper.

And I need to stay the fuck away from him.

Ya know what I hate? When I have a chapter perfect, well, as perfect as mine get, and then I upload to FFN and, low and behold, shit’s messed up. Sigh. Thanks for reading!

9. Colors

Here's Chapter 9, reworked and rewritten with help from Project Team Beta - they're such lovely people!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Can you feel it crush you? Does it seem to bring the worst in you out?
There's no running away from these things that hold you down,
Do they complicate you because they make you feel like this?
Of all the colors that you've shined this is surely not your best.

-Colors, Crossfade

The ride back to my apartment is interesting. I'm on edge from everything that happened today. I'm almost ready to cry; every time I think of Esme's confession about knowing Jasper was previously engaged, or thinking of my run-in with Edward, and even remembering Ben's attitude toward Jasper, I just feel like I might break down. I don't know what the hell is the matter with me, and it isn't helping anything. Well, I know what it is...I just don't want to admit to it. That I can find another man attractive just... fucks me up. I want to take back the day completely; from my temper this morning, to my feelings of being at home with the Cullen's, to Edward, and to the way Jasper hasn't looked me in the eye since finding me in that bathroom. It feels like the weight of the world is coming down on me. It's too much.

The other passengers in the car aren't helping matters either. Angela can tell something's going on with Jasper and me, and I know because she keeps sending me curious glances. What do I say to her? 'Oh, I had a moment in the bathroom with your brother, and now my boyfriend won't speak to me.' That would go over really well, I'm sure.

Ben is surprisingly in a much better mood. He seems happy that the passengers in the back seat are in obvious turmoil. This makes me remember Jasper's comment about Ben not liking him. For the life of me, I can't figure out why Ben wouldn't like Jasper. It's apparent though; the way he's making small talk with everyone despite receiving a response—he's pleased with the turn of events. Or maybe he's just trying to ease the tension in the car. Hell, I don't know.

Then there's Jasper. Jasper, who hasn't said a word to me since finding me in the bathroom with my hand inside of Edward's. Jasper, who hasn't taken his possessive arms or hands off of me. Jasper, who hasn't looked me in the eye since. He forced a smile and feigned politeness for everyone at the barbeque, save Edward, after pulling me out of the bathroom. I have no way of knowing exactly what's running through his head given that he won't open his mouth and talk to me.

It seemed like everywhere we turned for the rest of the day, Edward was there, and I never saw a sign of his conniving fiancée. Angela tried to introduce him to us only to be interrupted with his suggestive, "Oh we've already met," smirk. She looked as shocked as I felt. It was like he was purposely goading Jasper, and it was working.

Just what we need on his last night in town.

Jasper expresses his thanks to both Ben and Angela before making his hasty exit, almost racing to my door. I'm embarrassed by his sudden shortness, and promise to call them if I get a chance before work on Monday. Ben politely asks me if he'll see me this week, and I nod sadly to him. Angela gives me a hug, whispering how everything will work itself out. I walk slowly to my front door, and find Jasper leaning next to it, hands in pocket, eyes to the floor.

As soon as I unlock the door he shoves past me and stomps to the bathroom. I don't know what to do. Should I try to initiate conversation with him? I feel like nothing good can come from that, but I know we can't leave things like this. I walk to the couch and sit, breathing slowly all the while, and try to keep myself from breaking down in tears. I hope he'll come out and talk to me. That's my cowardly self speaking; the avoidance side of my personality that shows itself far too often, and today, it's because I'm too chicken to initiate this conversation. Will he speak to me again? I mean, surely this isn't going to break us up. Right?

Trust, Bella. Trust him to listen. Trust yourself to not let him go without knowing how much you love him, and that you wouldn't do that to him.

Do what to him? Looking back, yes I'd been attracted to Edward, but it didn't go past that. We didn't do anything that would make Jasper question my fidelity. Except he was holding my hand. Guys hold girls hands all the time and don't mean anything by it though. Right? Right. Except when Jasper walked in, it certainly didn't look like a friendly hand holding. However, nothing else happened. Edward Cullen is an ass, and I let him know that. I'm probably going to be fired for it. I just need to explain this to Jasper. Hell, he'll probably laugh about it when he knows the truth of the situation. It will just be another 'clumsy Bella' story for him to take home and joke with Emmett about.

The door slamming startles me from my musings. I wince, and look up as Jasper comes stomping back into the living room.

"You mind telling me what the fuck I walked in on?!" Yelling, yep he's pissed.

As he should be.

"Jasper—" I begin. I really hope he'll let me think about what I'm going to say. Since I have no fucking clue where to start.

"Nuh uh, you don't get to stall. I walked in and found my girlfriend between the legs of another man! Looked pretty intimate, if I say so myself. That motherfucker was holding your hand, and he had his hand on your fucking knee! So what the fuck was that?! Truth, Bella!"

I wasn't between his legs, was I? What's he talking about? I mean, I was sitting on the edge of the tub, and Edward was crouching in front of me. I guess it could've looked that way... Oh God, that's just perfect.

"I hit my head. He was making sure I was okay—"

“Yep. That’s what you said. So tell me, on what fucking planet did you have to have his hand on your knee to make sure your head was okay?! When did it seem like a good idea for him to hold your goddamn hand to make sure your head was okay?! Why did he have you huddled in what sure as fuck looked like an intimate position...” he pauses, huffing a breath. Shaking his head, he looks me in the eye for the first time. “It didn’t look like nothing, Bella.” Oh God! He called me Bella! Not Bell, Bella. “It looked like you two were pretty close—”

“Shut-up! Just shut-up, Jasper! It wasn’t like any of that! I was leaving the bathroom when he opened the door! He hit me with the door—”

“What?!” Jasper roars. “He fucking hit you?!”

“With the door! It was an accident! That’s why he was making sure I was okay!”

“You should’ve fucking told me he hit you with the door! I would’ve beat that mother—”

“Calm the fuck down!”

“Hell no, I won’t calm down! You just told me some motherfucker hit you—”

“With the door! By accident! Jesus, are you listening to your—”

“Yeah, fuck you, Bella! Don’t put this shit on me! How’d you expect me to fucking react? Oh, it’s okay you hit my girlfriend with a door? Oh, and feel free to put your hands on her? What? You want me to be buddies with the ass—”

“No! I expect you to listen to me! I expect you to fucking believe what I’m telling you—”

“And why the fuck should I? What fucking reason have you given me to believe you?!”

“How about because I love you, and I’ve trusted you! You should want to hear me out!”

He laughs but it sounds bitter. “Yeah, that’s right, baby! It’s all my fault, isn’t it? It’s always my fault, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about, Jasper?! You’re being ridiculous—”

“Oh! So now I’m ridiculous too, huh? That’s just fucking perfect! I wonder what you would’ve thought—”

“I would’ve fucking listened, that’s for goddamn sure—”

“Oh, yes,” he sneers, “Miss Perfect Isabella, you never do the wrong thing, do you?!”

“Fuck you! I’m trying to tell you what happened! You’re not letting me get a word—”

“Not letting you get a lie in! Tell the truth for once! You didn’t just meet that fucker today—”

“Yes, I did! And he pissed me off! That’s what I’m trying to tell you—”

“Oh! Okay,” he spits. “So that whole ‘oh, we’ve met,’ bullshit was all him—”

“I don’t know what his fucking problem was—”

“I’m sure I could figure it out! You show up to see your old boy toy with your new one in tow, well, he’s bound to get pissed—”

“Are you serious?! Jasper—”

“Fuck this! I’m leaving,” he yells, and starts making his way to the bedroom. I shoot up off the couch and tear after him, grabbing the back of his shirt only to have him jerk from my grasp. I don’t let him deter me though, I just keep grabbing. I’m practically blind with tears at this point; I’ve upset myself to the point of crying. Of course, Jasper might’ve had a hand in that as well. He wouldn’t really leave, would he?

“Jasper, please,” I bawl. “Please, just stop and listen—”

“Why?! This is so obviously a mistake! I can’t believe I didn’t see this shit earlier.”

“No, no, no, no, no, it’s not a mistake! Please—”

“Stop fucking begging! You should’ve thought about what could happen before you took me around him!”

I gasp, “You can’t believe that I already knew him!

“Of course you did! Angela and Ben are your new best friends! They probably introduced you two—”

“No—”

“Bet you guys have a fucking blast double dating! No fucking wonder Ben didn’t like my ass—”

“Jasper! Please, just listen—”

“And Angela! She actually had me fucking convinced that she was alright! Hell, she’s—”

“No! No, no, no—”

“—fucking grooming you to be her goddamn sister-in-law, for Christ sakes!”

“He’s fucking engaged!”

“Oh, that’s rich, Bella! Like that ever fucking stopped you! I’m fucking married! Doesn’t seem to bother you if the guy’s taken or not!”

Whoa. Slap me in the face why don’t you?

My grip slips from his shirt as I crumple to the floor. Of all the things he could have said—things I might have deserved... He’s the one who told me it wasn’t my fault he and Alice broke up. His sister told me too. He reassured me I needn’t worry about that shit ever again, yet the first chance he gets, he goes right for it.

I don’t know what he was doing. I’m bent over into myself, bawling, sobbing, slobbering, and generally falling apart. What happened to the sweet man I’ve loved for so long? The man that flew all the way across the country to prove his love for me. I’ll admit the situation didn’t look good from his point of view, but he can’t be quiet for two seconds while I try to give him an explanation. He’s being completely unreasonable.

“Sayonara, Bella,” he snaps. I hear his loud stomps all the way to the front door. When I hear the slam of the door, I scream. What the fuck just happened?! My chest feels tight, and I can’t breathe. I’m crying so much and so hard, that I’m choking on my snot and tears. My eyes are just almost swollen shut, and I can’t see anything at all through the blur of the tears in them. I try to stand up. I try to go after him. I want to make him listen. My body falls forward as soon as I try to stand, and my head slams into the corner of my dresser. Then it’s all just black. Peaceful. Numb.

When I wake my apartment is cloaked in darkness, so I’m assuming it’s night time. My body is sore; I feel like I’ve run a marathon. There’s a crust so thick in my eyes it’s actually painful to wipe away. The pounding in my head is unbearable. On top of that, I feel a buzzing going through my brain that won’t stop. I’m lying on my bedroom floor, trying to remember how I’ve gotten here. I’m drawing a blank.

Maybe Jasper will know.

I pull myself slowly from the floor; it’s hard to do, being as stiff as I am. I don’t know how long I’ve been lying here. Why would Jasper let me...?

I gasp as the memories start coming back to me in quick flashes. Esme, Edward, Jasper, Angela, Ben, Jasper, car ride home, Jasper, trying to figure out what to tell him, Jasper flying off the handle, crying, begging, pleading. Jasper leaving. Jasper...gone. *Already, Bella, he left you already.*

The tears are immediate, and painful with the way my head is feeling. I walk slowly to the bathroom, concentrating on not falling and nothing else, or I’ll fall again. I raise my eyes to look upon my reflection and gasp again. A two-inch, or longer, gash has been cut into my forehead close to the hairline. There’s blood caked down the side of my face, my hair is matted to my head because of the blood, and I’m as pale as a ghost.

I feel as if I might pass out again just from looking at the gruesomeness on my face. I look like a really bad horror movie. I’m pretty sure I need stitches.

I stare at myself for a long time before my brain finally catches up, and I know, for sure, that I need stitches. There’s no reason to clean the blood that has dried because they’ll just re-clean it at the hospital.

My hand reaches out for the wall to steady myself as I walk down the hall to my purse in the living room. It’s still hard to see because the tears haven’t stopped. In fact, they become worse while I was staring at the mirror taken aback by my appearance. Now the blood that was caked around the side of my eye has dampened, and it stings, but I can’t be bothered to wipe it. If I thought it was painful to leave Jasper Whitlock, well, it’s nowhere near as heartbreaking as Jasper Whitlock leaving you. It’s crushing.

I know, in my head, that I shouldn’t drive myself to the hospital. With the size of the gash, I could possibly pass out again, and there’s no telling what my motor skills are going to be like on top of everything else. I don’t want to call anyone though, and have to explain what happened or why I’m so broken right now. I just can’t bear that, not right now.

As I open the front door, stumbling slightly, I’m met with the sight of the same man I’ve been crying over. Jasper is sitting on the ground with his back against the railing to my porch area. His bag is next to him, his clothes are wrinkled, there’s a scowl on his face, and he’s sound asleep.

I thought...I thought he’d left.

What’s he doing here? He’d been so angry and so spiteful with me. I didn’t think I’d done anything bad enough to warrant the level of hostility he’d awarded me with. I didn’t want him to leave. I tried to beg him to stay. He...he didn’t want to stay. He didn’t want to deal with me, to talk with me, to...be with me. Really, he’d avoided talking about anything of importance all week long. It’s like it had all built up, and he just needed something to set him off. There isn’t another explanation for it in my head; he’d twisted that argument to be just what he wanted it to be.

I almost hate him right now.

Which is so foreign of an emotion to me—to hate Jasper. Regardless, there it is, poking at my brain. My brain is disagreeing with my heart. My heart is telling me to wake him up; to take all the blame upon myself, to make him feel better, and to beg him to stay. My brain is telling me to wake his ass up, and send him packing.

Except the decision isn’t mine because my legs give out on me, confirming the amount of blood loss to my head is significant. I fall to the ground, just managing to grasp the door frame on my way down. One of my feet shoots out in front of me as I fall and kicks Jasper right in the shin.

“What the fuck?!” he yells at no one in particular. My whimpers got his attention, and he looks straight at me. It only takes him a second to register his surroundings, and another second to register the state of me. “Holy shit,” he repeatedly whispers as he scrambles to his feet. He reaches for me, but I flinch back from his hand. His progression stalls for a moment, but then I’m cradled in his arms, and being carried to my car.

“Don’t worry, Bell,” he says quietly. “I’ve got you, baby. I’ll take care of you.”

I can’t respond with anything but more tears. I want to yell at him, and tell him to stop touching me. I want to burrow into his neck, and tell him how sorry I am. I want to slap him, and tell him to go to hell. I want...but I can’t do any of that, and I know it.

So I let him strap me in the passenger seat of my car, and drive me to the hospital. I let him carry me to the triage, and give the nurse as much information as he can. I let him come to the room with me, and listen as the doctor tells us how many stitches I’ll need. I let him hold my hand as they sew me up, and send me home, blissfully full of pain meds. I let him undress me, and bathe me. I let him lie me in bed, and hold me while I sleep. I let him tell me how sorry he is, and how wrong he was, and how he’ll make up for it if it’s the last thing he does. I let him kiss my neck, and whisper for me to sleep. I let him comfort me all night long.

It’s the least he can do after he’s broken my heart.

There are two pills, a glass of water, a glass of orange juice, a cup of coffee, a plate filled with eggs, bacon, sausage, toast, and a bowl of cereal on my nightstand when I wake up. My stomach churns, and gurgles; I’m unsure of whether I want to throw up or eat. I’m sore, my head is pounding, and I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck. I raise my head slowly, and squint at the alarm clock, but my eyes are too fuzzy to read it correctly. I begin to raise my head further, but the pounding is bad enough to force it back down instantaneously. I bring my hand up, and gingerly prod where the pain is the worst. It’s still covered, thank goodness, by the bandage from the hospital.

Yeah, but the bandage doesn’t help with the pounding.

A whispered, “Hey,” comes from the foot of the bed.

I know better than to try to raise my head again. “Hey,” I croak. Placing my hand over my eyes seems to help; the less light to squint at, the better. “What time is it?”

“Almost noon. I didn’t want to wake you,” Jasper says quietly. Such a different tone than what he’d unleashed on me last night. “The doctor said the medication would make you drowsy anyway. I figured you’d sleep later, actually.”

“Hmm,” I responded. Does he want to talk to me *now*? That’s just lovely if he does, now, when I can’t think straight, and I really don’t like him. Way to go, Jasper, waiting until I was practically incapacitated before actually speaking up. *Douche*.

“Bell, I need to apologize—”

“Don’t bother,” I groan. So he does want to talk now. *Ass*. “I’m not really in the mood to listen to you right now, Jasper. I got enough of that last night.”

“Bell—”

“I said no,” I snap loudly. Immediate regret rolls through me as the pounding in my head gets worse, and my clarity of vision deteriorates with it. I whimper at the pain, and tears spring to my eyes. *Again*.

Jasper sighs and moves from the bed to the nightstand. “Here, take these. I got your prescription filled this morning. One every four hours. Each. Pain killer and antibiotics. Doctor said you’d be in pain for at least a few days, probably longer.” He hands me the pills and the water. I take them, grudgingly, and swallow them back. The bitter taste makes me wince.

“You should eat something too. I didn’t know what you’d want or whatever, so I made like everything,” he says, sighing. “I even called my Momma so I didn’t fuck any of it up. She’d be awful mad if you didn’t eat her egg recipe. Fluffy, buttery, moist. They’re really good, baby.”

I roll my eyes. “My stomach is too upset to eat right now, I think. Tell your Momma thanks though. Her eggs are good. I had them once before.” I really don’t want to think about sweet Charlotte Whitlock right now. “Why are you still here?”

He winces. “I wanted to take care of you...”

I chuckle as I say, “That’s funny.” He raises his eyes to mine, presumably to let me see his pain, and I do. His eyes have no hint of blue left in them. They’re solid, dull gray, sad eyes. Heartbroken eyes. “I mean, I thought your flight left at eleven.”

“Oh,” he breathes. “I canceled it, Bell. I couldn’t leave you like—”

I understood what wasn’t said; he could leave me, but he just couldn’t leave me like this. Bruised and broken. Pathetic and sad. Hurt and angry. He can’t do that to himself. It truly doesn’t have anything to do with me. Tears spring into my eyes again without my permission. I don’t want to cry over this man again. It feels as if more than half of my adult life has been spent crying over Jasper Whitlock. Yet I can’t make the tears stop. I can’t help feeling the stab in my heart from him telling me this—telling me he’s only here because of guilt, and a sense of obligation.

“Bell, baby, please stop crying,” he says as he puts his arms under me to scoop me up. “I didn’t mean leave you busted up like this, even though that’s part of it. I couldn’t leave after last night. After how I acted toward you. After how I yelled at you,” he whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

He hugs me tight as he begins rocking back and forth. I don’t know if he’s trying to soothe himself or me. It is soothing though, and that hurts even more. That he could treat me the way he had, and that I could still want something, anything from him...

“I don’t know what to do,” I whisper, but it’s broken from sobs. “I don’t know if I can live through you walking out on me again. It hurts worse than it did when I left Forks.”

He inhales sharply. “I’m so sorry. So, so sorry, Bell. I can’t believe the things I said to you...”

“Neither can I.” I pull away from him gently. “You said I was what I fear the most. You stated it as if it was a fact. As if,” I sob, “as if you believed it.”

Jasper raises his hands to my jaw, cupping my face tenderly. “I was hurt, and mad as hell. I took it out on the wrong person. I’m sorry. I’d never purposely do that if I was in my right mind. I was crazy jealous, and I wanted to kill him for touching you. You two looked so... so...together,” he finishes in a whisper.

I gasp, “Jasper, I swear to you, I’d never met him before he walked through that bathroom door—”

“*Hit* you with that bathroom door—”

“Jasper!” I whisper-yell. “I can’t... I can’t do this again. I’m telling you the truth. Believe it or don’t, but I can’t do yesterday again today with you.”

He stares at me for a long time before nodding, and looking down. “Will you be able to forgive me?”

“Will you be able to believe me?”

An uncomfortable silence settles between us with the weight of questions we had yet to ask hanging between us.

“Yes,” he says.

“Then, yes,” I reply.

The silence that remains holds the answers we don’t speak to each other. He doesn’t believe me for one second; he thinks I’ve lied to him and led him on, and he thinks I’ve been with Edward.

Me, well, I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive him for that. Not just for last night, but for not trusting me after he’s made such a big fucking deal about me trusting him.

The silence grows and with it the gap between Jasper and I. The first doubts of our relationship lasting creep their way into my head. I close my eyes and try to sleep some more as the pleasant numbness of the pain killers take their effect. On the brink of sleep, I hear it; a whispered cry for help. I think I might be imagining it because the fuzz is so thick in my head. Seven words ring clear before I slip into the darkness...

“Alice, I think I made a mistake.”

10. Bother

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them.

Wish I was too dead to care,
If indeed I cared at all,
Never had a voice to protest,
So you fed me shit to digest,
I wish I had a reason; my flaws are open season,
For this I gave up trying,
One good turn deserves my dying.

-Bother, Stone Sour

When Jasper wakes me next I feel like I've slept for days but I'm still tired. He shakes me gently, and whispers my name. I open one eye to him, seeing the pills and the glass of water he's offering, confused as to what's going on. He shushes me when I try to ask him a question, and asks me to trust him as he offers the pills and water to me. I feel a flash of anger rush through me at his words though I can't explain why. I swallow the pills and drink the whole glass of water, feeling as if I haven't drank anything in days. I'm cotton-mouthed and weak. The dehydration and lack of substance in my body makes me too tired to get up and try to eat something. I open my mouth again to ask him why I feel that way, but he shushes me again and tells me to sleep. I close my eyes as the pills take effect fast.

I dream of a wedding.

My dress is full, flowing, silky, lacy and beautiful. My bridesmaids are Angela and Alice; their smiles are warm and bright, and their dresses are simple and blue. The church is perfectly decorated in cream and the same shade of blue as the dresses worn by my two best friends. My father is decked in a tux as he stands by my side, smiling and ready to walk me down the aisle to my groom. I'm ecstatic; I've waited so long for this happiness. To be surrounded by all of my friends and family. To see all of them smiling genuinely at me. The wedding march begins and Charlie takes my arm, assuring me with a wink and a grin I won't fall. I raise my head to look for him; his blonde hair and blue eyes are sparkling and glowing in the soft lighting of the church. His smile is blinding as he waits for me. I hear the preacher ask my father to give me away. I feel a smile stretching across my face, threatening to split my face in two. It only grows when the bronze haired, green eyed man I love steps out from behind Jasper, to marry me.

I wake with a start, panting and confused. I whip my head to the side, taking in my surroundings. When I know where I am, my breathing slows. I close my eyes, trying to get that dream out of my head. *What the hell was that?*

I bring my hands to my eyes, trying in vain to make myself wake up. My head is on fire and throbbing, and the darkness in the room is too bright for my eyes to take. Voices filter in from outside of the door. I can't decipher who they belong to because my brain is still too riddled with sleep and fear of what I dreamed.

"—don't know why you just won't tell me what happened," a female voice says.

"It's not your concern, that's why." A male voice answers.

Indecipherable words from the female and then she says, "—frantic call asking me to come. I need to know what I'm dealing with." *Who is that?*

"I don't recall asking *you* to come actually." I breathe out slowly, finally recognizing this voice as Jasper. *Who is he talking to?* "I would like to know what *you're* doing here exactly."

"Really, Jasper?" the female snaps. "You must not have been in your right mind. You asked your wife to come to take care of your girlfriend. Tell me how that was working out in your head."

A sob bursts from one of them, but I'm not sure which. "I didn't know who else to call. I was so worried about her."

"Oh, Jasper," the female says, sighing. "Tell me what happened. Tell me how she is."

"I was terrible to her," he cries. "Terrible, Rose." *Rose? What the—* "And she didn't deserve it. I overreacted, and yelled at her and I..." A sob bursts from him that hurts me to hear.

"Jasper," Rose says quietly, "did you hurt her?"

A pause, and then Rose yells, "What did you do? Did you hit her?"

"NO! God no! I could never do that to her! I love her!" he roars.

More sobs, painful, gut-wrenching sobs, come from Jasper. "I said some stuff, I made her cry, I... left—"

"Big surprise," Rose sniffs. "That's what you're good at after all."

"Rose, please, just... don't. Not right now, okay? When I come home you can rag on me all you want. But... I... I just can't take it right now."

A sigh, and then there is only crying for a long while. I feel awful for him. I want to go out there, hold him and make him feel better. His obvious remorse for how he treated me is showing itself, fully, in this moment. My brain catches up to me though, and one sentence starts playing on a loop. '*You asked your wife to come take care of your girlfriend. What? He'd called Alice?* Something is nagging at me; something with that statement doesn't sit right... aside from the

obvious. Like Rose, I want to know what he'd been thinking. Calling Alice to ask what to do with me was not smart, and on top of that, it's hurtful. I can't even begin to think of how Alice must feel. That's a call I would never want to receive; a call I don't think I could handle.

"Just... you have to tell me what happened. I can't help you if I don't know what I'm helping with."

Jasper's cries grow softer, but are still evident in his voice. "I... I don't know... where to start..."

"You said you yelled at her, why?" Rose's voice is gentle now. "I won't judge you but I need to know."

I hear him take a stuttering breath. "We were at a barbeque... she... she went... um... to the bathroom? Yeah. Yeah, she went to the bathroom. But she was gone... a long time, I went to look for her, I was worried. And then... there was a guy... this... *dick* was touching her, Rose. I thought... I don't know... I accused her of cheating... I... I yelled..."

"What did she say?"

"She... she didn't really... I wouldn't let her... I thought she was lying to me... I yelled at her..."

"Oh Jasper—"

"I know... she didn't... she never... I think I've lost her... I don't know what to... to do..."

"What happened to make you leave? And why did you say you had to take her to the hospital?"

"I don't know... her head... it's bad... I told her... I... I told... her... I thought she was cheating..."

"What did you say to her, Jasper?"

"That..." He takes a deep breath. He's still crying; the sobs are keeping his sentences broken, and his words aren't making much sense. "That she didn't care... that... I... said... she didn't care if... if a guy... I threw my marriage... I told her..."

"Jasper! Please, please tell me you didn't—oh God!" Rose inhales sharply. "Did you... did you insinuate that it was her fault that you and Alice...?"

I faintly hear him whisper yes before Rose begins yelling at him like a mad woman. She's calling him names I've never heard before and asking him over and over, "How could you?" I hear slapping sounds, and Jasper's cries, and rustling, and want to know what's going on but I can't move. The pain is paralyzing and Rose's raised voice isn't helping the throbbing in my head.

Eventually it quiets; I take a guess that Rose has run out of steam. Jasper is still crying, but it too is easing up. I belatedly wonder what time it is. I only know it's night because of the darkness. Minutes pass or hours—I can't be sure—and then Rose asks, "Why did she have to go to the hospital? You said something about her head." Her voice is eerily calm now.

"Yeah," he says quietly. "I'm not sure what happened. There... fuck, Rose there was a lot blood."

"But you didn't touch her, right?"

"God, no! I... I couldn't... hurt her like that."

A sarcastic laugh springs from Rose. "Yeah, 'cause you haven't hurt her at all. Obviously."

"Please, don't. I know I hurt her... I just... I wouldn't ever lay a hand on her like that. She's... everything."

My heart still soars at his words. It still betrays me to Jasper Whitlock. He sounds sorry. He cries like he feels remorse for what he's done.

"You have a funny way of showing her how she's your everything," Rose snaps. She takes a deep breath before continuing. "So, you weren't there when she hit her head?"

I hear nothing, but assume he's nodded to her because she asks, "Okay, how'd you find her?"

He tells her he made it as far as the curb before turning around and running back to my apartment. He says he hesitated outside my door, unsure of what to say or do. He says he sat down to think and fell asleep. Then he tells her about me accidentally kicking and waking him up... about my head and the hospital... and about the short talk this morning.

"Has she eaten?" she interrupts.

"I tried to feed her breakfast," he answers quietly. "She didn't think her stomach could take it."

Rose sighs before telling him, "She needs to eat, something easy on her stomach. Does she have any soup here?"

"I can go get some; it's almost time to wake her up for her meds though. I don't want her to wake up and me not be here. I'm... I don't want her to think..."

"I'm here. I'll let her know where you went."

"Yeah, but—"

"I'll explain what's going on, just... go, Jasper."

There's nothing else said. I lay there waiting for someone to come in my room, and eventually hear the front door open and close. My eyes close as I think

over all I've heard. He said he didn't leave. He said he came right back. He sat out there for who knows how long while I lay on the floor bleeding. Why couldn't he have just come in? Why did he have to leave in the first place? What did he want me to say? He admitted his distrust for me, and how wrong he'd been for what he said to me. I've told him he was forgiven, but it sounded as if he knew I wasn't genuine. Could I forgive him? Now, that I've heard him cry, and tell his sister how much I mean to him. I have more questions than answers, and no clear path to take.

The door to my bedroom opens. "Bella?" Rose's voice calls softly.

"Yeah," I answer, sighing.

"Did you hear all of that?" She doesn't sound mad, only honestly concerned.

"Yeah, I did."

"Okay." She sits slowly on the bed beside me. "Can I look at your head? See how it's doing?"

I nod. "Cover your eyes. I can't imagine the light would feel nice."

I do as she asks and hear the lamp switch on. She gasps, "Oh, Bella!"

"That bad, huh?"

"Probably worse than you think," she breathes gently. "Can you tell me how it happened? The cut I mean, not what led up to it."

I sigh, hearing her click the lamp back off. When I'm sure the room is dark again, I open my eyes and look at her. I've never seen Rose look at me with such concern. "I... tried to go after him. I think my legs gave out, or I tripped... I don't know. I hit the dresser. Blacked out. They said there was a significant amount of blood lost."

She nods at me as her eyes roam my bedroom. I can tell when they find my dresser; they widen, and she gasps. I don't know how Jasper hasn't seen it. There is dried blood on the mirror, not a lot, but you can clearly see the specks of it scattered across the shimmery surface. It's also dried on the wood in the corner, where I hit, and the floor has quite a large spot staining it dark reddish brown. A lot of blood really, but head wounds tend to bleed a lot. This, I know.

"Are you in pain?"

I debate the question. The truth is: I'm in an excruciating amount of pain, and I want to beg her for more meds. The lie might keep her calm though, and I don't really want to see Rose's alter ego. So I tell her, "I'm fine."

She chuckles softly at me. "You're a terrible liar. You know that?"

I try to laugh with her but it hurts too much. At my grimace, she exclaims, "Oh, don't laugh! Gosh, I'm sorry! He should be back soon with some soup for you. I want you to try to get some down. I know it might be hard and kind of gross, most likely. You need it though."

I tell her okay, and close my eyes again. I wish I could just... go back. Go back to yesterday, or last week, and tell him everything I want to tell him, and ask him everything I wished I'd asked him. Why was this happening? Everything was so good. We were happy with each other. He was what I'd always thought he would be. Then he just... wasn't.

I feel the bed shift and then there's warmth close to my body. When skin touches my own I flinch.

"Shh, Bella it's okay," Rose tells me as she wraps me in her arms. The tears I wish were dry begin to fall again with her touch. It's... comforting. Something I never thought I might receive from her. "You cry, cry and get it all out. That's the only way it'll get better. Promise."

So I do; I cry, and cry, and sob, and bawl, and hyperventilate... and Rose holds me the whole time. She whispers phrases and poems in my ear, and tells me it's going to be okay. Her hands rub my back and my arms, and her fingers comb through my hair. It's so nice. I can't think about what to do right now; my head is too lost in pain to make any decisions. Every time I take a breath I hear him yelling at me, telling me I'm at fault for his marriage ending. Telling me he thought I lied to him. Telling me we're a mistake.

I gasp as the words I'd been searching for earlier come back to me. The words ring just as clear today as they did when Jasper spoke them before. *Alice, I think I made a mistake.* Oh God! It really is over! He really is leaving, and the words he'd spoken earlier were the cruelest of all lies. He's going back to his wife. My best friend. He called her to ask her to take care of me so he wouldn't feel guilty about leaving me.

I try to pull away from Rose because her concern is fake. She just wants her brother to be able to leave me... to go back to his wife without a guilty conscience. Now I know about Alice as well. She hates me enough that she couldn't come to help him. Why make the woman that cheated with him feel better? Leave her in pain. Better yet, send the woman who hates her to take care of the situation.

That's what I've become: a situation in the lives of the Whitlock family. Jasper's... *whore*. The tragic *whore* their son decided to try on for size. The pathetic *whore* his sister has to take care of so she doesn't harm herself again. The double-crossing *whore* who took and took, and didn't care who was affected by her selfishness. *Whore. Whore. Whore. You've become Jasper's whore, Bella.*

"Don't touch me!" I spit out at her, mindless of the pain as I jerk away from her completely. Her face registers her surprise. I shoot up out of the bed, but fall again immediately. I try to get up. I try to find my balance. I need to get away from her, away from them. I get to my feet again only to fall once more. Rose comes running around the bed, grabbing my arms as I struggle to break her hold.

"Calm down, Bella! You're going to hurt yourself again! Calm down!"

The bedroom door opens, and Jasper runs through. "What did you do to her?"

“Nothing!”

Jasper works to get Rose’s hands off of me as I struggle to get to my feet again. “What the fuck happened while I was gone?”

“*Nothing!* She just freaked out!”

I get to my feet, but fall yet again, this time into Jasper’s waiting arms. “She doesn’t look like nothing happened!”

I struggle to get away from him, but every bit of strength I’d had is now waning. “I don’t know! I was holding her—she was crying—”

“You made her cry?” He loses his grip on me and almost drops me, but instead pulls me tighter against his body. “What the fuck! You said you’d take care of her!”

I give up; my legs won’t hold me up anymore. I let Jasper support me fully. “I’m telling you—”

“Get out,” my voice finally says. It’s weak, no more than a whisper, and broken from my tears.

Jasper’s grip falters for a second, but he tightens it just as quickly, and says, “You heard her Rose—”

“Both of you,” I whisper.

Rose gasps, and Jasper pulls back from me to look at my face. “Baby—”

“*Stop!* Stop fucking calling me that!”

“Bella, calm down,” Rose scolds. “You don’t need to upset yourself right now—”

“Quit pretending! Go! You don’t want to be here!”

“Bell, baby—”

“No! Go! Go back to Alice! Go now! I don’t need you to stay!”

“What’s she talking about?” Rose asks as Jasper breathes, “You don’t know what you’re saying—”

“I heard you! You said you made a mistake! You said we were a mistake!”

“No, baby,” he says, shaking his head. “No, no, no that’s not what I—”

“It is what you said! I heard you! I’m not going to be your whore!”

His arms slip from me, and I fall again. Rose jumps up in time to keep me from hitting the floor, and hauls me back to sit on the bed. I struggle with her the whole way. Jasper falls to his knees. His head is hung low, and his hands are gripping his hair tightly. His eyes are shut, but I can still see the tears falling. He shakes his head back and forth as he whispers words I can’t hear or understand. Rose finally gets a good grasp on me and holds me, in a vice-like grip, presumably to keep me from hurting myself.

“What did you do, Jasper? What did you say that she’s talking about?”

“He said we were a *mistake*,” I spit. “His exact words were ‘Alice, I think I made a mistake.’ I’m just his *whore!*” He shoots his head up and scrambles to kneel in front of me.

Rose takes one arm away from me to jab a finger to his chest. “Did you call her a whore?”

“No! Fuck no! Bell—”

My hand flies forward, connecting with his face soundly. He freezes, and any reply he had is lost in his surprise. His eyes widen as he stares straight into mine.

“No,” he whispers, grabbing for the hand I slapped him with. “Bell, no! I love you, goddamnit! I won’t leave.”

I shake my head and close my eyes, letting more tears fall down my face. “Bella,” Rose starts; she becomes the voice of reason, “you can’t take care of yourself right now. Just let us stay until you can walk, at least. Then we’ll *both* go if that’s what you want.”

Jasper is still grasping my hand, repeatedly whispering ‘no’ to himself, or me, or Rose. I’m not sure and I don’t care. I want them gone. I don’t want to suffer this humiliation anymore. She is right though, and I know it. I nod to her as she rises with me, taking me around the bed and away from Jasper. His hand holds on until she finally slaps it forcefully away, and whispers, “Not now, Jasper!”

She lays me down slowly, murmuring to me to stay and that she’ll be back with food and water to take my pills with. I pull the covers tight, willing myself to just... disappear.

I hear Jasper’s whispered plea, calling out my name and begging me to let him explain. I can’t answer him. I don’t want him here anymore. I lie here thinking of all the ways I’ve messed up my life. At one point of my life, I thought the day I watched him marry Alice would be my biggest regret. Watching the two declare themselves to each other; declaring myself to no one, presumably for the rest of my life. I thought about leaving Forks, and the pain related to leaving everything I’d ever known, for a life I had no idea how to live. I remember Jasper telling me he loved me; Jasper making love to me. I am quite certain that giving Jasper Whitlock my heart, giving us a chance, is the hugest regret I’ll ever have.

Pain slashes through heart. No matter how badly he’s treated me... no matter if I was just his *whore*, I love him. Solely and completely. I’ve lost my best friend

over this love. Someone who had been beside me for my *entire life*. She hates me now because of my love for him. I want to go back, and make the past week just disappear and make Alice, not Jasper, answer the phone the night I called. How would things be then?

Rose comes back in with a bowl of soup and a glass of water in her hands. She sets them on the nightstand and takes pills from the two bottles sitting next to my alarm clock. She hands the pills and the water to me, and I swallow them down greedily. "Can you feed yourself or do you want me to do it? I know it's been a hell of a day. You need to eat though."

I think about telling her to go fuck herself, but know that I can't feed myself. Not now, with the pounding blurring my vision and affecting my motor skills and strength. I nod at her and look down. As she feeds me, she doesn't say anything, for which I'm grateful. I don't want to speak to her or her brother. Ever. I just want to forget that I'd ever met the two of them. I don't want to feel this way anymore.

I finish half the bowl of soup before I start to gag. Rose takes that as a sign that I shouldn't eat any more and begins to clean up. "Do you need the bathroom?"

I nod, ashamed at my inability to do such a thing for myself. I'm a grown woman and I can't even perform the simplest of tasks right now. I know it's something I can't help but still. It's degrading and this woman thinks little enough about me as it is. She just nods though, and helps me to a sitting position before hoisting me up. She walks beside me slowly, supporting all of my weight. She sits me on the toilet after helping me lower my pants and underwear. Instead of leaving, she walks over to the sink. I look toward her incredulous, until she turns around with my toothbrush. I blush as she stands there holding a cup for me to spit in while I use the commode. When I'm finished, she helps me back up, but stops and asks, "Did you want to take a bath? I don't want you to have to walk all the way back later if you do."

I blush even deeper and nod. A bath sounds wonderful. "Okay, I'm just going to sit you back down while I fill the tub, okay?"

I wait, watching her turn the faucets on and plug the drain. She stands back up and looks at me. "I have some salts in my luggage I'm going to put in. You're probably very sore. They'll help relax you."

By the time she finishes, I'm thoroughly exhausted. The water smells incredible, and the heat begins to seep into my bones, relaxing me. I grab a washcloth and wet it, folding it up to put over my eyes. I'm glad for the quiet. Rose left to allow me time to soak. The pain medication has taken its effect again, making things that were incredibly hard to do before, easy again. Like moving, and breathing. It fuzzes up my brain too, more than it was already, making it impossible to really think about anything in particular. That's where the real relaxation comes from: the ability to just... not think for awhile.

The next time I wake, I'm in my bed again. The last thing I remember is soaking in the tub, letting the heat work its magic. *How did I get here?* I look around for any clue, but see nothing except a perfectly clean, perfectly empty room. I gasp.

The blood is gone!

Rose. That's all I can think, Rose must've cleaned it up. Why is she doing this? It's one thing to make sure I don't die or something, but she's just... I don't know, but I need to tell her to stop. It's too much. Haven't I inconvenienced their family enough?

I turn my head to squint at the alarm clock, and this time my eyes actually allow me to read the numbers clearly. Half past eight. I gasp again; half past eight in the morning! Work! Oh God!

I shoot up out of bed, stumbling on my way to the door. That I actually got to my own two feet is good; that I'm walking and not falling is better. I wrench open the door and make my way down the hall. After the first few steps I need the wall to support me, but I'm still able to walk, at least. I almost make it to my purse when I hear an alarmed voice ask, "What the hell are you doing out of bed?"

I turn to face him, determined not to look into his eyes. "Not that it's any of your concern, but I need to call work."

"I called Angela and let her know. You should go back to bed, baby."

"You should stop fucking calling me that," I snap before inhaling sharply. He sighs as I take a few calming breaths which is hard because I'm losing my breath rapidly, just from exertion. "What did she say?"

He walks closer to me. "She said it's fine, and she hopes you feel better."

I nod, steeling myself to walk back to my bedroom. I really don't want to be in the same room with him. "Bell—"

"No. We're done, Jasper. I'd appreciate it if you'd leave, but you won't until I'm well enough to take care of myself. I accept that—"

"Well, I don't! You totally misunderstood what I told Alice—"

"I said no," I snap.

"Bell," he says, sighing. His voice is bordering on desperate. "Please... just... just let me talk for like two minutes—"

"I think you've said enough."

"Please! I swear to you, if you knew the whole story behind that phone call—"

"Oh! Oh! I see!" I pause, measuring my breaths. "Like how you let me talk the other night? Like you let me have *two minutes* to explain what you thought you saw!"

"It's not like that—"

“Not like what? Not like you insinuated that I cheated on you? Or not like you’re cheating on your wife with me, your *whore*?”

He winces. “Stop calling yourself that! I love you and you know it!”

“Pretty words and empty promises don’t prove love.”

“Empty promises? What fucking promise didn’t I keep? I don’t understand where any of this is coming from!”

“What promise? How about all those questions you wanted to answer for me? You didn’t have anything for me—”

“You didn’t ask me anything! I would’ve answered!”

“Or how about that promise to trust me? I mean, you made me promise to trust you, and to not keep things from you. But you didn’t want to believe a word I said!”

“I’m sorry! I know how wrong I was! I want to make it right!”

“Oh! I know! Here’s this one! How about you telling me that I had no hand in your marriage to Alice ending but basically called me out as a *whore* the first fucking chance you got?”

He falls to the ground again, a mirror image of himself last night. Sobs wrack his body, and every breath he takes is loud and wet and hard to listen to. He looks up, straight into my eyes as he begs, “Please, please, please, please, don’t leave me. I love you and I need you. I don’t know if I can walk away from this. From you...”

I sigh as I sink down into my couch which I’ve backed into. I put my head gingerly in my hands, wishing for my pain meds—my head is throbbing terribly. “I don’t think I can forgive you,” I whisper; a great sob bursts from him. “I don’t know that I want to forgive you...”

He crawls quickly to me, but he’s smart enough not to touch me right now. He just kneels in front of me, bending his body over into itself, and begs, “Please... I’ll be so good... I swear. Whatever you want... it’s yours... I... Just please... please... give me another chance...”

I don’t respond for a long while because I’m not sure what my response will be. Finally, I ask the question I’ve been wondering about since yesterday. “What was the phone call about?”

His head pops up and his hands wipe furiously at his eyes. “I knew how bad I’d fucked up with you. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know who to call—”

“And you thought *Alice* was the best choice?” I snap sarcastically.

He sighs, closing his eyes again. “She’s... always... been there. She’s my best friend too.”

“She’s also your wife! Do you really think she wanted to hear anything about me?”

He sort of shrugs, but has the decency to look ashamed of what he did. “I wasn’t really in my right frame of mind, I guess. I needed advice. I can’t lose you.”

“So tell me what you meant. Tell me what the fuck you meant by telling her you made a mistake.”

He sighs, and looks away. “I guess... I couldn’t find a better way to put it at the time. I mean... she was freaking out when I called and she heard nothing but crying—”

“So you tell her you made a mistake? How did you think I’d take that? Better yet, how do you think she took it?”

“She knew what I’d meant... she immediately asked what I’d done to you. Best friend, like I said—”

“Yeah, I got that,” I snap, irrationally jealous that Alice knows him so well. “And then what?”

“Then... nothing. I asked her to come. I didn’t know what else to do. She said she’d see what she could do... and now Rose is here,” he whispers. “I’m sorry for making you think it meant anything different.”

“Enough. I don’t want to listen to any more apologies right now,” I say, sighing. I’m exhausted; this is all too much for my injured head to take right now. “I think I need another pain pill. And sleep. And no more talking.”

“You need to eat first. Rose said—”

“Yeah. Okay.”

He pauses, probably surprised I agreed with him so easily. “Okay. Um... do you... I mean... what would you like to eat?”

“Something easy. Cereal, I guess. And water, I’m thirsty.”

He rises from the ground, holding a hand to me. “Let me help you back to bed?”

I stare at his hand; I’m reminded of the way Rose stared at mine when I first met her. I really don’t want to touch him. Nodding reluctantly, I put my hand in his and let him support me on the way to the bedroom. He presses his luck, brushing a kiss on my injured forehead, but makes sure to pull back quickly enough that I can’t slap him.

After he leaves the room, I let my mind wander. I remember the day before, everything that has happened, and the conclusion that I’ve drawn about our relationship. He’s not answered all that I want, but I haven’t asked either. I decide to make a point, when I feel better, to get the answers I want. The answers

I need.

There's one question I need the answer to right now. As he walks through the door, I ask, "When are you going home?"

I think maybe he hasn't heard me because he doesn't answer for a while. He just goes about arranging my cereal, and getting my pills out of the bottles.

Finally, he meets my eyes when he hands me the water and medication. "I've decided to take a leave of absence. I'm not leaving. Not until we get a chance. To talk... to be together... I don't care. I won't leave until you know."

"Know what?"

"How much I love you, Bell."

Mucho thanks PTB for helping me along... those guys are so damn awesome!

11. Landslide

The characters belong to Stephenie Meyer.

Sorry this took longer than I'd said. ^^; As it turned out, it took me another whole day to recover from a day spent with my husband! Note to self: Raspberry kamikaze's and Screwdriver's are eeeeeveeeel.

Well I've been afraid of changing,

'Cause I've built my life around you,

But time makes you bolder,

Children get older,

I'm getting older too.

-Landslide, Fleetwood Mac

"Look, in my opinion, my not-your-therapist-but-friend opinion... I think you did the right thing. I know that might not be what you want to hear, but it is what it is," Ben cleared his throat once. He looked up, right into my eye, "In my opinion as your therapist, you *did* do the right thing. The only way for you to be able to move past any of this... *these* insecurities that you have with each other... he needs to move on and so do you. He should have waited to come to you until he was divorced. You should have turned him away. I get it," he sighed, "you guys have had this *thing* with each other- for each other- all this time. Doesn't make it right Bella."

I breathed out a slow, unsteady breath, "Yeah. I know." My thoughts were so jumbled; I was surprised that I hadn't cried yet. "Still hurts though," I finished in a small voice.

It had been two weeks since I gashed my head open, since the blow-out with Jasper and Rose. I'd put him and her on a plane last week. Sent them home. Jasper had argued with me the whole time, telling me we needed him to take this leave. That we needed the time for *us*. I disagreed with him and so did Rose. She was my biggest supporter in asking him for time and space; in getting him on a plane back to Washington.

I'd made a decision. No matter how much it hurt to think about Jasper not being there, about how much I still loved him despite the things he'd said... I felt it best for *us* if he went home. He needed to get his life in order. He needed to decide if divorcing Alice was what he really wanted. He needed to decide if *I* was what he really wanted. He needed to think and so did I. I didn't want to be the other woman. After I'd gotten past my irrational outburst of calling myself his whore, I realized that I wouldn't be able to get past that so long as that was what I felt like. If he wanted to be with me, I wanted him to pursue me... single. If he wanted to come back and tell me how much he loved me and prove that I was what he wanted... he was going to have to do so as a divorced man.

Rose admired my decision, told me that she felt I was doing the right thing. She was the hugest help the week she'd stayed. She cooked for all of us every day; kept my apartment clean, kept me clean, and most important, gave me an ear. She never judged, always giving me her thoughts but not advice. I looked upon her differently now than I had before, thought of her as a... *friend* now. Saying goodbye to her was hard in light of all she'd done. When she hugged me, teary-eyed and sniffing, she told me to let her know if I needed anything. To call if I needed to talk. That she'd kill me if I didn't let her know how I was doing. I've talked to her every day since.

I *haven't* talked to Jasper though. He's called every day, multiple times. I asked him not to, I asked him to wait, to think and to give me the same courtesy. He'd scoffed at the airport, telling me he would be back before I could blink, telling me he loved me, telling me he would miss me. I missed him, so much. I regretted my decision to send him away, but I still felt it was for the best.

It was with a heavy heart that I walked in to my appointment with Ben. My voice was quiet, my heart was thumping loudly and my eyes had threatened tears the entire time. I didn't feel any better.

"I know it hurts Bella. Hell, you wouldn't be human if it didn't. I know that you love him; I don't doubt he loves you either. It's just," he sighs. I know this is not something that Ben wants to tell me, Angela implied as much to me when I returned to work. She said that Ben was very clear in his thinking, but that he knew it was something I wouldn't want to hear. He didn't want to cause any problems for Jasper and me but felt that someone should say this. I've been waiting the whole session for him to say it. "I think you guys rushed things. I felt that when Angela told me that he was here, after I got over the shock factor. I know from what she told me that you think I didn't like him. That's not necessarily the case, I just... Okay, don't get mad?"

I nodded, "You know I value whatever you would tell me Ben, as a friend or a therapist. And I'm more than a little curious as to your reaction to him."

Ben got up, walked to the window that looked over palms and green, "Okay. I just didn't like how he was with you. Like in front of me. Like he had to make it *known* that you were *his*. To me. A happily married man. I know that you girls weren't paying attention--"

"Wait, wait. What did he do?" I was genuinely curious; I hadn't noticed Jasper doing anything in the car ride over.

"It was his hands and his arms, eyes and his posture. It's something that women don't notice, I swear this to you. Like a signal between guys. And he was sending it. Loud and clear. I didn't like that. I didn't feel like he had that right," he ran a hand over his face, frustrated. "Not while *he's* still married."

My head snapped up to Ben, "That's it? Because he's still *married*? So you wouldn't care that he did that if he wasn't?" I shook my head. That seemed ridiculous. That Jasper would feel the need to act like that in accordance with me at all... "I mean, sorry, shit, I just, I mean you think it would be okay for him to be... possessive?" I looked to Ben, wondering if that was the word I was searching for. He nodded his agreement, "I mean, do guys... they do that? Like period? I mean at all? I mean hell I don't know... Why? Why do guys do that?"

He laughed, "Of *course* we do Bella." He came back and sat in front of me, "That he felt the need to do it in front of me I found laughable. When I saw the suntan from his *wedding ring* I got pissed. I'm sorry if I didn't handle the situation well. Scowls and eye rolls from the driver's seat weren't what you needed.

I am sorry.”

I waved off his apology, “I’m not concerned with how you acted. I guess... Well shit I guess I’m more concerned that I didn’t even notice...”

“Yeah well, in your defense, you were sorta looking through the eyes of love. You were only seeing what you wanted to. That you noticed any reaction from me at all is baffling.”

I laughed, “I guess I was out of it a bit.”

He nodded, “So... uh... Friends okay?”

I looked to him confused, “Of course.”

“I wanted to ask you something- as a friend- don’t get mad.”

“Okay...”

“Edward might’ve mentioned something about you...”

I blushed immediately; I knew what he ‘might’ve mentioned.’ Trying out an innocent look, “Really? What was that?”

Now Ben looked nervous, “Just that... He might’ve hit you with a door, and uh... that you guys might’ve... had... a moment? I mean, that’s not what he said exactly but-”

“Well what did he say exactly?” I interrupted.

Ben wouldn’t look at me, “He said uh... he thought you were... beautiful?” He winced, “His words- no offense, I mean, you are, I just-”

“I get it.”

He breathed out in relief, “He also said he thought maybe... okay, just that uh... you might’ve... found him attractive?”

“*What?! That Ass!*”

“You said you wouldn’t get mad!”

“I’m not mad! I’m fucking pissed!”

Ben laughed, “So you didn’t? Find him attractive? I mean I think he was fishing-”

“It *so* doesn’t matter! He could be Brad-fucking-Pitt and it wouldn’t matter! The nerve-”

“So you *did* think he was attractive?”

My face got hotter, “It doesn’t matter! He’s an ass! In your wife’s words- a ‘boil on the butt of humanity!’”

Ben was holding his stomach now; he was laughing so hard, “You two are *never* watching that movie together!”

I had to join in with him, “I just... ugh! Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!”

“Yeah well, Edward Cullen’s usually very popular with the ladies; I have to say your reaction to him is quite comical.”

“I can’t imagine why,” I rolled my eyes. The nerve of him! It was *obvious* that I was taken! And he’s engaged! I gasped, “Isn’t he engaged? To be married? He *really* shouldn’t be asking about womens’ reactions to him if so!”

It was Ben’s turn to roll his eyes, “Yeah no. Like it matters. I give Edward another month before he breaks it off. Those two were a bad match from the start. But Tanya’s hot and Edward is a dumb shit.”

I laughed, “I’m so telling Angela!”

His eyes widened, “What? I mean she’s-”

“Just kidding oh my God! Touchy, touchy,” I was gasping for air between laughs. “You should see your face right now!”

We joked around for awhile longer. When my time was up he said, “Okay seriously. I think you should give yourself a bit longer before you talk to Jasper. I can’t tell you *how* long. But you need some time to figure out what exactly you want from him. I know before, that you wanted exactly what he presented you with when he got here. You see how that worked out. You two *do* need to talk. You two *do* need to ask questions. First though, you need to make sure all your ducks are in a row. Talk to Charlie. Talk to Alice. Talk to Renee. Hell talk to Edward, don’t deny that blush. Figure out what you want Bella. And then see if Jasper wants to give it to you. If you even want him to give it to you anymore. Okay?”

I nodded and thanked him, my mind wandering over all he’d said. It was time, I knew that. Jasper and I had avoided for too long. We needed to stop and I needed to get a move on so we could do just that.

~*~

“Cul de Sac Incorporated. This is Bella, how may I direct your call?” I wish it was time to go home, I was so sick of repeating this all day long. “One moment,

I'll send you right through."

I sighed, redirecting the call before disconnecting on my end. Long day. Long week. Long freaking life. At least the phone calls gave me reprieve from my thoughts. That's all I'd been doing lately- thinking. I still didn't know what I wanted and I was sick of fucking thinking about it. It was making me irritable. And depressed. And generally not fun to be around.

Angela seemed to be immune to my dismal attitude. She still walked in every day all smiles and laughs. I was grateful to her for not letting me get completely lost in myself. She kept me grounded and reminded me that there was no time limit to getting myself in order. She often quoted her favorite movie when I was particularly hard to be around, telling me, "That which does not kill us, makes us stronger."

My mother? Not so immune. She so much as told me to go away and not come back until my attitude improved. I'd joined her and Phil for dinner at her house last week. I griped at her for not telling me that Jasper had called again. I griped at her for not calling me to warn me that Jasper was coming to my apartment. I griped at her for *not helping me move*. I was venting, she was there. After a very uncomfortable dinner she told me, "I don't know what's going on with you and that boy. When he would call he sounded miserable but I didn't think you wanted to talk to him. Then he shows up here, starry-eyed saying he wanted to surprise you? I mean, that is Alice's husband isn't it? I don't think I'm wrong there, and judging from your face, I know I'm not. You need to get your head on straight Bella. Friends don't do that to friends. I don't care *what's* going on in their marriage. And don't come back here until you've got it figured out. I don't want to be caught in the middle of any drama. And you're really not fun to be around right now honey, no offense."

Bitch.

Charlie hadn't really been particularly helpful either though. He refused to even talk about a possibility of there being a 'Bella and Jasper.' And then he grumbled about Jasper having unpaid parking tickets before he hung up. But not before he told me to call Alice.

Which I hadn't. Because I'm a chicken-shit, obviously. But really, it was so much worse thinking about calling her now. You know, since I'd fucked her husband and all.

Ugh!

"Well, well, well, look who's here," a smooth voice said, interrupting my thoughts. *Thank God.* "I wasn't sure if I'd catch you or not. Angela said you had taken some sick days. You don't look sick though. You look quite... *healthy* if I do say so myself."

Fuck me.

I looked up from the doodles I was drawing distractedly to find Edward Cullen leaning across my counter. In a suit. A black, expensive, soft looking suit. And a smile. *Fuck, he's gorgeous. Was he that nice-looking in the bathroom?*

"So, how're you feeling? Not sick anymore, I take it?" He was leaning closer, I could smell his cologne. *Gah!*

"I'm fine," there! I talked! *Woo-hoo Bella!*

"That's very good. I was worried that I might have hurt you with that door," his eyes are wicked green. And smiling playfully at me. It should be illegal to look like that in a suit. "Why were you out?"

"Huh?"

His smile widened, "You seem to say that a lot around me Bella."

I blushed; I *did* say that a lot around him. He rendered me practically speechless though, I was quite sure I wasn't the only woman he had that effect on.

"Let me rephrase, why were you out *sick*?"

Oh! "I hit my head."

His eyes went from charming to alarmed, "Oh God! From me? From the door? Shit, are you okay?"

What the...

"Huh?"

Alarmed to angry, "Bella stop saying that! Oh God. How bad was it? Can I see?"

Oh! "Oh! No!"

Angry to concerned, "No? Why?"

"Huh?"

Concerned back to angry, "Damnit Bella! Why can't I see your head?"

Oh! "Oh! No! I mean, sure you can see it, but, no you didn't do it."

Still angry, pissed sounding actually, "Then what happened if I didn't do it?"

"Uh..."

"Your *boyfriend*," he spit out the word, "did take care of you, didn't he?"

What's this fucker's deal?

"Yeah, he took me to get it stitched up," I replied stiffly. "And I fell, that's what happened. Did you need something?"

Back to charming, "Do I need a reason to come by and say hello?"

"Um... no?" *Huh?*

"Good," he smiled wickedly, "have you eaten today?"

What?

"No..."

"Would you care to join my sister and me for lunch? I know she'd love for you to come."

Breathe, Bella, "I don't think, I mean, if I say no, um..."

He laughed beautifully, "You're not obligated to say yes, if that's what you're asking. I just thought you might like to. Angela says I'm boring to lunch with. She might like if you came, I'm pretty sure she would, in fact."

"Pretty sure she would what?" Angela said as she walked up. She turned to me before receiving Edward's response, "Hey we're gonna go eat, wanna come?"

Ugh.

"Sure," I said quietly, gathering up my things for lunch.

"Excellent," Edward grinned wickedly at me. Angela whipped her head back to face him and I saw his grin dim a bit. *Huh.*

This was bound to be interesting.

~*~

"So how goes it Edward? Haven't been over to take your dear sister to lunch in a *very* long time," Angela asked after we'd placed our orders. The restaurant they'd chosen was nice and extremely out of my price range. The salad I'd ordered would pay for groceries for at least two days.

"Yes, well, I've been rather busy-"

Angela burst out laughing, "*Edward! Gosh!* I was just kidding! I know Tanya doesn't like me!"

Edward sighed, "Ang, you know it's not that-"

"Oh yes it is! But I don't care, you're here now. So tell me, how are you?"

I blanked out on most of their conversation. There was a lot going on in the restaurant, it seemed very popular. It *was* very nice; I'd never been to a place like this before. I'd been raised on the lower end of the financial wealth tree; things like eating out had taken place at small town diners or fast food joints. I didn't even really peg Angela for the type to like this restaurant, seeing how comfortable she'd been in La Popular. She'd ordered flawlessly though, and didn't seem intimidated like I felt.

"Bella, you must've fallen awfully hard to cause bruising like that. How did it happen?" Edward's voice broke through the fog. I looked down and heard Angela clear her throat awkwardly. "Touchy subject?" He asked stiffly.

I shook my head, "Um... I'm quite clumsy actually. My feet got caught on themselves? I hit my bedroom dresser on my way down."

I looked anywhere but him. Angela was giving me a sympathetic smile, "Yes Bella *does* tend to fight with her own feet sometimes."

"So it would appear. And your boyfriend? Jackson right? He must have been terribly worried about you. How's he handling your issues with staying upright?"

Ass.

"It's Jasper, actually," I looked up to find him smirking. "And he's back home now; he was very worried, you're right."

"Back home? Where's home?"

I looked to Angela; surely she'd told him this. "Forks, Washington. His father runs their company from there."

"Ah, yes. Angela mentioned working with them," he leaned forward, dropping his voice, "you must not be hurt badly then. I would never have left my girlfriend when she was just taken to the hospital."

My posture stiffened, "Well, he didn't leave *right* after I'd left the hospital. I asked him to-"

"He had work Edward, geez. Let off a bit," Angela intervened, thank goodness. He'd made me mad, there was really no telling what might have come out of my mouth. "Anyway, how's Tanya?"

Is it my imagination or did Angela Cheney just *sneer*? "She's fine."

“Really? Oh good! Then you’ll have to invite her over on Friday! You said you were coming, right? Oh and Bella, you’re coming too,” Angela was doing that thing again where she didn’t breathe while she talked. “Ben and I are having card night! You *so* have to come!”

“Uh...”

“Well then, I wouldn’t want to make it a *couple’s* thing by bringing Tanya,” Edward interrupted me. *Ass.* “Make Bella feel uncomfortable when Jameson is so far away in Washington.”

“It’s *Jasper*, and I wouldn’t feel uncomfortable. But I don’t think I can ma-”

“Of course you can! I *know* what you do on Friday nights Bella. Bring tequila. Oh I’m so excited!”

And then of course you couldn’t talk anymore. Angela was prattling on for the rest of lunch, talking about playing this game and that. She told Edward to bring rum. Why? She’d told me to bring tequila. I decided then to take a cab to and fro. I didn’t trust Angela with alcohol.

“Kay, well, Bella and I have like, *actual* work to do. So we’re gonna go, but I’ll see you on Friday brother dear. With Tanya or without?”

He looked right at me, “Without.”

~*~

I hated going home at night. Which really sucked because when I’d moved in to this apartment, I was so excited to be away from Renee and have a place that my past hadn’t touched. A place all my own. And then Jasper showed up on my doorstep and fucked my whole peaceful place thing up. Everywhere I turned now I was reminded of him. I missed him the most at home.

I did everything I could think of to keep my mind off of him. I knew it was counter-productive; I was supposed to be figuring things out. I couldn’t help it though, it just... hurt. Tonight it was a marathon of *Friends*. Nothing like watching Ross and Rachel pussy-foot around each other to take your mind off of things.

My phone rang, interrupting my vegetative state. I sighed and walked over to the counter to see who it was. *Unknown Number* flashed across my screen. Huh.

“Hello?” I said curiously.

“Ah-ha so Angela *doesn’t* totally hate me,” a male voice said from the other end of the line.

Uh....

“Uh... who is this?”

“Do you really want to know? Isn’t it kinda fun not knowing?”

“No. It isn’t. And since you don’t want to tell me, good-”

“It’s Edward, *God*,” he laughed. *What the...* “You really gotta lighten up Bella.”

“Yeah, okay,” I said quietly. Taking a deep breath I asked, “Why did Angela give you my number? And why are you calling me?”

“I can’t just call to call? I thought we were friends,” *was he serious?* “No, seriously, you’re not mad she gave me your number are you?”

“Maybe, what do you want?”

He muttered something that sounded entirely too much like ‘bitch,’ “I don’t *want* anything. I called to apologize.”

“For what?” I know I was being short and rude, but I wasn’t entirely comfortable with Edward Cullen having my phone number and then using it.

“For not remembering your boyfriends’ name, for one,” he laughed. “Please send Jamie my apologies as well-”

“It’s *Jasper*,” I sighed. “Why are you *really* calling?”

He paused; I could hear him breathing but nothing else. There was no sound from a television or a radio, no fiancée’s voice, nothing. “I just,” he sighed, “I guess I wanted to know if you were okay. At lunch... you just seemed kinda lost. Like stuck in your head, out of it, not really there-”

“I got it. And I’m fine, thanks for asking. If that’s all-”

“Yeah, you said you were fine. I remember. I’m not asking if you’re sick now,” he paused again. I was still baffled that *Angela* would give her brother my number. That didn’t seem like her at all. Something was nagging at me about this, “You seemed like something was bothering you. I know sometimes it’s easier to talk to people who... don’t really know what’s going on. I’m offering, if you’d like.”

“Oh,” I said slowly and quietly. How does one respond to something like that? “Wouldn’t that be awkward? I mean, you’re my boss...”

He sighed, “I wish you’d stop referring to me like that. My Mom is your boss. I’m just another coworker.”

“Yeah, but, you’re gonna be the boss,” I argued.

“And I doubt an educated, witty, dedicated young lady like yourself will still be a *receptionist* at said company for much longer. You’re too smart to get yourself stuck in a dead-end job like that.”

“Didn’t seem so dead-end for your fiancée-” *Oh. My. God. Please tell me I didn’t just say that.* “Holy shit, I’m so sorry-”

“It’s fine,” he sniffed. “Fine because it’s true... I’m not stupid or blind Bella; I know what she wants from me. Still,” he trailed off quietly. When he didn’t say anything for a minute, I checked my phone to make sure we were still connected. We were.

“Still, I’m sorry for saying that. It was so far out of line-”

“I called us friends yeah?”

“Um... yeah...”

“As my friend, I’m glad you don’t beat around the bush,” he took a deep breath, “So please. Tell me what had you so distant today. I know I don’t know you, but you were much more animated at the barbeque. Well, in the bathroom at least.”

I sighed, “Yes well, you put Jasper in a bad mood. If I’m not mistaken, it looked as if you were doing it on purpose.”

“Me? What could I possibly have done to put him in a bad mood? I’d never even met you two,” he *tried* to sound innocent.

“And for the record,” I said declaratively, “I *do not* find you attractive.”

Cue Bella blushing. “Oh really? May I ask why you feel the need to tell me this?”

He was being playful; I so wasn’t in the mood, “Maybe because your brother-in-law felt the need to tell me so. Which I don’t appreciate. And you shouldn’t be disrespecting your fiancée like that.”

He sighed, “Okay, I’m sorry. I *did* say that to Ben. In my defense, I thought you were beautiful.”

My heart stopped. *Gah! Ass!* I hated that my body reacted to him at all, “That’s... nice.”

Edward laughed, “You could say thank you, it is a pretty universal response to a compliment.”

“Right. Yes. Thank you. Is that all?”

He sighed again, “Okay I get it. No small talk. No compliments. Fine. So tell me Bella, why did you tell Jasper to go back to Washington?”

Uh.....

“How do you know that I-”

“Because you said so. At lunch, before my sister failed to covertly cover for you. I know Peter Whitlock’s company, and I know who Jasper Whitlock is. There’s no way in hell he would need to go home for work. You sent him home, I want to know why,” now he was being short and rude. And to the point, geez.

“Wow, you really are a lawyer aren’t you?”

“Funny. While you’re at it, why don’t you tell me why he was here at all? Considering my family was sent an invitation to his wedding. The one where he married Alice Brandon. If I’m not mistaken, that was less than half a year ago. There’s no public record of divorce. You’re a smart girl Bella, what’s going on?”

The fuck...

“How the hell do you know all that?” I was breathless. I *never* in a million years would have thought I’d be having this conversation. “Your mother didn’t say anything about a wedding invitation-”

“Yes, well, she wouldn’t want to embarrass you Bella.”

“Oh,” I said quietly. Of course she wouldn’t, Esme Cullen didn’t have a mean bone in her body.

“Look,” he sighed, “I don’t want to embarrass you either. But I do want to help, if I can. It sounds like you’ve got yourself into some deep waters. I can be a friendly ear, if you’d like...”

He sounded so... *nice*. Not like the Edward Cullen I knew thus far. Did I want to talk to him though? I mean... I was *sort of* attracted to him. Okay, I was *very* attracted to him; I’d admitted that much to myself. But... he was engaged, so he was safe right?

Doesn’t seem to matter to you whether the guy is taken or not.

I sighed. Time to end this phone call, “Thanks Edward, really but-”

“Don’t say no because of him,” he interrupted me. “If *you* want to say no to me, by all means do. But don’t say no because of something said or done with him. You need to talk to someone. Ang says you aren’t talking to her, except for greetings and pleasantries. Ben says you talk to him in therapy, but he feels you just need a friend to vent to. That’s all I’m offering. I’m a good listener Bella, promise.”

Ugh.

“I’m just... I don’t... I mean... You don’t even *know* me. Why?”

“Selfish reasons. I’m hoping maybe one day, you’ll let me vent to you,” he said jokingly.

“Edward, if you need to talk-”

“No, angel, this is you we’re talking about. My session can be next time. Now, lay it on me.”

It’s reason enough to end this call that my heart skipped when he called me angel.

I’ll never know why I didn’t end the phone call either. I just... he was right. I *needed* to talk. Once I started, I just kept going. He never interrupted, always waiting until I paused to ask questions. And his questions sounded different than others. Like he was asking in his lawyer-non-biased-gathering-all-the-facts voice. He never offered advice. He just... let me vent.

That was the first night I talked to Edward Cullen. It most certainly wouldn’t be the last.

12. Drops of Jupiter

Massive apologies to everyone still reading this. ^^; I said one day between posts and it's been over a week now. Just, that writer's block? Kinda hit.. I was just... stuck. And I still don't really like this chapter but I didn't want to sit on it anymore. It was pissing me off too much. Thanks to everyone who is still reading! I'm starting on the next chapter rightfuckingnow.

Stephenie Meyer still owns these characters!

La Popular is a Mexican bakery in Abilene, Texas. I was born and raised on their fewd! So good!

Can you imagine no love, pride, deep-fried chicken,

Your best friend always sticking up for you... even when I know you're wrong,

Can you imagine no first dance, freeze dried romance, five-hour phone conversation,

The best soy latte that you ever had... and me?

-Drops of Jupiter, Train

"You... are just disgusting! Ugh!"

"Really? You really don't like that? It's so good, you have to try it!"

"No! That's just... eww. I mean like beyond gross! Where the hell did you even come up with that?"

"Late nights and no food, c'mon! You *have* to try it! It's like... a staple or something!"

"Um, no I don't. That's fucking gross. Remind me not to let you ever feed me."

"Seriously? It's good. You just wait; I'll get you to try it one day."

"No, you won't. I'm liable to throw up my dinner just thinking about it."

"Bella," Edward sighed, "Don't talk about throwing up. It makes me want to throw up."

I laughed, "I wish you would throw up. I don't know how you ate that and didn't throw up."

"Bella! Ramen noodles and picante sauce are delicious. One day woman! One day, I'll teach you what's good."

"I don't know that I trust your judgment. I mean, you used to eat ramen noodles and picante sauce, like, voluntarily. That says something about you--"

"Mhm, that I have good taste. You just wait angel. I'll get you to try it one day," he laughed.

We'd been doing this all week long. He'd call, I'd vent, we'd joke, he'd ask questions, I'd answer, he'd tell me some weird story, I'd feel better, we'd say goodnight. It was nice and uncomplicated. I'd even grown *somewhat* immune to him calling me 'angel.' Almost. Somewhat. Kinda.

That's what I told myself anyway, "No, you really won't. College late nights and no food usually resulted in Cheetos or popcorn for me. Something from a fucking vending machine. That's normal. Your shit is just... ew. There's really no other word."

"That's so boring! I mean, Cheetos are good, don't get me wrong, but... Cheetos and picante sauce would be--"

"Don't you *dare* taint my Cheetos!"

"I'm *not*," he breathed a laugh. He was in a really good mood tonight. "I'm only trying to broaden your horizons Bella. You could use some new in your life."

Uh...

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He sighed, "Nothing. Nothing at all. You really shouldn't try to read in to everything I say."

"I don't do that--"

"Yes, you do. All the time."

"I've only been talking to you for like a day or--"

"Three days. That's beside the point. The point is that you read in to everything I say."

"I do *not*--"

"Yes, you do. Look, if you don't want to try ramen noodles and picante sauce, then don't. That's all I'm saying."

"Um, no it isn't," I said stiffly. "You specifically said I needed *new* in my life."

He laughed, “And how isn’t you trying ramen and picante *not* new?”

I huffed, “But that’s not what you meant-”

“Bella, please trust when I say that if I wanted to give advice, other than how good ramen and picante is... Well I would. But then, I’d have to listen to you try to give me advice,” his laughing was really starting to annoy me. “And judging from *any* comment you’ve made to me about my fiancée... Well forgive me for not wanting to put myself through that.”

Totally didn’t understand him and Tanya. I’d not met the woman true, but from what Ben and Angela say about her, I just don’t think I’ll ever want to. He said himself that first night on the phone that ‘he knew what she wanted from him.’ He hadn’t ever explained that so I was drawing my own conclusions on the subject. Which weren’t good. She was a hussy slut bag ho who was sleeping with the boss to get further in life. *Make that marrying the boss.*

But then, that kind of didn’t make sense to me either. I mean, if she was marrying him, why would she care about her position with the company? He’d be inheriting quite a bit upon Esme’s official retirement and the dude was loaded as it was. Why would she care about working when she could just spend his money after they married?

It didn’t matter ultimately because, like with all things in my life, I was too chickenshit to ask Edward about it.

“I don’t really give advice, so you’d be safe there,” I replied honestly. “Don’t think I want you to go spouting off words of fucking wisdom to me or anything though. I don’t want nor do I need advice. I just need... Hell I don’t know what I need.”

“Okay well, no advice meant, but... I think you just need to man up Bella. Once you do, once you talk to at least one of the two... I just think things will be a lot clearer for you.”

“That sounded a fuck of a lot like advice.”

“Yeah, I guess it did,” he sighed. “I guess I’m not as good at this as I hoped I’d be.”

“Yeah, you really aren’t,” I laughed. He growled in response and told me goodnight. Off to lick his wounds I would assume.

~*~

Thursday after work I decided to make my run to the liquor store. Angela asks for tequila, Angela gets tequila. I’m thinking Bella might get wine coolers. Wine coolers are tasty. And not near as likely to leave me incapacitated on Saturday.

And I might not say anything to embarrassing either.

Never failed, I get drunk, I tell secrets. Or stupid things. Embarrassing things. That was bad if Edward Cullen was going to be around. Edward Cullen and my therapist. Edward Cullen and his sister. His sister my dear friend Angela. Yeah, wine coolers it is.

“You should definitely get the watermelon. Especially if you’re gonna be a pussy and not join in the tequila shots.”

I grinned as I turned to face Edward, “What are you doing here?”

He grinned back, “Same as you I’d say. Except my mission is to buy rum. And if Angela wants rum...”

I knew exactly what he meant.

And poor Angela, she’d hid from me for half a day before sulking up to the desk the day after Edward had first called. She’d sputtered out all kinds of apologies, mumbled about it being Ben’s idea and then threw herself on the floor fake-crying out ‘I’m sorry’ over and over. I’d been laughing so hard; I almost forgot to tell her I wasn’t upset.

That surprised me almost more than anything. I wasn’t upset, at all. It felt good to talk to him. He was like a long-lost friend and that was a great comfort to me.

“Yep. I got the tequila already-”

“Oh no you don’t. That,” he pointed to the bottle I was holding in my hand, “is crap. Come, let me educate you.”

I laughed but followed and he pulled a different bottle off proclaiming it to be the best. It sure as fuck better be the best, the damn thing was more than I make in a month. He laughed as my eyes widened, putting the bottle back and pulling out another. He was quite knowledgeable in the area of tequila. I asked him where he learned so much about it, earning a crooked grin and a shrug and a quiet, “College.”

We finally settled on one that wasn’t *exactly* in my price range, but not so much that I would feel guilty buying it. I inquired about his purchase which got me another shrug and a, “I know fuck-all about rum.”

I laughed at that, wondering silently why Angela would send me to get something that was obviously Edward’s favorite shot. Again with the nagging in the back of my head. Sometimes I wish my brain would just... go to sleep or something.

“So, where you off to?”

“Oh! Um... Just home I think, I didn’t eat much at lunch and there are leftovers calling my name,” I laughed.

“Wow. Leftovers. Yum. You should just come to dinner with me, I was gonna go to this Mexican place.”

“La Popular?”

His eyes widened, glazing over a bit, “You said the magic words.”

I laughed, “Your sister and you are so fucking weird.”

“Come eat with me? I hate eating alone and Tanya’s out of town.”

I hesitated, wondering if it was really a good idea. I mean, I guess *technically*... Or I don’t know... Or what about... I looked up to find him smirking at me; he knew what I was thinking, even if I didn’t. I hated that he could read me so easy.

“Um... okay.”

“Gee, don’t sound so excited,” he chuckled. “C’mon, it’s not far, I’ll drive you back to your car later.”

I didn’t think that was a very good idea and was about to voice my concerns when, “Seriously?!”

He looked at me puzzled, “What?”

I burst out laughing, huge deep laughs making my whole body shake and tears spring to my eyes. He looked at me for all of about thirty seconds before joining in with my laughs.

“You drive a fucking Volvo?!”

He stopped laughing.

His face twisted into a grimace, this made me laugh harder, “I mean a Volvo?”

His eyes met mine and his face softened a bit, “What’s wrong with Volvo’s? It’s a very safe care.”

I doubled over, unable to breathe anymore, “It’s for soccer *moms* Edward. They even made a *song* about it!”

He stood and glared at me for a few seconds before rolling his eyes, “Get in the fucking car and shut-up.”

~*~

“Do you put picante sauce on *everything*?”

“Hey woman, don’t knock it,” seriously he’s smothering it over his rice, refried beans, enchiladas, and large spoonfuls into his burritos. It looks a little much. “Besides, it’s Mexican food. What’s Mexican food without picante sauce? I don’t know how they eat it in Washington, but-”

“Actually Jasper started me on Mexican food, and he’s from Texas. Which is like the Mexican food capital of the U.S. So obviously I know how to eat my Mexican food. I don’t know how they eat it in Florida-”

“Yeah because you’re scarfing down those enchiladas like they suck,” he pointed with his fork while stuffing the burrito in his mouth with his other hand. If he weren’t so damn attractive, I’d have to minus some points for his cheeks bulging from the excess of food in them right now. When he’d *finally* chewed all the food in his mouth, he said, “So where did you go to college Bella?”

“UW, where did you go to college? And really it doesn’t matter what you say because I *know* that they had vending machines. So your thing,” I motioned my fork to his food, “with the hot sauce? It’s unacceptable, no matter what it’s on. You can’t even taste the food.”

“I *can* taste the food, thank you very much. And I went to Dartmouth. And they had vending machines. And those vending machines had ramen fucking noodles. They were gross, so I jacked packets of picante from the cafeteria when I’d eat there. You really need to get over this obsession you have with my eating habits Bella, it’s really not healthy.”

I rolled my eyes, “I don’t have an obsession with your eating habits. Just... you know you’re gonna get heartburn and acid reflux and indigestion and from the looks of it you won’t have any taste buds left either. Aren’t you kinda young to be dealing with all that?”

He raised his eyebrow at me, “Are you inquiring my age? Genuine concern, Ms. Swan? I’m touched.”

“Don’t flatter yourself or anything-”

“Oh, I’m not,” he laughed. “I know you a *bit* better than that. I’m thirty, that’s not too old, but yes old enough to worry about those things. Fortunately Prilosec is a miracle. As for my taste buds, you should see Dad; he *douses* everything in black pepper. Like it doesn’t even matter how it’s spiced. Guess I come across my weirdness naturally.”

He winked at me causing me to blush, “Good to know it’s in your genes. You are weird though, for the record.”

“It runs in the family, the weirdness. I mean, you *have* met my family...”

I laughed, “Yeah well you should meet mine sometime.”

“Are you inviting me to meet your parents’ angel?”

More blushing which I tried to cover with my hair. I hated that he did this to me, “That might be kind of hard. Well, you could meet my Mom, Renee. She lives here, and she’s the real weirdness. Like honest to goodness. She’s one of those people that never gets bored with herself,” I laughed, feeling a bit more light-

hearted now just talking about something familiar and not depressing with him. I told him all about Charlie and Renee, their split, my childhood with Charlie, growing up with the Chief as a Dad. Renee's quirks and Charlie's fierce loyalty. "I guess I kind of grew up with the best of both worlds, kind of. I was mainly with Charlie, only visited Renee. Most of my traits I guess I get from him."

"And so your Mom annoys you?"

"No, she doesn't annoy me," I said quickly. I looked up to him catching his smirk and raised eyebrow. I rolled my eyes, "Okay sometimes she annoys me. Only really now because she acts all-knowing and doesn't let you answer questions."

"Yeah but isn't that kind of every mom? They just think they know what's best for you?"

"Why? Does Esme do that to you?"

He chuckled, "All the time. I think it's ingrained into you when you give birth."

"Yeah, but Renee wasn't ever like that before."

"Maybe she just knew you needed her to actually be a mother," he looked down, "I mean, you weren't in the best of shape when you moved here. From what you've told me."

I nodded, looking down as well. I felt tears prick at my eyes and I *so* didn't want to cry here with him. I liked to reserve my crying for when I was alone, at home. Holding the pillow with Jasper's scent and trying to figure out how to fix everything. I missed him and I wanted him here with me. But I didn't know how to ask him for that. I hadn't returned his phone calls and he was still calling me everyday. Chickenshit, like I said. I was sick of my behavior and I wanted so much to just buck up and do the damn thing already.

"Do you love him Bella?" My head snapped back up to look at Edward. His face was level with mine but his eyes were averted to the side. His hands were clasped together in front of him and I could see the knuckles were white from gripping so hard.

It was the first time anyone had outright asked me that question since the blow-up between myself and Jasper. I knew without having to think that I loved him. I'd always loved him. I just didn't know if I was ready to forgive him yet. He had and was trying so hard to earn my forgiveness. He wasn't giving up on me. It took me a minute to answer. When I did, my voice was almost a whisper, "Yes, I've always loved him."

Edward nodded immediately, clearing his throat, "I think you should tell him. You should give him his reason to keep trying Bella. It sounds like he loves you too."

I nodded, this conversation had abruptly turned uncomfortable.

"Well, let's get you back to your car angel."

~*~

In the car, on the way home I decided it was time to do something. Anything. Edward was right, I needed to let Jasper know how I felt about him, let him know I *didn't* want him to give up on us. I decided to go home, shower, change into comfy clothes and call my man. *The time to hesitate is through.*

I was almost giddy, thinking about calling him as I sat my drink down and readied my cell phone for the call. I didn't know what else to tell him but that I loved him but I wasn't going to worry about that. My shower had been heavenly, knowing what I was about to do and my clothes felt even more comfortable than normal. I giggled, fucking giggled *again* as I hit the send button. It rang once, twice, three times, four, five, and then I heard the click signaling that it had been answered. I drew in a deep breath preparing to tell him how much I loved him-

"*This is Jasper; don't know why I'm not answering, but I'll get back to you right quick,*" followed by the noise signaling to leave a message. My heart dropped in disappointment.

You really don't have anything to be disappointed about Bella. You haven't been answering his calls for awhile now.

I sighed, "Hey Jasper, it's Bella... Um..." here comes the chickenshit, "I'll just try to call you back tomorrow, I guess."

And I hung up. And then I hit my head with my cell phone.

A thought popped into my head out of nowhere. He didn't call today. I checked my phone to be sure. Nope, last call from him was at eleven last night. He didn't answer his phone.

The *last* time he didn't call me...

A smile broke out on my face. I knew it might be stupid, hell he could just be in bed and couldn't hear his phone to answer it? But then why didn't he call? My head said he was sick of me not answering. My heart said he was stuck on an airplane, or in an airport, flying to me.

My body responded to my heart. I was on my feet in two flat. Running around my apartment with cleaning products, scrubbing everything top to bottom. I started a load of laundry, frowning as I took the sheets and pillowcases that still smelled like him faintly and threw them in to wash. I quickly reassured myself that they would smell like him again, very soon.

It really didn't take long to clean up, I didn't have that much once it was out of boxes. I sat back on the couch, leaning back and turning the television on for noise. I closed my eyes and thought of his face. I couldn't wait for him to be here.

Eventually boredom led me to pay attention to the television. It was getting late, almost midnight. I wished he would just get here already.

So stupid Bella.

Grr. I wish I could shut that fucking voice up. I got lost in the episode of *Gilmore Girls* that was on. The friendship between Rory and Lorelai was just so damn cute. And unrealistic from my point of view. You couldn't be best friends with your mom, could you? Still, it was nice to think about.

Alice and I used to have *Gilmore Girls* nights. I teared up again thinking about it. We'd put on our jammies and make popcorn and eat chocolate and drink sodas for the whole hour straight. We would skip dinner, filling up on the junk food. It was the best night of the week. Afterward, we'd put on some music and cuddle on my bed. Talking, sometimes crying about how much our mothers *weren't* Lorelai *Gilmore*. We'd always find something to laugh at to cheer us back up. Those nights, we were sisters in every sense of the word.

I think... it's time.

I picked my cell phone back up, scrolling through my contacts slowly. Again, it wasn't that I knew what to say, it was just *time*. I hit send listening for the ringing and on the third, it picked up.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded hurried, out of breath. *Exactly like always*. I choked a sob at her voice, realizing now how much I underestimated her presence in my life.

"Alice," I sputtered, my voice cracking on the two syllables.

"Bella?" Her voice had quieted very much by the time she answered me. "Bella? Is that you?"

Deep breath, "Yes, yes it's me."

A sob burst through the line, breaking my heart, "I didn't know if I'd ever hear from you again."

I sucked in a sharp breath, tears thick in my throat as well. "Yeah... I... I didn't know if you would *want* to hear from me again," I choked out. "I was... *Gilmore Girls* was on... I missed you so much."

She laughed quietly, still crying throughout, "Damn that show. I still wish for a Lorelai..."

I didn't know what else to say, I hadn't even thought of how her mother would have reacted to any of this. She probably was smug, letting Alice know that she'd *always* known what was best for her. Rubbing salt in open wounds. For the first time in a long time, I allowed myself to remember that Alice *really did* love Jasper. That *we'd* broken her heart. Then I was rambling, "I'm so sorry Alice, for everything. I didn't... I couldn't even think straight. I *never* meant for any of this to happen. God. I can't even imagine what all of this has been like for you. I love you so much, I would do anything to make this right. Just tell me what to do. I'm so sorry, I didn't even think about what would be happening with your parents. I was blind and stupid and I want to make it right. I'll do anything, I swear. Just tell me. I'll even go back to Forks and take all the names your parents want to call me and *you!* *Oh my God!* You! There's probably so much you want to call me! Please just... whatever, whatever you need."

"Bella-"

"So sorry Alice, really. That's why I left, I should have never come between you two-"

"You didn't Bella-"

"Shouldn't have ever bothered you again, can't blame you for hating me-"

"I *don't* hate you Bella-"

"Just tell me to go away and I'll never bother you ever again. I'll do whatever to make things okay for you-"

"Bella come on-"

"I can even talk to Jasper, tell him how stupid he's being, get you two back to where you should be-"

"You *can't* be serious Bella-"

"Don't care about anything else but making things right with you Alice, I was *so* stupid. *So, so* stupid-"

"Bella stop!" Her voice finally rang through. I stopped sucking in a deep breath. Thinking back over everything I'd just said to her. *Yep, you just told her you'd give Jasper back. Told her you'd give him up.* Oh God. My heart hurt thinking about the words. "Bella, I'm only going to say this once, and then we're going to *talk*. I do not, nor do I *ever* wish to reconcile with Jasper Whitlock. You have nothing to do with that."

What? What did she mean? *Of course* I had something to do with that. He left her for me. What was she talking about?

"Alice," my voice cracking still at her name, "forgive me, please. But, I'm not sure I follow what you mean. I *do* have something to do with you two split-"

"No. You don't. Trust me."

"But-"

"Bella," she sighed, "just shut-up and listen for a second, okay?"

I nodded, before realizing she couldn't see me, "Yeah, okay."

"Thank God. I swear, once you start talking it's like *impossible* to get you to shut the fuck up. Second only to *actually* getting you to talk," she laughed lightly.

She seemed to realize herself quickly though, as her laughter stopped abruptly, “Okay. I want to make sure you listen to me. I only want to say all this crap once, and then I want us to forget we ever had to have this conversation, okay?”

“Um... okay?”

“Okay. So listen, when I wrote you that letter... I *knew* Bella. I knew he felt strongly about you. He had this sad look on his face when he came with me to see you. You weren’t there and his face was just... *devastated*. That look, it didn’t leave his face. We stayed together for two weeks after we got back from our honeymoon. I would overhear him on the phone, talking to your mom. Talking to you. I knew he’d made his decision. I knew he wanted to be with you. Not gonna lie, that hurt. Especially since I thought neither of you thought enough of me to say shit to me about it. Especially since I thought my best friend was betraying me with my husband. I was torn when I wrote that letter. I *really* didn’t like you when I wrote it, but I still loved you. I wanted you to tell me. I wanted him to tell me. So I wrote what I did, and didn’t hear shit from you-”

“Wait, Alice,” she sighed, annoyed at the interruption. “I’m sorry, it’s just... You said you overheard him talking to me? I didn’t talk to him at all until after-”

“If you’d be quiet I’d tell you the rest,” she said shortly. I shut-up, sucking in a breath and trying to figure out what she thought she knew. I didn’t want her hurting over things that were unnecessary. Thinking that me and Jasper were going behind her back was *not* what happened and I wanted her to know that. “I know it wasn’t you Bella.”

“Then what-”

“It’s sort of the reason we split. You were the other part. I thought maybe you could be the one to straighten him out, so I didn’t say anything to anyone. I let Rose and my parents and everyone else think that you were the reason our marriage was over and I’m sorry for putting that all on you-”

“I’m sorry but I’m really not following-”

“Bella! He *was* cheating on me! That’s what I’m saying!”

“No Alice! I swear to you we didn’t talk or *anything* until *after*-”

“I know,” she sighed. I was thoroughly confused now. If she thought he was cheating on her... I gasped, “Yeah. He *was* cheating. I caught him. Well, caught *them*,” she spat. “I knew then that it wasn’t you he’d been talking to. The first thing I wanted to do was call and *cry* to you. I mean... I’d only ever been with Jasper. I’d only ever loved him. He’s the only man that’s ever broken my heart.”

I couldn’t believe what she’d just told me. *Jasper cheated on her!* And that he had the *audacity* to be so unmoving in his belief that I was cheating on him... I couldn’t think about that right now. Right now was for Alice.

“I don’t even know what to say to you... I can’t tell you how sorry I am for you Alice. That I wasn’t there for you-”

“It’s fine Bella. I’m fine now. I’ve had awhile to get over my husband. Not nearly long enough, but it’s a start. And I think I’m going to be just fine.”

It was quiet then, both of us lost in our heads. Reliving moments of our lives spent with Jasper. I *couldn’t believe* he did that to Alice! I guess I should have been more guilt-ridden than anything, seeing as *I’d* done that to Alice too... I wished that I could be there for her. Hold her, comfort her, turn back time and be the friend she needed.

“Is there anything I can do Alice? I know that’s not what you want probably, but I would do anything to help you over this hurdle.”

She didn’t answer for awhile. I thought my insecurities were confirmed, she didn’t want anything to do with me. I hoped that wasn’t it though, I hoped she was just trying to figure out what punishment to give me.

“Do you? Do you love him Bella?”

Funny how not three hours ago at dinner with Edward, I knew the answer to that question without a doubt. I wasn’t sure anymore.

“Let me rephrase,” she sighed. “Did you love him before you talked to me?”

I took a deep breath, “I thought I did, yes.”

“And what I told you has made you rethink that?”

“I think so,” I said slowly.

“That he cheated on me or that things you were so sure of aren’t what you thought they were?”

“Both, I think.”

“He accused you of cheating, didn’t he? That’s why he called me in that panic that night isn’t it?”

I sucked in a sharp breath, I hadn’t even thought that much into it. My anger rose, “I can’t *believe* he called you! Out of all the people... didn’t deserve you... bastard... so sorry Alice... I’m going to kill him!”

“Whoa, slow down there little girl. He was right to call me,” a noise of protest came from me, “No Bella, I’m serious. If he hadn’t, Rose wouldn’t have come. If Rose hadn’t come... well I just can’t imagine what would have happened. And he’d probably still be there. And you’d probably have forgiven him a lot easier. Whitlock charm and what not.”

“Why didn’t you come?” My voice was small but that was to be expected.

"I... couldn't Bella. I'm sorry for that, but it was best to send Rose. As worried about as I was... I just couldn't see him and you. Together. I'm not ready for that, I'm sorry."

We were both crying now, for each other, I hoped. "Alice?"

"Yeah," she cried.

"Do you... hate me now?"

"No, Bella. I don't hate you. I don't even blame you actually."

"How can you not?"

"Because I've had time to rationalize everything. Because *he* messed up enough to make me *want* to go. You didn't have anything to do with that really. You even moved all the way across the country to try to hide from what you felt," she cried louder at that. "I miss you Bella, so much."

"Oh God, I miss you more than you know Alice," I bawled to her. My voice came out sounding like something out of Charlie Brown and it made me chuckle. Which in turn, made Alice giggle. And just like that we were magnets again. She told me about all she'd been doing in Seattle. She'd gotten a job as a personal shopper at Barney's in downtown Seattle. She of course loved it and had ten regular customers as of today. They loved her, calling her often, keeping her busy. That was good, Alice always needed to be kept busy. She'd found an apartment, not *too* far away from downtown. She said the rent was moderately expensive but she was doing well at her job now so she didn't worry much.

I told her about Cul de Sac, she was ecstatic about my working for Esme. She said that woman was *fabulous* and I had to agree. I told her all about Esme and Carlisle's house, how nice they both were. I told her about Angela and Ben and she was happy that I'd found them both but sad that I'd gone to therapy. I told her how much better I had been doing with it though, and that helped her to deal with it. I even told her about Edward, albeit reluctantly.

"Whoa there! You mean to tell me that you found man-candy hotter than that dick of a husband and boyfriend of ours?" My heart stopped for a second but then Alice was howling with laughter. "Oh my God! I'm sorry but that was *so* funny! Can I call him that from now on?"

I had to join in, "I don't know how he'd feel about it but--"

"I could give a fuck less what Jasper thinks about it. He's not my favorite person you know."

"Yeah, I know."

Sobering thoughts suck. I had decided that it would be a long time before I freely mentioned him to Alice again, "Sooooo, spill Bella. I can practically *hear* you blushing. A guy hot enough to make you forget everything and anyone, pisses you off, renders you speechless, is *nice after all....* What's not to go for? Seriously. Your feelings for asshole aside, don't make the same mistake I did. You *should* try dating before you give your heart over to him for good Bella."

"Okay aside from- whatever with Jasper- Edward is *engaged*. And if you tell me that it doesn't matter if the guy is taken or not I *will* hurt you--"

"Wait, what?"

I took another deep breath, "He said that to me, while he was accusing me of cheating. He said that it didn't seem to matter to me if the guy was engaged or *married*--"

"That *dick*! He better hope he doesn't run into me anytime soon! I'm liable to not leave him with his balls intact! I can't *believe* him!"

And that opened the conversation up to Jasper again. As much as I didn't want it to. I told her all about that night, what he'd said, that he'd left, my falling, the next day... I told her everything, as hard as it was I got it all out for her. She was completely silent throughout making me worry about her reaction when she did give it.

"Bella, I don't know how to say this but..."

I sighed, "Just say it, doesn't matter if I like it or not. I probably need to hear whatever it is."

"Bella, he was... *never* like that with me. We would fight, and he would threaten to leave, sometimes he *would* leave but..." she sighed heavily. I figured he would walk out on her sometimes, I'd heard Rose say that was what he was good at. "This, this doesn't sound like him at all Bella. The irrational, almost volatile way he sounds... He was never possessive of me like that either. We fought over his issues with trust, yes. But he never accused me of looking or acting on attractions to someone else..."

"So? Every relationship is different Alice--"

"I don't think you should see him anymore Bella."

"What? Why? Because we fought? You guys fought--"

"Not like that Bella."

"And?"

She sighed, "Okay, just, I don't want to argue with you. I just got you back. It's just... promise me you'll really think about it before you make a decision about him? Know that I'll support whatever you decide, but I don't think you should see him anymore. It just doesn't sound like him. I think I know him pretty well Bella..."

She did know him well. I knew that. She knew him better than anyone else. I trusted her. I would listen to her.

“I promise.”

13. Bad Things

So, I really don't want to start out every chapter apologizing for not posting when I said I would, so! I'm going to try and be more realistic about it. I'm going to set a firm posting schedule for every Monday and Friday for right now. I know that's a lot more time between posts than every day, but I just don't want to keep disappointing everyone with not being on time. I'm CST so it's just after one in the morning on Monday as I post this chapter. So next chapter will be on Friday. Also, I *might* post between those times, ya know if the mood strikes me and I go on a writing spree or something. But yeah, I'm really sorry for not following through, please forgive me.

Thanks to all of you who have reviewed and those of you who keep reading this story of mine. I'm still having so much fun writing it. I hope you all are still enjoying it.

These characters still belong to Stephenie Meyer.

When you came in the air went out,

And every shadow filled up with doubt,

I don't know who you think you are,

But before the night is through,

I wanna do bad things to you.

-Bad Things, Jace Everett

The morning after talking to Alice was amazing. I woke up feeling better than I had in so long. Her place in my life *had* been seriously taken for granted by me for so long. It was like a weight had been lifted. The sleep that I woke from was the best sleep I'd had in *months*. Even when Jasper was here, the sleep wasn't this good.

Ugh. Jasper.

I was just completely thrown on the subject of Jasper now. I couldn't *believe* that he had cheated on Alice... before me. There were so many different emotions running through my head on the subject. I felt... betrayed- for both myself and Alice. I knew I probably didn't have the right to feel that way, but I did. I was hurt- again for the both of us. I mean, how could he spout off to me how much he loved me and that he decided to leave Alice *for me*, and then just randomly cheat on her?

And who the hell did he cheat on her with? I realize that I should have tried to get more information from Alice on the subject, but I just didn't have it in me to make her relive any of that anymore. She was in a good place now, she didn't deserve to have this all dredged up again. At least not before their divorce proceedings. Which were in two weeks. I like how Jasper failed to mention that to me in *any* of his messages.

I wanted to know who the hell it was. It was bugging the shit out of me. And why didn't he tell me? I felt like maybe he just didn't want me to distrust him right off the bat. And I get that, I do. But he really should have let me know what happened *from him*. I mean if he wanted to be in a relationship with me, honesty is key right?

Yeah fucking right.

Our first fucking argument was about *me* keeping a goddamn call to his *sister* from him! And he had the nerve to keep the fact that he cheated on Alice, his wife and my best friend, from me! After he went on about not ever wanting to come between us. *Ugh*. I was so pissed at him on so many fucking levels it wasn't even funny. I didn't want to talk to him but I wanted some answers. I would worry about this tomorrow. Today, today is for Bella to bliss out on having her best friend back in her life.

Today is going to be a good day. I knew it was going to be a good day when I woke up and got confirmation when I strolled into work. Angela and Edward were standing at the front desk, obviously waiting on me.

"Well, well, what do we have here? You two better get to work before I tell Esme that you're slacking," I laughed as I rounded the desk to put away my belongings.

Angela clapped her hand down on the counter, "Uh uh! Missy! You went to La Popular without me! How *dare* you!"

I laughed at her, "Take that up with your brother. I was just along for the ride."

She narrowed his eyes at his smirk, "You told me she suggested it!"

"She did."

"I did not!" I gasped.

"Yes, you did. I said 'some Mexican place.' You said La Popular."

"Way to twist my words Edward," I grumbled. Angela was in full on pout mode as I turned to her, "I'm sorry Angela, swear. Next time it'll just be us girls okay?"

Her face broke into smile, "Shoot yes! I love girl nights! We can have margaritas and talk about how awful our men are!"

My smile faltered, “Oh, uh, yeah. Sounds like fun.”

Edward obviously noticed my change of expression as he asked Angela about some pointless file. She rolled her eyes at me as she walked off to her office to retrieve said file. “Okay, tell me what the hell happened.”

I shook my head, “Nothing happened, swear. I’m just-”

“Bullshit. Tell me. Did you talk to him last night?”

“No, I called him yes, but he didn’t answer,” it didn’t escape my attention that I sounded decidedly dejected as I said this. I wish my fucking mind could make up whether it’s mad or not at him. “I talked to Alice though.”

His eyes widened, “Holy shit! What happened?”

I smiled, “We got some things worked out. It was really nice to talk to her again. I didn’t realize how much I missed her.”

“So she was happy to hear from you then?”

“Who was happy to hear from you again? Here’s the file,” Angela cut in as she walked back to the desk. She gasped, “Oh my God! You talked to Alice didn’t you?!”

We both stared at her like she had two heads. “Are you serious right now? Bella could have been talking about her mother. You say Alice and she’s liable to break down! God Ang,” Edward bit at her.

Angela looked immediately guilty, “Bella, I’m soo sorry! Swear! It was just a knee jerk reaction and I didn’t-”

“Angela he was joking,” I blurted out before bursting into laughter. Edward joined in but stopped suddenly when he saw the look Angela was giving him. “And yes, I talked to Alice. You were right, don’t listen to the jerk over here.”

Angela narrowed her eyes at Edward, “You realize I’m gonna make you pay for that tonight right?”

Edward coughed, “Yeah um... see ya then!”

We both watched him hightail it out of there like his house was on fire. It was quite funny actually, how afraid of his sister he was. “Is he that afraid of Esme too?”

Angela nodded, “Yeah, I think he carries an extra pair of pants around Mom though. He’s not that afraid of me yet,” she winked at me. “Sooo, oh my God Bella! You talked to Alice! How was it?”

I could feel my face soften, thinking about Alice, “It was awesome actually. I really missed her. I wish I hadn’t waited so long to call her.”

Angela was doing some kind of jumpy, limpy, dance thing in front of the desk, “That’s so exciting! What’d you guys talk about?!”

“Um... lots of things actually. We got a lot cleared up, thank goodness. There’s a lot more to talk about but... I think we’re gonna be just fine.”

She nodded and then looked down, I knew what she was going to ask. Her voice was low and her eyes roaming to make sure we weren’t overheard, “Did you talk about Jasper?”

“Yes, we did. And that’s a conversation for another time. Please understand and know I will tell you all about it but... I’m kind of riding on an Alice high right now and I don’t want to come down,” I laughed.

“I understand completely. Just so long as you tell Alice that she better come to visit soon! I wanna know who held my place before me! ‘Kay?”

I nodded to her and we made plans for lunch then. It was nice and I’m sure that she could tell a difference in me today. Our conversation was light from start to finish and neither of us really watched what we said for fear of hurting the other. Well, Angela didn’t have to watch what she said for once. She didn’t ever care what I said and told me I was a ‘hoot and a holler.’ She made sure I’d gotten the tequila for the night so I told her about Edward educating me. She rolled her eyes and called him a ‘tequila snob.’ When I left work, I couldn’t wait for tonight.

That feeling only increased when I returned home to find it, still, blissfully Jasper-free. He hadn’t even called me all day and for that I was thankful too. I just didn’t want to burst my bubble today. I wanted to enjoy what was left of it damnit.

I showered, shaved, fixed my hair and as I was picking out what clothes to wear my phone chimed. I nervously walked to it, hoping it wasn’t Jasper.

I new text message.

I looked at the number and let out a sigh of relief when I saw it was from Alice. Grinning I opened the message and then laughed at what she’d written.

You better have fun tonight wench! And enjoy that delicious man! (I so Googled Edward Cullen, will call when I can snap my jaw back in place.) He’s gorgeous! Lucky! Don’t think so hard Bella!

And thus I decided to leave my thinking cap at home, along with my wine coolers and have a fucking blast tonight.

~*~

Did I ever mention that when we graduated from college, Alice took it upon herself to categorize my entire wardrobe? True story. She spent two days arranging every piece of clothing by color, material, style, prevalence to event, and of course, season. After she took a picture of each individual piece of

clothing, she set them into outfits. And then she photographed those. Along with underwear and shoes. So really, it was no surprise when not five minutes after my first text message she sent another message with a picture of what to wear.

So of course I wore what she told me too. Alice has ways of knowing if you don't do what she told you to. I knew by now that she'd probably actually already procured and used Angela's phone number. Angela lied for crap. *Angela would so rat me out to Alice.*

"Bella! Oh my God you look awesome! Come, come in," Angela gushed as she ushered me into her house. I eyed her suspiciously as she was texting as I entered.

When I heard the snap of a picture, I knew I was right. "Tell Alice I wore the stupid clothes!"

Angela laughed, "How'd you know?!"

"I know Alice."

"Well then, here you tell her," Angela said as she led me into the kitchen. I loved Angela and Ben's house. It was obviously new, which typically meant expensive, but not overdone at all. Everything you could want or need and it still felt like a home. "Besides I need to get these stuffed jalapenos in the oven before people start coming."

"People? I thought it was just the four of us?"

She shook her head, "No, and I never said that so no guilt trips. You assumed it was just the four of us because you hate asking questions," she laughed.

Huh. Guess I did, "So then, who all is coming?"

"You, me, Ang, Eddie, couple of friends from school you'll like, and Felix and Gianna, cause Ang has a big mouth," Ben said as he entered the kitchen. "So what's this? You finally called her and you don't think I deserve a phone call about it? I'm hurt Bella."

I shrugged, "I figured your wife and her big mouth would keep you in the loop."

Angela froze and turned around slowly to face us. Her eyes looked ready to bug out of their sockets until she noticed both of us trying not to laugh. "That is *not* funny! Why is everyone being so mean to me today?"

"Aww honey," Ben walked over and pulled her into a hug. Her expression immediately changed from upset to enamored of her husband. These two were so adorable.

"Oh God, don't tell me it's gonna be one of *those* nights," Edward walked into the kitchen looking absolutely delicious. Jeans, a t-shirt and Adidas never looked so good on a man. Seriously he shouldn't be allowed to dress like that. "Oh shit, are those stuffed jalapenos? Dude you know what's really good on those? Picante sau-"

"No! You are not putting shit on my food Edward! I threw out all the picante sauce when you said you were coming over. We're not even having chips because I have no hot sauce to serve with them," Angela huffed.

I laughed, "Told you. You're fucking weird."

He turned his gaze on me immediately causing me to blush. His eyes raked from my shoes all the way up to my hair before focusing on my cheeks, then my eyes, "My my Bella, don't we look nice? What are we all dressed up for?"

I looked down, "Um... nothing. Alice just likes to dress me, that's all."

"Well she obviously wanted you to look nice for a reason," it did *not* escape my attention that Angela was blushing as well. "And please let Alice know that she succeeded. In every way imaginable."

Buck up Bella.

"Well I should hope so, she's a personal shopper for Barney's. She obviously knows what she's doing."

Edward just stood there, with his gaze fixed intently on me and God help me I stared right back. I really couldn't help it, the man was casting a spell on me. The doorbell rang though, making me jump and Angela laugh. Ben clapped Edward on the back before dragging him along to answer the door with him. Edward just smirked and winked at me.

Sweet... Jesus that man is hot.

I've of course noticed this before, I don't know why it was such a predominant thought in my head tonight but it was. His eyes just lit me up and I couldn't help my reaction to him. It reminded me of the first day I met him. When we were in the bathroom and I couldn't look away from him. I didn't know if I should be thinking about him this way or not but damnit-

"Nu uh Bella. Alice told me to make sure you had fun tonight. She *specifically* told me not to let you get lost in your head. Which you're doing. Stop, now. Come meet everyone," Angela was smirking at me. I never noticed how much her lips and Edwards' were alike. Damnit.

People kept arriving for the next fifteen or twenty minutes, stopping with Edward and Angela's cousin Felix and his wife Gianna. Who didn't like me. She *did* seem to like Edward though, taking every chance possible to eye fuck him or smile seductively, usually resulting in Edward hightailing it across the room. I felt kind of bad for him. But it was too funny to put a stop to.

Three of Ben's friends from college were there, Sam, his wife Emily and her brother Jared. They were all incredibly easygoing and Emily struck up a

conversation with everyone in the room flawlessly. It was obvious why Ben was friends with the three. They all had his laid back personality and were so easy to get along with. Emily even came to help Angela and me get all the food finished and laid out while Ben and Edward finished setting up for the games.

There was also another couple there, James and Victoria. Angela told me that James worked for Cul de Sac as well and was one of Edward's good friends. He'd married Victoria earlier in the year and when Angela met her it was instant friendship. Victoria was incredibly friendly, offering assistance to the guys and girls alike. She said she just wanted to help wherever she was needed. That earned her smiles all around and a hug from her husband, who whispered something in her ear, causing her to blush.

"They're still newlyweds, give them time," Edward whispered in my ear. I didn't see him come up beside me, I'd been standing back, trying to stay out of the way since all the food was out but they weren't quite settled in the living room. Edward was leaning against the bar behind me, his body positioned toward me, "They're not always this touchy-feely."

Did he really need to stand that close to me? Better question, did he really need to *whisper* in my ear? I mean, I could feel his nose graze the shell of my ear each time he leaned in.

Breathe Bella, "Some couples stay that way you know." My voice was shaky, and was that his hand touching my back? "Look at Angela and Ben. Or you parents."

Yep he was definitely touching my back. I could feel his fingertips grazing over the thin material of my tank, "Oh, I know. I definitely know that some couples don't change." He ran his nose behind my ear and I felt the faintest pressure below it, was that his lips? "I'm just not convinced that James and Vicky are that. Yet."

His hand stopped its grazing and rested on my ribs, partially on my back and partially on my side. He squeezed gently, pressing his lips below my ear again. "Are you happy you talked to Alice, angel?"

I nodded, closing my eyes and trying to catch my breath. The motion had his lips trailing along my neck. Was he really doing this? At his sister's house in front of so many people who knew him *and* his family *and* his *fiancée*?

"Edward you have to stop," I whispered.

His lips stopped, but he didn't let me go, "Why?"

I shook my head, trying desperately to clear it. *Was he serious?* "Tanya?"

He sighed, "Trust me. She won't care."

Well that... just... pisses me off. I jerked away from him, surprising him. His eyes were half-lidded, he obviously wasn't expecting me to pull away. I narrowed my eyes at him, "Yeah? Well I do. So don't offer me up these cryptic fucking messages about Tanya. I don't care what arrangement you have with her, you still have it. Which means what you were just doing? Is. Cheating. And I'm *not* gonna be that for you."

I turned to walk away but he grabbed me and spun me to face him. I was pulled right up against him, for the first time and God help me, he felt so fucking incredible. "All you have to do is ask about her. Did you ever think that maybe I'm waiting for you to build up the courage just to do that? That maybe that's why I haven't said much at all about her?" He was breathing hard and I could fucking *taste* him. "No Bella, because we've been spending the past week trying to talk you through a *failed* fucking relationship. I'm so fucking sick of trying to sound objective for you about him. He's an asshole Bella. No one should *ever* talk to you like he did. No one should *ever* treat you like he did. You deserve better. And you fucking know it. So fucking forgive me for thinking that maybe something had changed. Since you talked to Alice."

Oh, okay. "So since I talked to Alice, you assume that I'm ready to just give him up? You know where you fucked up in your logic Edward? Regardless of whether *Jasper* and I are still together or not... *You* are still fucking engaged. To Tanya. So fuck you."

"Yeah, that's right Bella. Hide behind what you feel safe with. Why can't you just admit that you *are* attracted to me and-"

"Guys! Geez, drama much? Drama free night, sorry," Angela graciously broke us up. "C'mon let's play."

I made it a point for the rest of the night to stay away from him. It was actually quite easy to do. Ben kept him pretty busy losing at poker, each hand making Edward bet more only to lose again. On my side of the room, Angela was feeding me shots of tequila and rum and cokes. I was feeling good actually.

So good that I tried to engage Gianna in conversation. Don't ask me what brought *that* on, I couldn't tell you. I'm going to blame it all on being drunker than hell. Tequila is definitely my friend. I will only say this about that conversation, that bitch is no nicer when I'm drunk than when I'm sober.

Oh well.

Victoria and James were freaking hilarious when drunk though. James was keen to tell everyone as many embarrassing stories about the Cullen children as he could remember, eventually leading to him being tackled. By Angela. Victoria almost busted a gut laughing about how her husband got beat up by a *girl*. Then she told us stories about her job. She was a lepidopterist, a mouthful of a job. Emily asked her what the heck that was and we were treated to an entirely too long definition that basically meant she studies butterflies and moths. She worked at the nature center close to downtown and loved it. In my hazy drunken brain I only thought it was *mildly Silence of the Lambs* disturbing.

We were all having a blast, most of the alcohol and food was gone and we were just sitting around the living room now. We'd cleaned up the card tables a bit earlier in exchange for the more comfortable wrap-around sofas in the room. Victoria and James were the first to call it a night, calling a cab and hugging everyone goodnight. I was so engrossed in conversation that I didn't notice until it was too late that it was down to just the four of us again. Angela grabbed my face and made me promise to stay, that she'd make breakfast burritos and we'd veg out all day together. That sounded good to me so I made her that promise. It wasn't until Ben came to scoop Angela up for bed that I realized Edward was also staying the night. He was sitting across the room from me still, but I could feel his eyes on me.

I knew where the extra bedrooms were, I'd stayed here drunk overnight before. So I started to make my way toward them. I didn't know what to say to him, he wanted something from me I couldn't give him. Except right now, I just might. I had enough alcohol in my system to do something *very* stupid. And I would be damned if I put myself in that situation. I was in enough shit as it was.

He didn't say anything as I made my way out of the room and I made my way down the hallway quietly. I could hear Angela and Ben talking and I didn't want to disturb them. Once I made it to the room I stayed in the last time, I kicked off the shoes that Alice had forced me to wear and turned around to close myself in. Imagine my surprise when Edward pushed his way through the door, closing it and locking it behind him.

He was reaching for me as soon as both of his hands were free, pulling me flush against him. "I don't wanna do this tonight angel. I've stayed away from you for about as long as I want to. Don't push me away tonight."

His eyes were on me, looking intently back and forth between my own. I could feel his breath on my lips, making my own tingle. His smell was more intoxicating than any alcohol. Musky and spicy and *man*. I wanted him. He knew it.

"I love him Edward. No matter what is going on with me and him, I still love him," I whispered.

His body sagged a bit at my words, "Just. Just give me tonight Bella. Let me show you what you could have. Let me show you what we could *be*."

Dear God in heaven, please help me.

I looked into his eyes, seeing all the emotions of what he was saying swirling there. I couldn't do this. I shouldn't do this. Jasper and I are still together, aren't we? That didn't matter, because Tanya and Edward were still together. I *wouldn't* be a cheater.

"I can't Edward. I don't know her, but I can't do this to her anyway. Or him. I just--"

And his lips were on mine. I had no fight to put up. Because right as his lips touched mine, I saw everything I ever wanted glaring right at me. I saw that wedding again, with Edward waiting for me. I saw us at home on Sunday morning, reading the newspaper together and feeding each other breakfast. I saw us making love to each other. I saw our kids running in our back yard. I saw Alice and Edward hugging and smiling and calling me over. I saw Charlie patting Edward on the back and pulling us both to him. I saw Renee beaming at the two of us over dinner. I saw Angela and Ben and Esme and Carlisle. I saw *my* family.

I saw things the way they should be. For the first time in my life, I saw how easy everything could be.

And I wanted it. All.

14. Crash Into Me

Wow! The number of people that alerted after the last update just blew me away! I'm incredibly grateful to all of you for giving this story a chance. To those of you who've stuck with me all this time- you guys rock.

Once again, big thanks to ReluctantRomantic. Your reviews are always kind and insightful and just absolutely awesome and encouraging and sure to put a smile on my face. You rock woman!

Stephenie Meyer *still* owns all things Twilight. /sigh

Touch your lips just so I know,

In your eyes, love, it glows so,

I'm bare-boned and crazy... for you,

Oh, and you come crash into me,

Baby, and I come into you.

-Crash Into Me, Dave Matthews Band

Edward laughed against my lips when he realized I wasn't going to resist him. A breathless, panting, *relief-filled* laugh. He pulled back to look into my eyes and I could only imagine what he saw there. I felt drunk on him. I mean, I *was* drunk, but this... *this* was a completely different feeling. My mind was hazy from his taste and his mouth and the feel of his hands holding me to him. Everything else was in sharp focus. I could see his face with perfect clarity; the smoothness of his skin, the sharpness of his cheek and jawbones, the crazy length of his lashes, the way his eyes almost *glowed* in the darkness. There was no gold left in them; the green was dark- a forest on a cloudy night.

He was studying me just as intently. I'm not sure what I looked like- probably a mess from the night and the drinking. It didn't seem to bother him if I did look a mess though. His lids were half-shut as he drank me in. The lust for me was evident on his face and I was quite sure he could at least see that on my own.

His hands moved then, from my waist where they'd been when he pulled me to him, around my hips to my ass. He gave me a gentle squeeze, groaning at how I felt, before moving lower and cupping me completely. He squeezed me harder and a moan burst from me. His hands were the perfect size for my cheeks, his fingers gripping me, spreading across my ass pulling me closer to him. It felt incredible; everywhere we were touching was crackling and pulsing with our desire for one another.

I let my eyes roam lower than his face, noticing how his chest was rising and falling. His heart was beating so fast. My hands finally moved from their limp position at my sides to his chest and I could feel how fast his heart was racing. It rivaled my own, which had never thudded so hard and so fast in my life. My head, of its own volition, moved forward; my lips pressed to his heart. I left them pressed there and breathed in his scent. Another wave of lust ran through my body at the smell of him.

Edward's lips pressed against my hair and I felt him breathing me in as well. "You always smell so good," he murmured, the gentle puffs of breath leaving him making my skin break out in goose bumps. "Like rain and strawberries and just... *fresh*."

I nodded against his chest, he always smelled just as good to me. I wanted to tell him but my mouth just wouldn't work with me. He had intoxicated me, completely. We weren't even undressed yet.

"Bella, look at me, I need to know what you're thinking," he told me urgently. I shook my head against him; I didn't want him to see anything he didn't want to. My heart and my head were in complete agreement for once; they both wanted this man, and everything that entailed.

"Please, Bella, I don't want you to regret this or regret me or... just look at me please angel."

I pulled my head back just a bit, to stare him in his eyes. I willed myself show him what he needed, to not doubt my need for him. "Don't... just don't think Edward. I want this; I think I have for a while. Believe me," I whispered to him.

The doubtful expression that was clear on his face made me second-guess myself. Didn't he want this too? He followed me in here, he pulled me to him. I didn't imagine his desire. I *felt* it.

"I want you Bella. Don't think that I don't," he licked his lips, making my gaze slip to them. They were slightly swollen from our fervent kisses. I wanted to kiss them again. Without a thought in my head other than his lips, my hands swiftly went into his hair before pulling him to me again. My eyes remained open when his lips touched mine this time and I saw his features relax. His tongue wasted no time gliding across my lower lip and opening me to him. I thought I might pass out when I felt and tasted his tongue in my mouth for the first time. His tongue was cool but his breath was hot and the mixture was making my cloudy head even dizzier. The need to breathe eventually made him withdraw his tongue, but he kept kissing me. Soft, gentle kisses. Kisses that made me crave more.

He tastes like Jolly Ranchers and tequila.

"I hope that's a good thing," he murmured against my lips. *Damnit. Really need to learn to keep my mouth shut.* I chuckled breathlessly against him, nodding slightly but not willing to say anything in my quest to get his tongue back in my mouth.

His hands moved from their position on my ass, up my back, into my hair and finally resting on my neck. Tilting my head back and away from him he asked, "You really do want this don't you angel?"

My bottom lip jutted out. *Why does he keep trying to stop me?* "Yes, can't you tell?"

Edward's eyes were roaming all over my face, focusing mainly on my lips and my eyes. "Just want to be sure."

His eyes looked conflicted, still. I didn't want to see that in them, "I'm sure..."

"Are you?" Edward's nose brushed against mine, his eyes were still intent on my own.

"Are you?" My voice was breathy and low, husky. This man had me, whether he believed me or not.

"Yes, I am," he brushed a kiss on my left cheek. "I've been sure about you for a while now," he moved his lips over the bridge of my nose. "I want to know that *you're* sure," he brushed a kiss on my right cheek. "There's no going back from this..."

He was right. *There was no going back from this.* I could walk away now and we would probably be able to salvage a friendship. *Probably.* Or I could stay and have everything I ever wanted and so much more I didn't think to wish for. The decision was made for me. I knew in that first kiss. If I'd never kissed Edward Cullen... then I would have loved Jasper, forgiven him, and *stayed* with him. But, I did kiss Edward Cullen. And that's that.

Momentarily taken aback that I could give Jasper up so easily, my eyes flitted away from his. His grip loosened on me, fingers sliding down my neck and away from me. I caught myself then, realized what was happening. Realized he'd taken my silence as a negative. My hands grasped his before his fingers could completely leave my skin and pulled them to cup my cheeks.

"I don't want to go back," I whispered, looking right into his eyes.

His eyes searched mine but I knew that my resolve was clear in them. It was the easiest decision I'd ever made.

Edward whispered my name just once, his voice filled with awe and adoration, before his lips pressed against mine again. They were soft and wet and hot and just *meant to kiss me.* I knew then, with my decision made, my head clear, my heart beating for this man alone, I knew that *this... this* is what people wait their entire lives for. He moved his lips against me gently, eliciting whimpers and short moans from me. The little bit of pressure he was applying was making me crave more.

"Edward," I whispered against him, trying to take control of the kiss with my own lips. He was unyielding though. He wanted to take this slow, that much was apparent. "Edward, please."

He groaned against me and my eyes popped open to look up at him. Edward was amazing in that moment, his brow was furrowed and his eyes clenched shut. It was obvious that he was having trouble keeping himself in control. I could feel him against me, his desire prominent between us. His breath was coming in short gasps and each puff would blow into my face, setting my skin to tingle and my own breath to become short.

"Edward," his eyes popped open to look into my own again. I gasped. His gaze was almost too much for me. The green almost completely black in the small amount of light in the bedroom. The lids still half closed. The certainty of lust glaring at me. He shook his head a little bit, as if trying to clear it.

"Bella," he finally croaked out. "We... don't have to do anything angel. I didn't mean to rush this so much, but--"

"Do I look like I don't want this Edward?"

Again with the stare, "No, you look pretty fucking sure actually. But--"

"Do you not want this Edward?"

He shook his head quickly, "Fuck yes I want this. That should be apparent," his head dipped to look down between us. I knew he was talking about his erection that was nestled firmly against my stomach. "I just--"

"Then stop fucking talking and don't pull away from me again damnit," I huffed.

Edward rolled his eyes at me before letting out a short laugh. "Don't you think we should talk about this a bit first? There's a lot we *need* to talk about and--"

"You're still talking," I mumbled to him as my fingers wound their way into his hair. "I love talking to you Edward, but right now I'd like to do some more of this," I pulled his lips to mine and devoured his mouth. This time it was my tongue grazing his smooth lower lip. The taste of tequila was still strong in his mouth but there was also the taste of *him.* That sent me into a frenzy, trying to get even closer than we were already. An impossible feat seeing as I was pressed flush against him.

His resolve was wavering; his body was relaxing under my constantly roaming hands, his breath shortening again, his hands tightening their grasp on my face. Slowly, he moved them from their resting place on my cheeks, down my shoulders, around to my back and lower until I could feel him grasp the hem of my shirt. One swift movement, Edward had my shirt over my head. He held it in both of his hands, behind my back, his hands in tight fists around it.

I pulled back slightly, pausing my kisses for the moment to make sure he was okay. His eyes were still shut tight and his jaw was clenched. His breathing was rough and through his nose only. My hands left his hair as I brought them down to cup his own cheeks.

"Hey, look at me," I whispered. Edward's eyes popped open on command, his eyes finding mine immediately. "You're not being very convincing..."

Confusion took over his face, "Huh?"

A grin took over my own face, "You're not being very convincing, that's what I said..."

His brow furrowed, "Huh?"

A giggle escaped me, "You seem to say that a lot around me, you know..."

It took him a minute; his mind must have been as hazy as mine had been. When he finally realized what I had said, the most beautiful, crooked, gorgeous, amazing, *fucking perfect* smile broke across his face. "I guess I do. So far as the convincing goes..."

My shirt was gone from his hands, flung across the room somewhere. His hands wasted no time making their way to just below my ass where he hoisted me up and against him. He carried us the few steps left to the bed and lowered us slowly, me on my back and him settled comfortably between my legs. The grin never left his face. "How's that?"

I sighed, "It was okay, I guess. I mean any old guy could do that but whatever..."

"Shut-up Bella," he laughed as he brought his lips to mine again. I couldn't help myself and joined in with his laughter, which didn't stop as he kissed me. One of his hands found its way into my own as the other wound around me to hold the back of my neck. I gripped his hand tight, relishing the feel of his skin against mine.

I wanted more of his skin against me. My free hand worked its way down his back before grabbing a handful of his t-shirt and tugging. Edward got the message pretty quick, removing the hand grasping mine and pulling his shirt off quickly before returning to hold my hand. When his stomach touched my own, I swear to God, it was like a lightning bolt striking between the two of us. Gone were the tingles of desire that had been present and our senses and bodies went into a frenzy.

His hands both moved from their positions, roaming over as much of me as they could reach. My own hands were pushing at his shoulders so that I could feel him. I wanted to see him too but didn't want to stop kissing him long enough to actually be able to. I raked my fingers roughly down his chest, feeling his toned pectoral muscles and making him groan loudly. A smirk formed on my lips at that.

Huh. So Edward likes it a little rough.

He pulled back from kissing me, "What are you smiling about?"

My smirk widened, "Just making an observation."

When he pulled back, I finally let my eyes roam to his chest and stomach. What I saw made my mouth go dry. He was perfect. The toned muscles I had felt were sculpted, dominant, sexy as hell. His abs were clenched tight and if my brain had been working, I was sure I would count more than a six pack. Nothing about him was too much though. His muscles were big, but not too big. Quiet strength ran all through this man. He was quite possibly the most beautiful man in the world.

"Quit ogling me woman," he laughed. My eyes snapped back up to his. The amusement in his eyes made them twinkle as he grinned at me. "While it does wonders for my ego, I'd much rather your attention be spent on... other things."

I shook my head to try to clear the lust a bit. With an eyebrow raised I asked, "What other things?"

Slowly, he lowered his head back to my own. He pressed a chaste kiss against my lips before peppering kisses across my cheek to my ear. Each press of his lips against my skin igniting another spark in my body. His nose nuzzled my lobe and neck for a minute before he brought his lips to my ear, "I'd rather show you than spend time talking about it."

My eyes shut tight at the husky tone of his voice. My head was moving on its own, up and down, letting him know that I wanted him to show me. His lips left one more gentle kiss below my ear before creating another trail down my neck to my collarbone. When he reached the juncture of my neck and collarbone, he sunk his teeth into me gently.

Obviously, I never knew that particular spot was an erogenous zone. Because when I felt his teeth sink into me, even with the gentle pressure he was giving, my whole body lit up and my hips bucked up against him. I heard more than felt when I rubbed against his erection. Edward cried out a 'fuck' before going into another fast frenzy.

He moved down my body quickly. Somehow, his lips never left me; they just kissed along my skin until he reached my breasts. His hands had my bra unsnapped and slipped off before I could blink. I was momentarily distracted by him settling his stomach against my center, the little bit of friction caused by him making me suck in a much needed breath before moaning. But then his mouth closed around my right nipple and all thought of friction and sex and Edward naked were lost to the smoothness of his tongue mixed with the gentle nips of his sharp teeth. His hands were wrapped around my shoulders making my chest jut out for him as he just kept alternating between my breasts.

I couldn't see him. My eyes were wide open but unfocused. The angle his hands were holding my body at restricted me from looking at him. I wasn't sure if he planned it that way or not. If he did, the man certainly was good at this; not being able to see what he was doing to me was driving me fucking crazy. In a good way.

"Your nipples are fucking perfect, you know that right?" The breaths that left him fanned across my wet nipples. My body broke into goose bumps again and I moaned. Loudly.

I felt him grin against me. He pressed his lips to the center of my chest before releasing my shoulders and letting me lay flat again. Immediately searching for his eyes and finding them, I let a breath out that I wasn't aware I'd been holding. The smile on his face bringing one out on my own. I looked down to take in the differences between our bodies. He was tanned, nice and even. I was still completely pale; apparently, Jacksonville's sun wasn't strong enough to penetrate my skin. His body was muscled, toned, built. It was obvious this man took care of himself physically. Mine was trim, no sign of fat but it wasn't as if I worked out, I just was born with a high metabolism. The contrast between him and myself was plain as day. I was nothing special and he was. What caught my attention the most though, no matter which position we had been in tonight... we fit. Always comfortably, never forced, as if our bodies... knew each other. Like our bodies were meant for each other.

I had noticed this earlier; when he kissed me, our lips moved together flawlessly. When I let my fingers run down his chest, they knew their path. When I felt him against me, I automatically accommodated him. It wasn't a conscious thought. It was... simply... amazing.

“What is it angel?”

I shook my head at him, “No, it’s nothing. Just lost in my thoughts for a minute.”

“Care to share?”

“It’s just... I don’t know. It’s weird. And stupid. Nothing, never mind,” my hands came up to cover my face. My awkward rambling was embarrassing me now. Here, naked from the waist up with Edward. *Breathe, Bella.*

I never felt him move, he waited patiently for me to get myself back under control. Truthfully, his presence was calming. My embarrassment passed fast, well faster than normal and I brought my hands from my face slowly. Peeking out at him, “You really want to talk now?”

He grinned crookedly at me, “Uh no. I’d much rather be inside of you right now,” my face flamed bright red at that. *I’d much rather he be inside of me right now too...* “But I think that tonight might be a little too soon for us to do *that*. So, talking is good.”

Uh...

Frowning at him, I asked, “Then what was all of this? If it wasn’t leading to sex? I mean, you just wanted to mess around with me?”

Edward laughed, “Oh geez. I haven’t called it ‘messaging around’ since I was in high school.”

The blush on my cheeks was uncontrollable, “Well there really isn’t a better way of putting it.”

“That’s true,” he lowered his chin to rest on my chest. Between my breasts. That was a little distracting. “I never meant to go this far at all tonight Bella,” he finally sighed. “You just acted so oblivious to me. I had to know if it was one sided. I’m glad I came in here. More than glad actually. I just,” he hesitated. His eyes left mine for a minute, roaming around the room. “Well, okay for one? I think it’s kind of classless for us to do this together in my sister’s house. Ever, not just our first time together,” my heart fluttered at the thought of a first time or any after. “Second? I want everything to be clear between us before we take that step. I’m so fucking afraid of pushing you too far before you’re over *him*,” he spit out that last word.

“Edward,” I cut in, “okay, sorry, but... I know there’s no way for you to believe me. However, we can work on that, and we will. But so far as Jasper goes? I’m over it. Swear. I want this-”

“Trust me, I want this too. More than you know. But,” he sighed. Shaking his head, he said, “but you just don’t get over it like that angel. I didn’t and *don’t* expect you to. I knew when I followed you back here that you wouldn’t be over him. I swear to you that I tried to stay away. I was only successful for a couple of weeks. That lunch with my sister was absolutely premeditated.”

“But Edward-”

“No Bella. You’re not gonna sway me on this. If you’d let me hold you tonight... well that would be enough for me. I just want to be with you, believe me.”

“Edward-”

“*Bella*,” I really wish he would stop interrupting me. “You’re not thinking clearly right now. I’m having a hard time thinking clearly right now too but... if we did this... I don’t want you to regret *anything*.”

“I *won’t*-”

“You will, you just don’t want to see that right now-”

“No, I won’t-”

“And forgive me for not giving into you angel, but I don’t want us to start this wrong. Us having sex would be wrong-”

“No, it wouldn’t-”

“Yes, it would. At least, tonight it would. Think about this Bella... have you talked to him?”

My eyes clenched shut, “No, but I know what I want Edward. Stop trying to talk me out of this-”

“I’m not, trust me-”

“You keep asking me to trust you, but you won’t trust me-”

“I do trust you Bella-”

“Then why? Why can’t we be together? Now?”

“Because you’re still with him. And technically, I’m still with her.”

That was the equivalent of a whole pool of freezing water being dumped on me. *How in the hell could I forget about his fucking fiancée?* My hands were pushing him away from me and my feet were trying to kick my body out from under him. How could I have been so fucking stupid? Of all of the foolish things...

“Stop, Bella,” his voice was firm as he struggled to keep me where I was. His hands grasped my own and raised them above my head. He lowered his face to my own, trying to press his lips against me. I struggled harder against him and turned my head so that he missed my mouth. He grunted before taking both of my wrists into one hand and grasping my face with his other, “*Stop*. Jesus woman. Don’t fucking fight me.”

I cried out, "I can't do this. Please. Let me go please. I won't say anything to anyone, I swear."

"You think that's what I want?" He looked as if I'd slapped him in the face. "You think I want to just forget about this?"

Tears were streaming down my face, I was *so mad* at myself.

"Bella," he sighed. Edward pressed his forehead against mine. "You are quite possibly the most insecure woman I've ever met in my life. You know that, right?"

And now he insults me?

"Guess we'll have to work on that," he breathed. "Let me make one thing clear to you- I don't want to forget this. Ever. I want to be with *you*. That was sort of the point of following you back here-"

"But Tanya-"

"You don't need to worry about Tanya," he sighed. "But that's hypocritical of me and I know it. Since I worry so fucking much about Jasper..."

I nodded, letting my eyes fall shut again. "So, um, would this be a good time to ask?"

He pulled back from me. My eyes opened slowly to find his face conflicted, "Well, uh... honestly? It's a fucking horrible time to ask. I couldn't answer you completely truthfully with your tits pressed up against me like this," he chuckled.

I rolled my eyes, "Seriously? You were talking to me just fine a minute ago, and they've been hanging out for a while now."

He laughed loudly at that, "Yeah, but I had that shit rehearsed. Seriously. I planned on saying it earlier, you know, before you made me get you half-naked but-"

"Before I *made you* get me half-naked?"

"Yep. I was just gonna kiss you, ya know. You're the one who was all with the sexy whispers and whimpers and shit. Then you fucking moaned and I lost my shit."

That made me laugh. How this man could send me through so many emotions in such a short amount of time was beyond me. He succeeded in pulling me out of my funk though. Almost completely. It still irked me that he wouldn't answer me about Tanya though.

"You will tell me won't you? Not right now, but-"

"Yes. I will. Not right now, but tomorrow, the next day, the day after... whenever you want. Okay?"

"You promise?"

He looked straight into my eyes, "I promise, angel."

I wiggled my hands and he let go of them. Placing them on his face, I asked, "You do feel this don't you? I mean, how we fit?"

He sucked in a sharp breath, "Yes. I felt it that day in the bathroom... your hand was just..." he shook his head. "Fuck it was like made to fit in mine."

"Yeah," I whispered. He brushed his lips to my own again. "Wait, just a sec. I just have to know one thing..."

He nodded at me, "Anything angel."

"You said you want to be with me. Yeah?"

"Yeah," he whispered. "More than anything."

"Does that mean that you are planning to...? Um... I don't know how to ask this without sounding like a complete bitch..."

"Just ask Bella. It's okay."

My eyes were downcast, "Okay. So, that means... you're breaking things off with Tanya? I mean-"

"Yes, Bella."

My eyes shot back up to his. It was what I wanted to hear but shocked me regardless, "Seriously?"

He laughed, "Yeah. You didn't think I was gonna pursue you while I was engaged to another woman did you?"

"Well that's kind of what you've been doing-"

"No," he shook his head, grinning at me. "You'll know when I decide to pursue you Bella. I haven't started yet."

"Then what is this?" I could feel the blush on my cheeks.

"This... is what it is. But it's not me pursuing you. I won't do that until I've broken things off with Tanya. You deserve better than that. You actually deserve better than this right here but I can't seem to stop kissing you," he pressed his lips to mine again at that. Laughter burst free from both of us.

He sobered faster than I did, "In return... does this mean... you want to be with me too?"

I could swear there was a blush on his cheeks as well. It was adorable.

“Yes,” I whispered.

“So you’ll... make sure things are... shit um... final? With Jasper?”

I already dreaded that conversation. But knew it to be necessary. There wouldn’t be avoidance this time around. Already we’d been more honest with each other than Jasper and I had been.

“Yes, I’ll try to call him tomorrow. I’m ready to be done with that.”

He looked surprised, “Just like that?”

My brow furrowed, “That’s not what you want?”

“No! I mean yes!” He rolled his eyes. “Of course it’s what I want. I just can’t believe that it’s that easy for you.”

He didn’t know what all Alice and I had talked about so he couldn’t understand the mounting doubts that were already there. He only knew what had happened between me and Jasper in our relationship. While that alone was enough to make me question it, after what Alice had said... and now Edward... well there just was no question for me anymore. I made my decision.

“Okay, so, you know how you don’t want to talk about Tanya tonight?”

Edward nodded, “Okay well, there are things you don’t know. Things Alice told me. And then this. It’s just...” I sighed. “It just *is* that easy for me Edward.”

He looked doubtful, “Don’t you think you should talk to him about what Alice told you? Before you make a decision like this?”

Shocked, I asked, “Are you *trying* to talk me out of being with you Edward?”

His response was immediate, “Fuck no! I just don’t want you to regret-”

“Blah blah blah. Quit talking about regretting shit. I’m sick of it already.”

“Bella,” his voice sounded frustrated. “Listen to me, please.”

I sighed but didn’t respond. When he was sure that I wouldn’t argue, he continued. “You were in love with him for a long time. You don’t just get over seven years in one night. I’m not stupid. Just... talk to him. Take some time to think. But know, I’m here. I’m yours- if you want me. Whenever you want me.”

My heart melted at his declaration. This man was amazing. He seriously wanted me. I didn’t doubt that. But he was prepared to back off if that wasn’t what I wanted.

“I want you Edward. I know that,” he tried to interrupt me but my finger pushed against his lips, silencing him. “I let you talk.”

He sighed and nodded, “Okay, so yeah... I do. I wish you wouldn’t doubt that but I get why you do. I’ll *talk* to Jasper tomorrow. Get shit straight, okay? I’ll explain to him what’s going on-”

“You sure that’s a good idea? I mean, he looked pretty ready to rip me up-”

“Are you scared?”

“*Fuck no*. I’m just afraid of it making things difficult for you. I think if you left me out of the conversation, it might be better.”

He was right, but I still thought that I should tell Jasper. “I’ll think about it,” he went to argue again, making me laugh and shush him with my finger again. “That’s the best you’re gonna get from me. Deal with it.”

He looked at me for a long time, not saying anything, just staring into my eyes. After a while, he brought his lips to mine again. Before he kissed me, he said, “I’ll fight for you Bella. He’s not gonna just back down. You need to be ready for that,” his kisses were immediately forceful. His frustrations apparent through them. Neither of us were going to back down tonight. Both of us knew it. When his tongue slipped into my mouth, I forgot what we were arguing about in the first place.

Eventually, exhaustion began to take both of us. Our kisses and caresses turned lazy and slow. Edward rolled off me, an arm wrapped around me to pull me with him. He positioned our heads on the pillows and pulled the covers out from under us. My head found its way onto his shoulder. His lips found their way to my forehead. He whispered, “Good night, angel girl.”

We didn’t move all night. Wrapped tightly together, still naked from the waist up. His arm kept me pressed firmly against him and my leg anchored me to his own. He mumbled my name in his sleep more times than I could count. His breaths came out in little puffs of air that would push the hair back from my face and my eyes close in contentment. But I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t want to.

I wanted to stay with him, just like this... forever.

15. Smile

I'm posting this a few hours earlier than Monday... hope no one minds. I just found out today that it is apparently 'Reader's Appreciation Day' and I couldn't let it slide. I was close to finished with the chapter anyway. Soooo.... I appreciate all of you! I hope you enjoy the chapter... it's a tad lemonish. Just fair warning!

Thanks to all of you who have given this story a chance and to those who are sticking with me! Next post will be Friday! So enjoy!

All things Twilight still belong to Stephenie Meyer.

You make me smile like the sun,
Fall out of bed, sing like a bird,
Dizzy in my head, spin like a record,
Crazy on a Sunday night,
You make me dance like a fool,
Forget how to breathe,
Shine like gold, buzz like a bee,
Just the thought of you can drive me wild,
Ohh, you make me smile.
-Smile, Uncle Kracker

When the sun *finally* began to peek through the blinds come morning, the smile still hadn't left my face. We still hadn't moved either. Edward's arm would tighten even further when I would budge in the slightest and my leg was perfectly content nestled in between his own. Especially since his morning erection had formed. I wanted *so much* to just... run my hand over it. Or my mouth. Or any part of my body.

He wants to wait Bella. For good reason.

I rolled my eyes at myself. I knew exactly why he wanted to wait. I respected his reasons and even admired him for them. Apart from our kisses and touches of last night, I knew that no more boundaries would be crossed between the two of us until we were free of our significant others. That was honest. And right. And smart thinking. Still didn't make me want to touch his dick any less.

Stop Bella! He's doing this for both of you.

Ugh. Damn inner voice was a know-it-all.

Edward's voice brought my attention to his face. He'd just mumbled my name in his sleep again. And he was so fucking adorable when he slept. His brow stayed furrowed just slightly, to make him look like he was constantly thinking. *Or just having really good dreams.* His eyelids were completely smooth despite his pinched brow and his lips formed the most adorable pout. The pout made the cheeks cave in just a bit and his jawbone jut out slightly. I wanted to lick it. Or kiss his lips. Or bite his nipples. Or touch his-

STOP Bella!

Jesus! That voice is really fucking annoying and anyway- he let me last night. Well let me kiss his lips. He didn't let me do anything else really but feel on him a bit, but I know he was just trying to keep things under control.

Uh... exactly?

Point taken.

I wonder what he's dreaming about. Whatever it is, I'm almost positive that it involves me- he's just mumbled my name again. I raise my hand up and wave it in front of his face to make sure he's actually still asleep and not faking. After about five waves and no response, I whisper his name just to make sure and receive no response to that either. Just to be safe... I raise my head up and rest my lips against his neck, pressing gently enough to make my presence known, but not to wake him needlessly.

His hand works its way down my side, to my ass, as I'm kissing him and I'm sure I've woke him up. I don't even feel guilty. I really don't feel guilty as his hand and arm pull me tighter to him and his other hand comes to grab my leg that's draped between his. I wonder if I even could feel guilty as he pulls that leg tight against his groin and grinds himself against me all while pushing my center against his hip, grinding me against him.

My name falls from his lips again, only this time it's in the form of a full out moan. He sounds so fucking sexy and I never thought my name could ever sound that sultry or hot coming from anyone's mouth. A wicked grin spreads across my face as I raise my head further to look at him. He's still asleep amazingly. I really thought I'd woken him.

Note to self: kiss Edward's neck. Often.

An idea forms in my head and I'm acting on it before I can stop myself. I grab hold of the hand holding my leg and raise it to my lips. His long pointer finger slides easily between my lips and I'm sucking and licking it, relishing the salty taste of his skin. Edward grunts in his sleep and the smile is once again on my

lips. He bucks his groin against my leg harder and I bite down gently on the tip of his finger.

Wondering how far I can go with this before I actually do wake him up, I raise my leg away from him. My movement stalls as I hear his frustrated groan but I continue because I *know* he'll like what I have planned. I push my leg as far as I can in my current position, almost completely over him. I rise up on the arm that has been nestled between us and push my leg all the way over him. His finger pulls from my mouth and his hand grasps hold of my hip suddenly, startling me. His eyes are still shut, now clenched tight and I know he's not woken yet.

I raise myself up fully, adjusting my other leg to where I'm sitting completely astride him. As if second nature, his right hand finds my other hip and he's pushing up against me. My eyes roll back at the feel of his dick pressed up against me this tight and my hands fall forward to rest on his pecs. My hips roll, on their own, and this time it's *me* that moans. It scares me for a fraction of a second, wondering how he'll react when he wakes to find me straddling him. Dry humping him in his sleep. I don't let it deter me for long though, my hips start moving on their own again and Edward is still pushing up against me and the *most delicious friction ever* is taking place on this bed.

I couldn't try to control the grunts and moans and whimpers coming from my mouth if I tried. And it looks as if Edward has the same problem. His noises are almost drowning mine out.

And he's still asleep.

I stall my movements slightly and lean forward. I decided somewhere in my lust filled hazy brain that I can't let Edward come in his sleep. I want him awake and I know he won't stop me now. But I bet he'd be pissed to wake up a hot, sticky mess. In his pants at least. Because he *is* a hot, sticky mess. But gooey fun in his pants probably wouldn't be fun to wake up to.

Leaning forward and readjusting myself before continuing my motions down below, I slowly bring my lips to his. Pressing gently against his mouth lasts all of a second and a half before I'm pushing my tongue into him and he's responding.

I know exactly the moment that he realizes what's going on- he stops responding completely to me, I'm kissing but not being kissed in return. My hips are still circling him but his have stopped bucking against me. And his hands aren't grasping me at all. They're just sitting on my hips like dead weights.

Guilt washes through me; this isn't what he wanted at all. He wanted to wait and here I am pushing myself on him. I hope he doesn't hate me for this. And really, it's his fault for being so goddamn humpable.

But then he's back in the game and the guilt leaves me completely. It took him less than twenty seconds to find his way back to me. That's incredibly encouraging.

Edward takes over the kiss and it's his tongue in my mouth now. His head is reaching up from the pillow, trying to reach me better. His hands aren't stationary on my hips anymore, they both roam up and down my back, into my hair, cupping my jaw, grabbing my ass, and of course reaching around to get a handful of my breasts.

I feel his knees bend behind me and he starts bucking up faster and harder against me. I wish so much we were doing this without clothes on, but I respect his decision on that subject.

And, really Bella. It is Angela's house.

That *is* kind of embarrassing and, as Edward put it, classless. But I can't be bothered to think too far on the subject because he's pushing me off of him suddenly.

What just happened?

Feelings of rejection start to take hold of me but then I feel his hands on my waist again. *Oh my God!* His fingers are fumbling with the button on my jeans and as I feel it finally unsnap and my zipper fall, I let out a breath of relief. He pulls them off fast, followed even quicker by my panties. My eyes clench shut, wondering how far *he's* actually planning to take this now but they snap back open when I hear a second zipper being lowered and his jeans being shrugged off.

My eyes search for his, I want to know what he's thinking. His brow is pinched and his eyes are barely open, his mouth is gaping at me and his breath is coming out in hot gasps. Confusion takes over my face- he's become frozen. He must notice my expression because he shakes his head a bit and mutters a 'sorry.'

But then he lowers his face back to mine and I realize that he was just admiring *me*. Much like I did him last night. His face was almost a mirror of my own when I looked upon him half-naked for the first time. Of course, then I kick myself, realizing he was just standing *completely* naked in front of me and I missed a look at what he's been hiding behind those designer jeans.

I feel his hand between my legs and *oh!* He's lining up with my entrance. In a moment of insanity, I pull his face to look at me and ask, "What are you doing?"

His face shows his confusion, "I uh... shit... I thought you wanted-"

"No, I do!" There will be none of this talk of me not wanting him inside of me. "I just... thought you wanted to wait?"

A long, low, raspy breath leaves him. "That was before I woke up to you grinding all over my junk. I'm only fucking human Bella," he whispers and clenches his eyes shut. He shakes his head, "But you're right."

Edward starts to pull away from me, "No! *God!* Can you just... forget I just interrupted you? Please?"

He's frozen again, staring at me. His eyes are piercing and I squirm just a little under his steady gaze. Of course that brushes my lips against his dick and the spell is broken. He gasps and asks me if I'm sure. I answer as steadily as I can that I am. And then I can feel him again. He's poised at my entrance when

Edward's lips find mine again. Lazy, adoring kisses that elicit moans from both of us. I feel him start to slide inside of me and he's *perfect*. I can feel every ridge and vein and he's smooth and long and wide and I don't know why we weren't up all night doing this.

An unsteady breath leaves me; my mouth is hanging wide open. He's still not completely inside of me. There's still space between my hips and his and I wish he would push in all the way because I want so much to know how that would feel. I open my eyes and notice that his are squeezed so *fucking* tight it looks like he's in pain.

I open my mouth to ask if he's okay, when, "Bella! Get up! The chorizo is almost done and the eggs are. Tortillas are in the oven! Oh! Have you seen my brother 'cause his car is still here but I can't find the little shit anywhere!"

Edward groans and pushes his head into my neck, "So help me fucking Jesus."

I giggle a bit, but I'm truly just as frustrated, "Shh, it's okay."

I run my fingers through his hair, trying to calm him down, "So not helping Bella."

"Sorry," I whisper and he raises his head to look into my eyes. The amusement twinkling at me makes me smile at him. That earns me one of his gorgeous, crooked smiles.

"Hey! Bella! Get up woman!" Both of our eyes widen at the sound of the doorknob rattling. "Why is this door locked? Oh God! It stuck again didn't it? Be right back sweetie. Have you right out! Ben!"

And just like that we are both off the bed and scrambling for our clothes. We're both giggling and hopping around trying to pull up our jeans and still have our mouths on each other. We break apart to pull our shirts over our heads but then his lips are melded to mine again.

We pull apart when we hear Angela and Ben outside the door and I motion to the window. He rolls his eyes at me, pecks my lips one more time and walks to the bedroom door. Unlocking it and pulling it open to reveal a shocked looking Angela and amused Ben, he salutes them both. "Morning you jackasses."

And then he walks down the hall to the bathroom. Leaving me there. Alone. With Angela.

Fucker.

My face flames bright red even as I hear Ben busting out in laughter. I look to Angela and I don't think she's blinked at all. She's still knelt by the door, screwdriver in hand, staring after Edward.

Oh God, I hope she's not totally pissed at me.

Her head suddenly whips around to Ben and he shuts up in record time. He mutters something about the chorizo before hauling ass down the hall to the kitchen. Angela's head whips around to me and her eyebrows go up. Her mouth opens and closes a few times. Her eyes stray from me to the bed and then back to me. She studies my hair, my wrinkled clothes, my red cheeks and finally her gaze settles on my lips.

"You..." she says and then shakes her head. "Holy shit!"

My eyes widen at her outburst and I open my mouth to apologize to her. Before I can say anything though, she yells, "Ben! Alice was fucking right!"

And then she takes off running down the hall.

Uhhhh.....

I followed her as quickly as my muddled brain would let me, entering the kitchen to see Angela whispering furiously into her cell phone and Ben grinning while stirring the chorizo in the skillet. Ben's eyes rose to mine and he winked, mouthing 'Nice.' I blinked and turned my attention to Angela, whose back was still to me but I could hear her voice. She was too quiet to make out anything she was saying but I knew she was talking, and talking a lot to whoever was on the other line.

Alice.

I knew with certainty. I walked swiftly to my purse, still on the counter where I left it and searched for my cell phone. Alice's number was being dialed when I heard Angela whisper, "Are you sure?"

She turned to face me, eyes wide, mouth hanging open, cheeks bright red and whispered, "I think you're right, call you back later."

A guilty expression took over her face as Alice chirped on the other line, "Well, well, sounds like *someone* had a bit of fun last night..."

I rolled my eyes, "Alice, I'm only calling to ask that you give me a little time to talk to Angela before you two start planning anything else together. Can you do that for me?"

"How much time?" She was pouting. I *hated* when Alice pouted. I always gave in.

"Like an hour? We were supposed to spend the day together, I don't know if she'll still want to now though so..."

Angela's eyes widen further and she starts shaking her head at me quickly. Her mouth was trying to spit out words that she couldn't really form and I was thankful because it looked as if she would want to talk to me after all.

Alice sighed, "Okay fine. But you better call me as soon as possible. I want to know what happened. Angela was a little... incoherent? Besides, first-hand accounts of debauchery are *always* better," she giggled.

I rolled my eyes, “Yes, yes. I’ll call you in like an hour. Don’t go letting your mind run away with you while waiting for me. I know how you can get.”

I hung up my phone before she could respond to that. She would’ve kept me on for far too long and I really wanted to straighten things out with Angela. I walked slowly toward her, my hands raised up slightly in a sign of surrender.

“Angela, I’m *so* sorry. I know you probably have like... a *ton* of questions and I’m prepared to answer whatever you want. Swear.”

Her eyes narrowed at me, “Ben, other room now. I’ve got this.”

Ben trudged slowly from the kitchen, pausing to place a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Don’t let her fool you. She’s not mad at all,” he whispered to me before breaking into laughs again and walking from the room.

“Kay one,” Angela started. “That was you and my brother. Edward. Right? I didn’t imagine him and his shit-eating grin. Right?”

“Yes, that was us,” I mumbled.

Angela nodded and took a deep breath, “Two. Okay. What. The. Fuck?”

My turn to take a deep breath, “Okay, just let me explain okay? I swear to you that nothing bad happened-”

“Ang, must you badger her first thing in the morning? We had a long night,” Edward said as he strolled into the kitchen.

My heart went into overdrive at the sight of him again, he smelled heavenly from here, freshly showered and shaved. I wanted to kiss him, “Edward! This is between me and Bella-”

“And you’re not even really mad. You hate Tanya and have secretly been rooting for me and Bella all along. Don’t give her shit-”

Angela gasped, “Who told you that?!”

“Your husband. You have a big mouth. So lay off a bit okay?”

“I do *not* have a big mouth-”

“Yes. You do. You always have-”

“Have not!”

“Have too!”

“Nuh uh!”

“Yes huh!”

“Oh my God! You’re like a little boy!”

“Look who’s talking!”

“Yeah whatever, that’s the best you could come back with?”

“Pssh, like you did much better. ‘Whatever’ is *not* a valid response-”

“*Yes it is!*”

“No it isn’t!”

“I don’t even know what Bella sees in you anyway-”

“That’s between me and Bella-”

She narrowed her eyes at him, “Bella is *my* best friend. I think I deserve-”

“Yeah well she’s *my* girl-”

“Enough! Jesus you two!” Ben finally showed his face back in the kitchen. “*God*, I don’t know how Esme put up with you!”

My head had been volleying back and forth between the two. I’d never had a sibling, but that was exactly what I’d imagined the tantrums and arguments would have been like. They both muttered a ‘sorry’ at the same time and turned to walk toward me. When they realized they were headed in the same direction, they turned on each other with narrowed eyes and opened their mouths to say something else.

“Okay,” Ben, the voice of reason stepped in. “Either you two recognize, right here and now, that Bella is *not* a toy to fight over... or I’m going to take her out of here for the day. Angela, dear- she *is still* your best friend. That’s not gonna change okay?” Angela nodded, somewhat dejectedly. “And Edward, I don’t know what the hell she is to you, but she is still that okay?” Edward rolled his eyes but nodded as well. “Okay, so right now? Is *share* Bella time. ‘Kay?’”

“Seriously Ben? I’m not like five years old-” Edward started.

“Then don’t act like it,” Ben finished.

Edward sighed and nodded, "I'll fix you something to eat angel. Eggs and chorizo?" I nodded, "Okay, why don't you and Ang go into the living room and Ben and I will bring in the food?"

Angela squealed, obviously happy to have gotten her way and dragged me into the living room. Edward's smile as he watched me and his sister leave the room was blinding. He was obviously happy about our being friends, though you wouldn't have known it five minutes ago.

"Kay so he so ruined my fun. Tell me! Tell me! Tell me! Are you and my brother together now?!"

My face lit up bright red, "Kinda? I mean, we're still with other people until we talk to them but--"

"But you guys are gonna be together *then*?"

I smiled, thinking of being with Edward. Whenever and wherever we wanted, "Yes, we're gonna be together then."

"Aww, you should see the smile on your face right now! I've never seen you smile like that before Bella! Honest!"

I looked into her eyes, "I think I haven't stopped smiling all night."

She smiled and I started in on all that had been said last night. I left out all of the um... events of last night and this morning. I didn't think that Angela wanted to know that I'd had her brother inside of me while she was standing outside of the door.

That did make me think though. Edward and I hadn't been able to talk this morning. Not before we were interrupted or after. I realize that the before part was my fault, but now I was wondering what he thought of this morning. I mean, *technically* we didn't have sex right? There was no humping. So that means no sex right? Sex usually involves humping. However, there was *most definitely* penetration. And penetration is *always* involved in sex. Because sometimes the guy just has to stick it in once and you're done. I didn't think that *Edward* was that type of guy but... I really need to talk to him. I don't even know if he's upset or not. He didn't seem upset but...

"What are you thinking so hard on Bella?" Angela's soft voice brought me out of my musings. "You do *want* to be with Edward, don't you? That smile kinda doesn't lie, ya know..."

I smiled again, "No, I do. Just thinking. Nothing important."

"I don't believe that for one second. You totally left me for a sec there. You can tell me Bella, I told you I'd never judge you."

My face pulled into a grimace, "I *really* don't think you're the right best friend for this conversation..."

Angela's brow furrowed, thinking about what I'd just said, "What do you mean?"

"You really want to talk about your brother's sex life or the lack thereof?" I sent a pointed glance at her.

Her eyes widened and her mouth gaped open before she composed herself again, "You're right! I'm gonna let Alice cover that one," she giggled.

"Let Alice cover what?" Ben and Edward were coming in with plates in all of their hands. I greedily grabbed for the one closest to me. Edward yanked it back away from me, puckering up his lips. My eyes glazed over as I all but raced to put my lips against his. Thank God he was in his right mind so we didn't go out of control in front of his sister and brother-in-law. He pulled back pretty fast, giving one of his gorgeous grins and a steaming hot plate of breakfast burrito. "That's gonna take getting used to," Ben mumbled.

Edward laughed as Angela said, "Yeah but they're sooo *cute*!"

Ben rolled his eyes, "So what are we letting Alice cover? You *do* remember that I'm a therapist, and that my advice would probably be less biased and more informative right?"

Angela and I mumbled a 'nothing' to Ben at the same time and dug into our burritos, hopefully ending that conversation. Edward eyed me curiously from his position next to me so I sent him a grin and shook my head, appeasing him apparently as he too then dug into his burrito.

"Hey!" Angela burst out, "Where the hell did the hot sauce come from?! I threw that shit out when I heard Edward was coming!"

~*~

Sometime later that afternoon, after I'd showered and changed into some of Angela's comfy clothes, she pulled me aside to the living room once again. The boys had left, citing that we needed more girl time and so they went to 'shoot some hoops.' It had been relatively quiet most of the day, Angela and I had pigged out on every type of junk food imaginable, watched *Steel Magnolias* twice and just lounged. Like she'd promised. But I knew it was going to be short-lived, I'd still not answered her questions about Jasper.

"So, what are you going to do?"

I sighed, "I'm just gonna be straight up with him. He *obviously* hasn't with me--"

"Wait, what? Is this about what Alice told you?"

I nodded and proceeded to tell her about my phone call with Alice in its entirety. Angela almost broke down in tears when I told her of Alice discovering *them*, though I couldn't supply her with any more information than that on the subject. "It's Alice's story to tell. I just can't bring myself to ask her about it again. It hasn't been easy for her and I wasn't there for her. She's gotten her life back in order and I'll be damned if I'm the reason she hits a speed bump. I just can't ask her any more about it."

"That's completely understandable, Bella. And really, it doesn't even matter anymore. I'm sure he'll offer you up answers when you talk to him but... well you're leaving him right? Like to be with Edward?"

I nodded, "Then really it's just not important who or what Jasper Whitlock does anymore. I highly doubt that he'd be someone you'd be able to keep as a friend and I hope that doesn't hurt too much to hear..."

I shook my head, "No, I was prepared to possibly say goodbye to him before. It hurt to think about and it's shocking how okay I am with it now. Trust me, I know. But... I just am," I paused. Looking straight into Angela's eyes, "Do you believe in love at first sight?"

Her cheeks reddened, "Yes, I knew Ben was it for me almost immediately."

I smiled at her, "Okay well, it's kinda like that with Edward. I think. I just... I think I wanted things with Jasper *so bad*... I made myself blind to anything else. Never mind the fact that he didn't tell me some things," I rolled my eyes. "I mean, we argued after a *day* of being together. And then that blow-up after the barbeque."

"About that- I think that Jasper saw what you refused to," I looked at her questioningly. "You know... like he saw the *mutual* whatever, attraction, love, whatever you want to call it. With you and Edward. That's what I think. I've thought that for awhile actually, but I couldn't say anything until you admitted things to yourself."

"I think Ben has too," I mumbled.

Angela nodded, "Yeah, he does. We've talked a lot about it. I really hope that doesn't make you mad. That we talk about you, we just... we just don't keep stuff from each other. Ever. Like he'll know what I talked to you about today as well. If Edward doesn't already spill it, I swear those two are worse than girls," she giggled.

I laughed at that, "I get that vibe from them too."

"They're *terrible*. It's even worse when Dad is involved," Angela laughed. "You just wait. Mom and I just stand off to the side and try to stay out of their way."

A thought occurred to me, "Is that why Ben was cheerier on the ride home from the barbeque?"

Angela laughed harder, "Oh my God! Yes! He was such a little bitch that day. And then he saw the way Edward was looking at you and the way you were looking anywhere but at Edward and he said he just *knew*. I wasn't as convinced at first, but yeah. That cheered him up immensely. He really *didn't* like Jasper very much. No matter what he told you."

"Yeah I figured," I sighed. "Did you?"

She squirmed in her seat for a minute before meeting my gaze and answering me quietly, "No."

That puzzled me. I had thought Angela actually did like him, "Just wondering. May I ask why you didn't like him?"

Angela sighed, "I saw him flirting with a few of the people there. I *know* that flirting isn't cheating but I still don't think it's right. You do know you were in the bathroom with Edward for like an hour. Didn't you wonder what took Jasper so long to notice you were gone?"

I gasped, "I was *not* in there for that long--"

"Oh yes you were!"

"But he was talking to you when I went to the bathroom... I just assumed he was *still* talking to you," Angela shook her head at me. "Wow... wait! Who the hell was he flirting with?" That kinda pissed me off. Not that it really should've anymore...

"Does it matter?"

She was right. "No," I sighed. "That's just... and he was pissed at me?!"

"Yeah..."

It reminded me of dominoes. I find out one thing out just to find another. And another and another until all the dominoes fall down. I felt like I didn't know Jasper Whitlock at all. I didn't think I *wanted* to know Jasper Whitlock at all anymore. I shook my head, "Do I even *owe* him a phone call? After everything I've learned--"

"Yes. You do. Not that you *owe* him shit. But he owes you some answers. Some closure. And then you can be done with it Bella. One phone call. 'Kay?'"

Again, she was right. But first, I wanted to call Alice. Our conversation earlier was brief and I'd promised to call her when I got home. Then, I wanted to call Rosalie. She was among the short list of people I called friends and I think she deserved to hear from me that I didn't want to be with her brother anymore and that I'd found someone else. I hoped she understood. I also wanted her to hear my side of the story- before they started spouting my name off around her parents' house because I'd not only stolen Jasper from his wife... now I'd broken his heart too.

Yes, I needed to call them both. Possibly talk to Edward again before making the calls to see what he thought about it. I didn't see him having a problem with any of it and things were, so far, going *really well* with us. I knew he still needed to talk to Tanya too and he definitely needed to tell me what the hell was going on with that. I had faith that he wouldn't keep me waiting though.

I made a promise to myself to extend him the same courtesy. I'd make the calls tonight, and tomorrow... I would be Edward's. Completely.

16. Swing Life Away

Yay for people reading this story! You guys are awesome and it *so* makes my day when my e-mail says I have a new person alerting or that someone has been nice enough to leave a review. Seriously, just awesome, all of you. Enjoy the chapter! Next update will be on Monday.

Public Service Announcement: Be careful when walking up, down or even just *near* stairs. They can hurt you. (You know who you are.)

All things Twilight *still* belong to Stephenie Meyer.

Am I loud and clear, or am I breaking up?

Am I still your charm, or am I just bad luck?

Are we getting closer, or are we just getting more lost?

I'll show you mine, if you show me yours first,

Let's compare scars, I'll tell you whose is worse,

Let's unwrite these pages and replace them with our own words...

We live on front porches and swing life away,

We get by just fine here on minimum wage,

If love is a labor I'll slave 'til the end,

I won't cross these streets until you hold my hand.

-Swing Life Away, Rise Against

Angela begged for me to spend the night again, stating that we *needed* to watch *Steel Magnolias*. *Again*. After thirty minutes of my polite refusal, Edward finally rolled his eyes and told her we had stuff to talk about. She pouted until Ben pulled her to him and whispered in her ear. Her eyes widened and her head snapped to Edward, then to me before she practically shoved us out the door, telling us to have a good night.

I turned to Edward, "Were you and Ben gossiping?"

A small grin formed on his face, "Maybe a little. I knew I was gonna need him in my corner if I ever wanted to get you away from my sister successfully."

I chuckled, "You know, your sister says that you two are worse than girls with your gossip."

He rolled his eyes, "She's one to talk, mouth that she has..."

I laughed as he opened the passenger door to his car for me. My eyes followed him as he walked around to enter from the driver's side. He'd changed into a pair of green and black basketball shorts and a black wife-beater for playing basketball with Ben earlier. When they showed back up at the house, sweaty and smelly... well it was all I could do to keep myself from jumping him. I'd seen the man almost completely naked, but something about him dressed like this just... turned me on.

He turned to me with a smile as soon as he was seated, "I thought maybe you might like to go for a walk on the beach before it gets too dark?"

"I thought you wanted to talk?" He said he wanted to talk. Now he wants to romance me with the beach?

Edward let out a short laugh, "I do. I thought we could talk at the beach. Forgive me, I just... don't trust myself to be alone with you again- and close to a bedroom," he winked at me. "The beach sounds safe, yeah?"

When did I become the guy in a relationship? Seriously? I was *more than fine* with going to my apartment or wherever Edward lived *because* we'd be that much closer to a bedroom. I knew what he was trying to do though. I'd asked the question, he wanted to give me my answers.

I sighed, "Yeah. Beach sounds safe to me."

He nodded and turned the car on, shifting gears easily and sending us on our way. Angela and Ben lived fairly inland, for Jacksonville, so it took us a bit to get where we were going. It was closer to Renee's than I would have liked to have been- at least until after this talk. I didn't want to accidentally run in to her. I didn't want her interrupting us and wondering who Edward was and generally just annoying the shit out of me. She'd probably have him running for the hills.

Jacksonville Beach was beautiful today. The waves were small and so the surfers were pretty much gone for right now. Every time one would break I was in awe that I actually lived here. I was mesmerized. I'd lived close to beaches my whole life but this one was something special. Or maybe it was just that I was spending time at it with this man.

"You okay?" Edward's voice brought me out of my head. It's something I noticed about him the first night on the phone. His voice called to me. It cut through the musings of my head and commanded my attention. Nobody else had ever done that to me. I found myself paying attention to Edward almost constantly when we were talking or in each others presence.

I nodded to let him know I was ready for our walk. Or talk. Whatever it was, I was ready for it. He waited at the front of the car for me and when I neared to him, he grasped my left hand in his and linked our fingers before leading down to the water.

We walked in complete silence for a while and I was beginning to wonder if he was as ready as he let on. Which made me wonder what he was actually going to tell me. Which worried me. What if he *was* really in love with Tanya? *Oh God*. I couldn't bear for him to tell me that.

"Sorry, I just..."

My head snapped up to him. He wasn't looking at me, but instead his eyes were wandering all around us. We were all alone out here. We'd walked a long way from his car and I really wondered why we hadn't just gone to one of our places- we were *very* alone here.

"I don't know where *exactly* to start."

I yanked on his hand, pulling his attention to me. "The beginning is usually a good place to start..."

Edward laughed shortly, "Yeah well, it begins a long time before I *actually* met Tanya. I'm trying to figure out the best place..."

Well that was certainly interesting. I just figured he'd met Tanya when she came to work for the company. I wasn't expecting some big long *back story* to their whole relationship. "I don't understand."

He let out a low breath, "Don't worry angel. You will. And hopefully you'll be more understanding than I'm sure my sister would be."

"Wait, what? Angela doesn't know what you're gonna tell me?" I kind of figured that what he was about to tell me was the *whole* reason that Angela had such a strong dislike for her. "Why?"

He chuckled, "I wish it was this easy to get you to talk all the time. I say I'm gonna tell you something and suddenly I can't get you to shut-up."

I rolled my eyes, "Yeah well."

"Yeah," he said slowly. He looked away from me, out toward the water. Minutes passed and he didn't say anything else. I wondered if what he was going to tell me was bad. All kinds of scenarios were running through my head and not one of them was good. Finally, after what felt like forever, he asked, "You know my cousin Felix, right?"

Uh... Thought we were talking about Tanya...

I nodded my head slowly, confusion written all over me, "Okay, sit down. If I'm gonna start here... it might take a while to get it all out. But I think this is best."

I was baffled as to where he was going with this but obeyed his request anyway. Once we were seated, side by side and not touching at all- much to my disappointment, he spoke again.

"So my Mom's brother, Marcus- that's Felix's dad, he used to be over at our house like all the time. He passed away two years ago. But always, as far back as I can remember, Uncle Marcus and Aunt Heidi were around. All the time," a small smile formed on his face. He breathed in deeply, "My Mom used to tell me that Uncle Marcus and Dad conspired with one another to get Mom and Heidi pregnant together. Felix and I are like a month apart in age. So of course, with his dad around the house all the time, me and Felix were like... best buddies. Ya know?"

I nodded. "Okay. So we went to the same schools, practically spent *all* of our time together. When we were uh... thirteen? Yeah. When we were thirteen, James' family moved in across the street from where my family lived. It was when we were still living in the city, before Mom had bought that house. She waited a long time for that house," he laughed. I could certainly understand why she waited for it, it was amazing. "So then he was around all the time. Felix and James were just as close as me and him had been," Edward turned to look out at the water again. "We all decided to go to college together. We were always around each other. Always doing everything together. It was just like... a given? That we'd go to college and be the same way."

He stopped talking for a minute so I rubbed his arm, trying to encourage him to continue. He turned to me with a small smile, "Senior year of high school, Felix changed his mind. Uncle Marcus wanted to branch away from Mom's business. It was understandable, it was *her* company. But he knew the business and wanted for his family... what Mom had built for hers. No one was mad. Except Felix. He always had this crazy dream of me and him running Cul de Sac... He just *knew* that his dad was gonna lose everything. Fuck it all up for *him*. I'd never heard him be so selfish before," he spit out. His eyebrows were low on his forehead, "Then he just up and decides he's not gonna go to college. Said there was no reason because there'd be nothing for him to use his education on. Kicked up a lot of shit with that decision. Then he just up and leaves town, right after graduation."

Edward shook his head and sighed, "Anyway, James and I still went. To Dartmouth. Together. It was cool; we were still good buddies and it made it easier for both of us to have the other. James had talked about coming to work for Mom's company for a while so we were in a lot of the same classes. He's a lawyer too, in case you didn't know. He just chooses to sell real estate because he's damn good at it. And he makes a shit ton of money."

I laughed at that, "So you wanna let me try to sell real estate then? I like shit tons of money."

He turned to me and smirked, "If you'd talk. Which I doubt you would. Besides, you need to write. You know that."

I shook my head, "I don't know what to write about. And writing doesn't make money unless you have something to sell. Besides, I talk to people on the phone all the time-"

"Anyway," Edward interrupted with an eye roll. He softened his face and grinned to let me know he wasn't serious. I smiled back and motioned with my hand for him to continue.

"So my junior year at Dartmouth, I met a girl," *what?! He's known her for that long?* "I pretty much fell in love with her. James thought I was a dumb ass. He was always telling me what a gold digger she was and that she only wanted me for one thing," he closed his eyes and sighed. Shaking his head, he said, "It caused a lot of problems between me and him. I thought he was maybe just jealous. I mean, she was a knock out. Still is," I so didn't want to hear how hot Tanya was. I wish he'd move on.

“But... I was blind to what he wanted me to see. We stayed together for a long time. And the longer we stayed together, the further apart James and I drifted. Then low and fucking behold... Felix shows his ass back up. Shocked the shit out of all of us. He'd straightened himself back out, met a good woman who treated him right. So, of course he treated her like a queen. He was bound and fucking determined to get through school as fast as possible and help Uncle Marcus make his company a success. He didn't go to Dartmouth though. He wanted to make his father proud, so he followed in his footsteps and went to Yale. I was already wishing that *I'd* decided to go to Yale myself. So stupid that Dartmouth doesn't have a law school,” he shook his head and frowned.

“The first time I met Tanya... was a double date with Felix and her. She was the girl he'd met. The one he treated like a princess and no shit Bella? She treated him like he was... the center of her fucking universe or something. The way she looked at him... well I would imagine you see that look when I look at you. She loved him, with all of her heart.” I blushed at that. *Did he just tell me he loves me?* Whoa, wait a sec...

“But Felix and Gianna-”

He took my hand back in his, “Let me finish angel.”

I turned to him and nodded dumbly, “Sorry, I just... it's kind of whoa. Ya know?”

Edward huffed a laugh, “Just you wait. You ready for this one?”

My brows knitted together but I nodded for him to continue, “The girl? *My* girlfriend. Was Gianna.”

My mouth dropped open and my eyes went big as saucers. *So wasn't expecting that.* Edward chuckled, probably at my expression.

“Yeah. You weren't ready,” he linked our fingers together.

“But,” I started. She was all about Edward yesterday at Angela's house. Sending him flirtatious glances and smiles, taking every opportunity to try and corner him alone. “But,” I tried again. He was running from her constantly though, I remember that. “But,” but I couldn't figure out *what* to ask him or interject.

“But what happened?” Edward asked. Yes! That is a damn good question. I nodded, “So like I said, first time I met Tanya, was a double date. She was there with Felix and I was there with Gianna. I was so happy to see my cousin again that I never noticed the way that Gianna was staring him up and down. *I never* noticed it. And Gianna and I dated for another year and a half. James and I were accepted to Yale, for law school and Gianna asked about moving in with us. James was strongly against it. He still didn't and still doesn't, by the way, trust or like her. We ended up not speaking for a while, and Felix offered for us to move in with him. He was already settled there, of course. And he had plenty of room, even with Tanya living with him. She was going to the state college in New Haven. She was a good girl, refused to let Felix pay for anything. She said she didn't ever want him to feel like that's what she was after. She worked, full time and went to school full time. Like I said, she was a good girl,” he sighed.

“She still *is* a good girl. I know that everyone around us sees what they want to about her, but it still pisses me off. They don't know the truth. And it pisses me off that she won't stand up for herself,” he growled. Shaking his head, he said, “Anyway, Gianna and me decided to take him up on his offer. Gianna was something completely different from Tanya. She was all about how much money you could spend on her. And I did. Spend money on her, I mean. She wanted for nothing and she'd get real bitchy if she didn't get her way.”

“We hadn't lived together before we moved to Connecticut. I totally wasn't expecting this... this vapid, *mean, selfish bitch* that was Gianna. She would always find something snide to say to Tanya, underhanded or not and Felix *never* took up for his woman. I don't know how many times I told Gianna to just shut the fuck up. Tanya would just... be in fucking tears, but she wouldn't say shit. She wouldn't take up for herself.”

Edward stopped again and I looked at his face. It was completely pinched, his eyes squeezed tightly shut. His mouth was in a thin line and his lips were almost white from his mashing them together. He was breathing hard when he finally continued.

“So, I started taking time to just... talk to Tanya. She's a really smart girl. Sharp wit, crazy observant eyes. She always has a joke or an anecdote for anyone. If they're willing to listen to her. I liked her. *I was* attracted to her, I won't lie. But I was with Gianna. I'd never do that to her.”

Thoughts of last night and this morning once again trickled into my head. He was with Tanya right now. But last night his mouth was suctioned to mine and this morning... he'd been *inside* of me. I realize that I practically threw myself at him but... So what was that? “Bella?” I turned to him, “I know you're probably questioning me right now because of what we did. Just... wait okay? You don't know the whole story. Okay?”

He was right. I was drawing conclusions on my own again. I needed to just...shut my head up. “Okay...”

His hands came to my face, cupping my cheeks and pulling my lips to his. He brushed his lips across mine, “I promise this is all about to make sense angel.”

I rested my forehead against his and took a deep breath, “Promise?”

“Promise,” he whispered before brushing his lips against mine one more time. Then he pulled back and said, “So one night, Tanya and I had run into each other at the grocery store. We decided to pick up dinner for everyone and have a movie night. I went to get the movies, she went to get the dinner and when I made it back to the house... Tanya was *fucking sobbing* on the front step. I rushed over to her. I was shaking her, trying to get her to breathe. I'd just about given up and was gonna just carry her inside when I heard it. Grunts and moans and,” he swallowed thickly, “*fucking skin slapping.*”

He ran his free hand over his face roughly, “I figured out what was going on pretty fast, and I never saw them together. Not like that. Thank God. I knew Gianna's voice well, and I didn't want to see it for myself. I snatched Tanya up and got us the fuck out of there.”

A tear ran down my face, how *terrible*.

Edward sighed, “I took us to James' apartment. He let us in willingly, forgiving me quickly when I spilled out the events of the night for him. He called Felix. He arranged for Tanya and my stuff to be moved out. He never even said ‘I told you so.’ He's the best friend I've ever had and I wish I'd fucking listened to him.”

He was quiet for a minute. The silence wasn't uncomfortable but I still wanted to offer him *some* comfort. I just didn't know what to say. What do you say to someone who caught their significant other cheating on them?

What'd you say to Alice?

"I'm so sorry Edward."

He shook his head, "I'm over it. Trust me. The only thing that bothers me about that night anymore is remembering Tanya crying on the steps."

I pulled his head down, to lie on my shoulder, and began to run my fingers through his hair. I felt so... *bad* for Tanya. The way that Edward talked about her, she was a genuinely good person. So where did these preconceived notions that Angela and Ben have about her, come from?

"Edward?"

"Yeah?"

"Why do Angela and Ben dislike her so much?"

He sighed, "That's a little further in the story. Can you wait for me to get there?"

I immediately felt guilty. He was *trying*. None of what he'd told me could be easy for him to talk about, and here I was *rushing* him through it. "Of course. I'm so sorry," I whispered.

His head snapped up from my shoulder, the hand holding mine squeezed tighter. "Don't apologize angel. Please."

I nodded and he took a deep breath, letting it out slowly. "So, I stayed with James. Tanya stayed for about a week. Just long enough to get her next check and put a first month's in at an apartment. We *both* told her she was more than welcome to stay. She just... she's so fucking independent. Never wanted anyone to do anything for her."

He shook his head, "I kept in touch with her. She was doing great; she got her degree and found a place there in Connecticut to work. She *sounded* happy. I thought she was."

Edward's eyes squeezed shut again, "One night... she shows up, completely blitzed. I'd *never* seen Tanya drunk before. She would drink a glass of wine or two or have a beer, but... nothing like this. She latched herself on to me and before I knew it, we'd slept together," he sighed. My heart felt a familiar pang of jealousy run through it hearing him say that. I mean, I *knew* they'd *probably* slept together. Just... hearing *confirmation* of the act, hurt.

"Of course when I woke up, I was confused. I'd categorized Tanya into the 'friend' category so long before that night that I'd stopped seeing her like that. I figured she'd done the same thing. Then, *that* happened and I was just... thrown," he shook his head, sighing. "Then I look at her and she's fucking *bawling* on her pillow. Anytime I would touch her, her sobs would just get worse. I sat there with her for four hours. When she finally did calm down and talk, she told me that she was sorry. That she just missed Felix so much and she thought maybe if she *tried* to do something with another guy... she thought it might help."

He let go of my hand and pulled his knees up. He placed his elbows on his knees and his head hung in his hands. When he spoke again, it sounded like he'd begun to cry. "I didn't know what to do for her. When I tried to touch her again, she freaked out. Snatched up all of her clothes and hauled ass out of there. I tried to call her but she wouldn't answer her phone. I went to her apartment but she'd moved out of there. I went to where she'd been working and they said she'd quit. She just fucking disappeared."

I put my hand on his back and rubbed, trying to offer him some comfort. I felt *so awful*. For both him and Tanya. I couldn't *imagine* going through what she did. And to feel so bad that you just up and disappear?

Sounds like you, Bella.

And it did. I'd done the same thing, ran away from everything that hurt me and tried to start over. I've learned that it never really helps though. Your past *always* finds a way to sneak up on you.

"So anyway, I didn't see or hear from Tanya for two fucking years. I don't know how but that bitch Gianna found her somehow. She had the *audacity* to send Tanya a fucking *wedding invitation*. Of course, I didn't know that. Gianna and Felix got married three years ago. Of course, she didn't come to their wedding. She kept up with us though, and two years ago, she read that Felix's dad had passed. Tanya came for Uncle Marcus' funeral. She stupidly thought that it might mean something to Felix. And it did. It meant that he could try to get in her pants again. Which he didn't. Because I stepped in. I told them that Tanya and I were dating. That we'd been together for a while and that she was there for me."

Oh wow.

"She was so fucking hurt over him treating her that way that she didn't object. She *never* fucking wanted people to think that we were together. She argued with me as soon as we were in private. I finally got through to her. Made her see I was just trying to help. She finally came around. And we thought that would be the end of it. But of course fucking Gianna had to go and spout off to anyone and everyone about Edward's new girlfriend."

What a fucking bitch.

"But, shit sorry," I said before he could continue on with his story. He shook his head, letting me know that my interruption was okay. "What about Gianna? And Felix? They just got married and your family was okay with that? I'm sorry that just doesn't sound like them at *all*."

He raised his head from his hands and turned to look at me, "We never told them. I never told them. Not back then. My Mom knows *now*. Which means that my Dad probably knows, but... I just... I just didn't want to cause any more problems in our family."

I growled, "How can you stand to be around them though? Did they even apologize?"

"Yeah. They did. Half-assed apologies about how you can't help who you love and shit," *shit that sounded familiar. I'm a horrible person.* "Which would be fine, and I would accept completely- hell I'd even try to mend my friendship with Felix and forgive Gianna, if they actually meant it. But people who love each other don't constantly chase after other people. And I know you gather that about Gianna. Angela said she was eyeing up Jasper at the barbeque and well, you saw her last night. Felix hides it a bit better but, hell; he tried to proposition Tanya *at his father's funeral.*"

Jesus. These people are something else.

"So then how *do* you stand it?"

He sighed, "I just *do*. I don't know. It's easier now that I know Tanya is taken care of. And I don't feel shit for Gianna at all. Like one way or the other. I don't hate her and I don't care what she does, she just exists in my life. Like taking up empty space. I just avoid her. Which I'm sure you could see last night," I nodded even though he couldn't see me. His head was still in his hands. "Felix tries to talk to me. I just nod or reply with a yeah or a no if I can get away with it."

"Why don't Ben and Angela know? Why won't you tell them? They would understand, and then you wouldn't have to deal with those two at your sister's house at least. I think at least," I whispered.

He shook his head, "Tanya doesn't want me to. She doesn't want to be the cause of any problems in my family and it's so stupid. She blames herself for Felix cheating on her. She still, to this day, thinks she could have done more. That she could have shown more gratitude or found new ways to show him how much she loves him. And she *does* still love him. *She* is a prime example of not being able to help who you love."

That's just ridiculous. "What if I talked to her?"

His head popped up, "What?"

I rolled my eyes, "What if I talked to Tanya? I mean, I'm kind of one of those examples too, you know. Maybe I could help her? And then all the dirty laundry could get aired and your sister wouldn't dislike her so much."

Tears formed in his eyes, "You really are amazing."

I blushed and whispered, "I just want to help."

He smiled at me, "I know angel. Maybe I might take you up on that. But I need to talk to Tanya about it; I really don't know how she would react."

I nodded, "Just please let me know if I can do anything. She sounds like an amazing person."

A fond expression took over his face and he nodded, "She is. Before I met you... I wished so much that I would feel something for her. *Anything.* I care about her and in a way I do love her. But it's more along the lines of 'like a sister.' Whoever does get her is going to be very lucky."

Before I met you. So he doesn't care for Tanya *like that.* But from the way he makes her sound, I just can't imagine Angela and Ben not liking her. And Esme, who I now know why held such distaste for Gianna. I couldn't see Esme not finding Tanya as wonderful as her son did.

"I'm sorry Edward, but... how did it come to be that nobody likes her? She just sounds too, well, *amazing* for the people I've met to not love her..."

He sighed and nodded, "That all started with Gianna. She told anybody and everybody things about Tanya. Vicious rumors about how Tanya tried to sleep with Felix when Gianna began dating him. She told people that Tanya had fled Connecticut because she'd slept with her boss and the wife was threatening her life. She told them that Tanya had tricked me into bed and was pregnant. Just anything she could think of to make people hate her."

I might slap that woman next time I see her.

"It was terrible for her. She had planned to stay for a week, but left after three days with the way my extended family was treating her. We kept in touch and I eventually got her to confess that things *weren't* going well for her. She was in Savannah and she could barely afford to keep her apartment. She'd sold her car trying to make ends meet. She didn't eat half the time. She was working three jobs because no one would hire her for any good paying ones. She was trying *so fucking hard* and I just... I couldn't sit and listen to her anymore. I told her I was coming to get her and that I'd train her to be an agent. Of course she argued, but I had better points. She conceded and came back with me."

"She refused to take money from me. She said she would get a job as soon as she could while I was training her. I made her take the receptionist job. It was the least I could do and I knew she wouldn't need much training so she would be an agent soon."

He took a deep breath, "Nothing romantic developed between us for a long time. But we were spending so much time together and we *were* attracted to each other. One night, we were at the office late going over more of her training and we just... *gave in.* Of course my Mom and Angela walked in on us. We were so fucking embarrassed and it was awkward and no matter if we were attracted to each other or not... we both knew it wouldn't happen again."

He took my hand back in his, "And it hasn't angel. That was over a year ago. I swear this to you."

I smiled at him, "I believe you Edward."

A breathtaking smile spread across his face, "Thank you, Bella. I was so worried about what you would think of me for that."

I smiled wider and shook my head, "You have nothing to worry about."

He just stared at me for a while, the smile never leaving his face. Finally, he shook his head a bit and continued. "So that's why Angela thinks what she does. The next week, Tanya was an agent. I moved her from that office to the one downtown because of Angela. I've never seen my sister disrespect someone the way she does Tanya," he sighed. "But Tanya doesn't want me to say anything. Maybe you *can* help with that. You know my sister pretty well and maybe your two cents would help Tanya see the light."

Edward took a deep breath, “That’s also why my mother knows the whole story. She was against me moving Tanya or promoting her. She didn’t like her one bit. Of course, that changed when I told her the story I just told you. Esme Cullen will tell you nothing but good about Tanya now. She’s like, her biggest fan. Though she doesn’t agree with our engagement.”

“So why are you guys engaged then? I mean, is it a *real* engagement?”

He laughed, “Yes, it is. I was planning to marry her. Of course all that flew out the window when I hit you with that door.”

I laughed with him, “That shit hurt, by the way.”

“I’m so sorry angel. I *never* want to hurt you.”

My hand gripped his tighter, “So, but... you said that nothing romantic has happened with you guys in over a year. What brought on an *engagement*?”

Edward sighed, “We just... we both tried dating people since Gianna and Felix, including each other. And it always ended with us being frustrated at relationships in general. Tanya is my best friend. I figured... if I was never gonna find *the one*... then my best friend would be the next best thing. That’s terrible, I know. And that’s how I proposed! I thought she was gonna throw her glass of water at me.”

I laughed, “No one would blame her! That’s *awful*, Edward!”

He nodded, “Yeah, I know. And I had to work her down to saying yes. To this day? We’ve kissed like twice since getting engaged. We’ve held hands maybe once. It’s so obvious that we just don’t feel that way about each other. And then you came along-”

“Does she know about me?”

“Of course she does. She’s called and hung up at Cul de Sac for me just to see if you were there,” he laughed. “She wants to meet you and told me when I first told her about you that we should break off our ‘fake’ engagement. And I would’ve, if I’d received any kind of recognition of this thing between you and me, *from you*. I have that now. That’s what I mean when I say that Tanya won’t care. She’s rooting for us I think.”

Well that’s just... wow. “Wow...”

“So that’s all. Unless you had any other questions?”

I turned to him, “I uh... don’t think so?”

He laughed, “Well, if you *do* think of anything else, you can ask me whenever.”

I breathed in deeply, “How, um... how do you think she’ll take it?”

Edward grinned that gorgeous grin at me, “You’ll know tonight, when I call you. I’m going to see her after I drop you off at home. Which, not trying to cut our day short but, it’s gonna be dark soon. We should probably head back.”

I nodded and noticed for the first time how far down the sun had gone. We’d talked for a long time. And that was fine. I had my answers. I trusted him implicitly. He’d been completely up front with me, left nothing out. I needed to make some phone calls myself.

The drive back to my apartment was quiet, but peaceful. Edward held my hand the whole time and the smile didn’t leave my face once. I was dreading the phone calls I had to make tonight. I knew Alice’s call would be the longest, so I decided she would be first. She would want every minor detail. I was worried about the phone call with Rose, I had *no* idea how she would take *anything* I had to say. She’d made me promise when I had called and asked advice on Jasper the first time... she made me promise not to break his heart. And I had a feeling that I was about to do just that.

The phone call to Jasper was the one I was dreading the most. I’d never broken up with someone. I hadn’t really dated in college, and not at all in high school. Jasper was too busy running the boys off in high school. And in college, well once the guys found that I just really wasn’t interested, they broke up with me. This was going to be hard.

And he still hadn’t called. Not since Thursday. He’d gone from calling every day, multiple times, to nothing in the past three days. I didn’t know what was going on with him and I kind of hoped that he had just given up on me. That would make the phone call easier at least.

God I’m such a chicken shit.

And then my phone rang. I sighed. Alice couldn’t *just wait* for me to call her. I was really enjoying the peace of our ride together and the pleasant hum generated between our clasped hands. I wanted to savor the rest of this ride with Edward.

He chuckled, “You gonna answer that?”

I sighed and reached down into my purse for my cell phone. I grumbled, “Do I have to?”

Flipping open the phone, I snipped, “Couldn’t wait ‘til I got home, could you?”

Someone was crying on the other line. I went to pull the phone from my ear to see who was calling when I heard a broken, “Bell?”

I gasped, “Jasper?”

Edward’s hand tightened on mine and I heard his sharp intake of breath.

“Bell... it’s... I need you...”

“Jasper? What’s wrong?”

“My Dad... Bell... he’s gone... he... he died...”

17. The Diary of Jane

If I had to, I would put myself right beside you,

So let me ask, would you like that?

Would you like that?

And I don't mind, if you say this love is the last time,

So now I'll ask, do you like that?

Do you like that?

-The Diary of Jane, *Breaking Benjamin*

Alice had answered on the first ring, a little while after I'd hung up the phone with Jasper. Rose had already called and told her and she made my flight arrangements for me while I gathered my things. She asked if I wanted her to drive me, or if it was okay if she went on down, to help Rose and Charlotte get things in motion for the funeral. I told her that I would rent a car and to please send Rose my prayers, as well as Charlotte. She sounded on the verge of tears through the whole phone call and I wished I could find something to say to comfort her. Peter had been like a second father to her as well. She and Jasper were together for a long time and in that time, she had been as close to his parents as their own children were. I knew this was hard for her.

The phone call with Jasper was painful. I hadn't the slightest clue what to tell him other than that I was so sorry for his loss and to promise that I would be there just as soon as I could. I finally got him calm enough to tell me that his father had suffered a heart attack on Thursday. That he'd been admitted to the hospital for observation and that the hospital had some concerns upon further inspection. They wanted to perform surgery, inserting two stints into his aorta. While he was on the table, in the middle of the surgery, he suffered another heart attack. He didn't recover. They lost him this afternoon. I again told him that I would be there as fast as I could, whispering apologies all the while.

When he whispered that he loved me, I couldn't *not* tell him that I loved him too. Edward was quiet throughout the phone call, but when he heard me whisper those words, he grunted and tried to pull his hand from mine. I just held his tighter and when I'd said goodbye to Jasper, I rushed out an apology to Edward.

"It's okay. I heard what all was going on, it still didn't feel good to hear you tell him that though," he said quietly. His face was tight; his eyes wouldn't look from the road in front of him, "How is he?"

I sighed, "He doesn't sound good. But I can't imagine that I would either. His family is very close." I wished he would look at me, "Edward-"

"Bella, it's fine. Like I said, I heard what was going on. And you're right; I can't imagine that I would be in a very good frame of mind if I just lost my father either."

"Still, Edward, I'm sorry. I know how I would feel if I heard you say that to someone who wasn't me," I blushed with the realization of what I'd just said. Was I really asking him if he loved me *right now*? I rushed on, hoping he wouldn't pick up on that, "I need to call Angela, tell her I won't be in on Monday, let her know what's going on. I hope it's okay-"

"Bella, stop," he grasped my hand tighter in his own. "Call Angela to let her know what's going on, yes. Because she'll be worried about you and she'll want to send her wishes along with you as well. Call my mother to let her know, because she and Peter and his wife were friends. She might want to go. But don't worry about *work*. I've got you covered, angel." He pulled up to a stop light and turned to me. His other hand pulled my face to look at him, "And don't *ever* doubt my feelings for you. I will tell you *that*... when you're ready to hear it. And *I* don't think you are. But maybe I'm wrong. You tell me."

Was I ready? I shook my head, if I wasn't sure that I was ready... then I probably wasn't. "You're not wrong," I whispered to him. "But I do care for you- so much. Please know that. And I'm sorry about what you had to hear. He just sounded so... *broken*. I couldn't just ignore that. And maybe *I'm* wrong but I don't think that the phone call in which he tells me his father just died was the best time to tell him that I've chosen you and I want to break up."

Edward smiled at me, "You're not wrong, angel. Just so long as you know how I feel about you. Go and take care of Jasper. And then," his voice dropped to a whisper, "come back to *me*."

He dropped me at my apartment with a promise to not bug me while I was gone. I begged him to call me regardless and he told me that I would probably change my tune upon arrival. There would be so much going on that I would be too busy to worry about my phone ringing. I promised to call him though, and with a kiss that left me breathless, said goodbye to him. For now.

Angela had been incredibly concerned, asking if I wanted her to come with me and bitching that Edward wasn't going with me. I told her no in response to her offer and defended Edward to her. I fully intended to break things off with Jasper. I just wasn't sure if I would find the right time to do so on this trip. That was a horribly insensitive thing to think, but, I had my mind made up. I *wasn't* so insensitive that I would show up with Edward, who I wanted to be with... to see Jasper, who I didn't. That wasn't fair to Jasper... not right now. I assured her that Alice would be there for me, if I needed her and that I would be there for her in return. She felt a bit better knowing that.

I had an hour wait for my flight once I'd packed and found a parking spot for my car at the airport. I called Esme then, with the number Angela had given me. She was happy to hear from me, already having spoken to Edward about his declaration for me. She assured me that she *still* didn't judge me and asked how comfortable I would be with her at the funeral. Her question caught me off-guard.

"Bella dear, I'm incredibly happy for you and Edward. I told you that I had a feeling he would adore you. I'm usually right," she laughed quietly. "But I'm not so selfish or insensitive to think that you won't be beside Jasper, comforting him the entire time that you're there. This won't be the right trip to break the news to him," she hesitated, "What you need to know is... my son doesn't intend to let you go anytime soon. I have to say that I don't think any of my family is- myself included. We're all smitten with you dear. You're going to be stuck with me in your life for a long time and the role that I'm going to play in your life... well... for goodness sake! This is so hard to say!"

"Esme, I think I know what you mean. You're Edward's Mom. If we were to get... *serious*... you'd be a mother figure to me too. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, dear. To an extent. Think about that and then ask yourself this- are you comfortable with your possible future mother-in-law seeing you comfort your soon-to-be ex?"

Okay, good point. Hadn't thought of it quite like that.

"Um..."

"It's okay if you aren't Bella dear. Peter was a good friend of mine, but I most definitely don't want to make you uncomfortable."

Ugh. Why did she have to be so damned nice? An image of her face popped into my head. The feeling of warmth spread through me and I was suddenly remembering the comfort of her arms around me.

"Actually, if you can handle it... I think I would like very much for you to be there."

"Then I'll make arrangements at once."

She told me to send her prayers to Charlotte and that she would catch a flight out either late tonight or tomorrow.

Then I called Charlie and let him know that I was coming. He, of course had already heard and offered to pick me up from the airport. I refused him that, stating that I would need a car in case I needed to run any errands for the Whitlock's. He hesitantly asked where I would be staying and without a second thought, I asked if he could set out fresh sheets for me in my old bedroom. I *would* be staying with my father. There was only so much comfort I was willing to offer Jasper. Sharing a bed with him went past that.

~*~

I was thankfully able to sleep on the plane rides. Waking abruptly to transfer planes in Dallas aside, I was able to make up for much of the missed sleep from the night before. Still, I was never so thankful for Seattle's 24 hour coffee shops in all my life. The drive went faster than I had anticipated, and I pulled up to the Whitlock residence at eight in the morning. Alice's and Emmett's cars were parked in front, along with many other cars that I didn't recognize. I wished I had gone to Charlie's first and showered and changed, but I told Jasper that I would be here as soon as I could.

I knocked, unsure of the proper etiquette for an occasion such as this. Thankfully, Emmett answered the door, pulling me into a tight hug and whispering that he was happy to see me. There were people all around, some I recognized, most I didn't and I assumed that they were family. I'm sure that many of them had been at Alice and Jasper's wedding, but I really couldn't remember. They all seemed to know who I was though, murmuring their hellos to me as I followed Emmett through the house to the family room.

My eyes fell on Alice first and her head snapped up as soon as I walked into the room. She was sitting next to Rose on one of the loveseats, an arm around her shoulders and her other hand grasping one of Rose's. She leaned in and whispered something to Rose, who then looked up to me and smiled faintly. I made my way to her quickly, kneeling before her and pulling her in for a hug.

"I'm so sorry, Rose," I whispered to her.

She nodded and sniffled, "Thanks Bella. I'm so glad you're here."

She wrapped her arms around me as well and we just held each other for a few minutes. When she pulled back and I saw the state of her face, my hand reached toward Alice, who knowingly passed me a handkerchief. I gingerly wiped Rose's eyes before holding it to her nose and whispering, "Blow."

She smiled but complied. It wasn't lost on me that I was the one comforting her now. Neither was it lost on me, that I now sat in front of her, doing something for her that her brother had done for me not long ago. I wasn't sure how to feel about that, but refused to think anymore on it at this moment in time. Right now, was for them.

Alice leaned forward, pushing one finger into my arm, "Hey you."

Rose choked out a laugh and I smiled in response before turning my eyes to Alice. There was a small, pained smile on her face, "Hey yourself."

One of Rose's arms pushed me toward Alice as she cried, "Jesus, just hug each other."

I chuckled in response but didn't hesitate. Once my arms were wrapped around Alice's small frame, I whispered, "I missed you so damn much."

Alice sobbed out, "God me too... Don't do that to me again."

I nodded against her and she pulled me tighter. Rose choked out, "You two are so freaking cute."

We turned our heads to smile at her and I pulled away from Alice. Taking her hand in one of mine, I vowed, "I won't. Swear."

My other hand took one of Rose's, "Is there anything I can do Rose?"

Rose turned to look at Alice and then cast her eyes downward. She whispered, "Jasper is in the kitchen. He needs you, I think."

I didn't turn to look at Alice; I couldn't bear to see the pain on it. I just nodded and stood to go to him.

My father intercepted me on the way to find Jasper. He had come by to pay his respects to Charlotte and see if I made it in okay. He passed me my old key to his house and pulled me in for a very unlike-Charlie-hug. Tears sprung to my eyes. I couldn't remember the last time he'd hugged me and I realized how much I missed him. He was probably one of the best dads ever and I had taken him for granted for too damn long.

"I love you, Dad. I'm so sorry I didn't tell you before I moved," I whispered to him, hugging him a tad tighter to reinforce the words I'd spoken.

"Love you too Bells. And don't worry about that crap. I'm real glad to see ya again though kiddo. Real glad," he too hugged me just a bit tighter when he'd finished speaking.

I pulled away from him and offered him a smile, assuring him I would see him at the house later and wiping the tears that had formed in the corners of his eyes. He nodded and turned to leave but I didn't move. I watched my father leave and thanked heaven above that I still had him in my life. When he disappeared out the door, I drew in a deep breath and made my way to the kitchen.

Jasper was sitting at the kitchen table, holding his mother's hand and talking lowly to her. There were two other women gathered at the table as well and, much to my disappointment, one of them was Mrs. Brandon. I sighed but told myself that she wouldn't say anything bad at a time like this. The woman had more couth than that. Slowly, I walked toward the table. I'd only made it about five steps when Jasper's head popped up and saw me.

I gasped at his face. It looked like he'd aged ten years. His skin was pale and drawn. There were deep brown, almost black bags under his eyes. The eyes themselves were gray. Storm cloud gray, not one hint of sparkle in them. His eyebrows were pulled down far on his forehead. His mouth pulled into a frown. His hair was longer than I'd ever seen it and it looked as if it hadn't been washed or even combed in days. His clothes hung on him, wrinkled and stained. I'd *never* seen him look *anything* like this before.

As soon as he'd seen me, he was out of his seat and in front of me. He didn't hesitate to put his arms around me and if he noticed my hesitance to put my own around him, he said nothing. His face buried in my neck as his body began to shake with sobs. I didn't know what to do for him. I settled for running one of my hands through his hair and rubbing the other hand in what I hoped were soothing circles on his back. We stood there, in Charlotte's kitchen forever it felt like. Jasper's cries would get better only to get worse and then better again. A never-ending cycle. I *really* did wish there was something more I could do for him. It was *painful* to listen to him like this.

People would walk past us from time to time, each stopping momentarily to lay a comforting hand on Jasper's back or his shoulder. They would all look to me and nod and I *tried* to smile in response. I'm sure that most of the time I looked as if I was grimacing, but that truly wasn't my intent.

Rose's voice brought Jasper's head from my neck eventually, "Jasper, maybe you should show Bella where the showers are upstairs. She doesn't look like she got a chance to stop off at Charlie's..."

I turned to her, "It's okay Rose. I mean, if I'm not embarrassing you... I'll go change if I am, I didn't even think about that."

She shook her head, "No Bella, you look fine, I just thought-"

"You look beautiful, baby. I'm sure I look like hell though," Jasper's voice was hollow sounding. I turned back to him and shook my head, "Don't lie baby. Come on, I'll show you where the showers are and take one too."

"Jasper," I whispered. He didn't want *me* to shower with *him*, did he? *Shit*. I shook my head again, "You really look fine. Can I... I... can I go say hello to your Momma?"

His eyes widened, "Shit Bell. I'm so fucking sorry. Of course."

I felt Mrs. Brandon's eyes on me the whole way. Charlotte though, smiled fondly at me when she saw me approach, "Hello there, sugar. Come on over here and give me a hug."

I smiled warmly at her as I made my way around the table to her. I wrapped my arms tightly around her, "I'm so sorry Charlotte. Is there anything I can do?"

She sniffled, "Oh hush now darlin'. Nothin' to be sorry for. Peter lived a damn good life. And he gave me two *beautiful* babies. I'll tell you what you can do though sugar, you run along and take real good care of my baby boy. He loves you and he needs you Bella."

My eyes shut of their own accord. A pain shot through my heart for this woman. She was truly a beautiful person. I know how much she loves her husband and instead of breaking down with the grief of not ever being able to see him again... she's already chosen to remember everything good about him. A truly wonderful woman.

More pain shot through my heart at the thought of breaking her son's heart. She's being so accepting of me, something I really didn't think would happen. I was going to break her heart too.

I nodded into her shoulder though, to appease her, "I will, Charlotte."

She pushed back on my shoulders, and pulled my face to look at hers. Pushing my hair behind my ears, she told me, "You're a beautiful girl, Bella. Go on upstairs sugar. Get my boy to clean himself up, please. He hasn't showered in days and I think he'd feel a whole lot better if he did."

I *tried really hard* not to show my discomfort, "Okay."

Surprise passed over her face, as she studied me. After a few moments she told me, "I know some of what happened sugar. Please forgive him. He needs you too much right now."

Grief for this woman strengthened my resolve. I came here to comfort him and his family. I would do what I came to do. I smiled for her, "Don't you worry about a thing, I'll take care of him."

She smiled at me, "I know that, sugar."

I stood and turned from her, squeezing her hand as I turned back to Jasper. "You heard your Momma, let's go get you cleaned up."

A small smile formed on his face as his eyes met mine, "She's already bossing you around baby..."

I smiled at him in response and he pulled me from Charlotte, back into his arms. His lips touched my forehead, "I missed you so much Bell."

My eyes closed and I nodded against him. I placed my hands on his biceps, trying to pull back from him so I could take him to get cleaned up. He held me tight though, "Jasper, come on. Let's get you ready before anyone else comes today."

A disapproving voice came from across the table quietly, "So inappropriate."

Jasper turned on Mrs. Brandon, "Look here you *bitch*!"

Charlotte interrupted, "It is *not* the time! Either of you!"

I opened my eyes and turned to look at Mrs. Brandon, "I'm sorr-"

"Don't bother," she sniffed at me.

"Jane!" Charlotte tried again.

"What, Charlotte? Don't you find it just a bit *wrong* that *she's* here? She broke their marr-"

"Enough Mother," Alice had walked in the kitchen at some point. "Charlotte is right. Now is not the time to discuss *anything* of that sort."

I turned my head to look at Alice, who was purposely *not* looking in Jasper and my direction. She was glaring daggers at her mother, willing her to shut-up. Mrs. Brandon was glaring them right back. Actually, it looked as if everyone in this room was glaring daggers at Mrs. Brandon. Even easy-go-lucky Emmett, who was holding Rose comfortingly next to Alice.

Jasper's lips were at my ear then, "You're right baby, let's go."

I nodded and followed him upstairs and in to what I remembered being his childhood bedroom. It looked... lived in. His clothes were strewn all over the place, the dirty undistinguishable from the clean. The bed sheets and comforter were wrinkled and bunched together at the foot of the bed. There was a thin layer of dust over everything. I turned a raised eyebrow at Jasper.

His expression was guilty, quietly he said, "I've uh... been staying with Momma and Dad since I got back."

Pain shot through me again and I'm sure it was visible on my face. *Look what you did, Bella.* I was determined to not let him feel any guiltier about that though. Now was the time to mourn his father.

"Why don't you go and take your shower, Jasper. I'll get this place cleaned up while you do that. Okay?"

His eyes clenched shut, "You don't have to clean up my mess, baby. I'd rather you came with me to-"

"It's *my* mess, Jasper. Don't pretend it isn't. Go, shower. Let me do this for you, please?"

He breathed in deeply, "Okay. But... just uh... don't go, okay? I mean, will you wait for me to come back out?"

I nodded and sent him a smile. He stared at me for a moment before nodding as well and retreating to the bathroom. I set forth getting his clothes together and realized quickly that I knew where nothing to clean was. Sighing, I made my way back downstairs and to find Rose. She was sitting at the table now, in Mrs. Brandon's place, holding her Momma's hand. As quietly as possible, I knelt beside her, "Rose?"

Her head snapped to mine, "Bella? Where's Jasper?"

I smiled at her, "He's showering. I was going to clean his room? It's really a mess... but I don't know where anything is."

She nodded and called Emmett over, explaining what I needed. Charlotte sent me another smile as Emmett pulled me from the room.

"So all the cleaning shit is right in the closet," he told me after we'd gone back upstairs and was standing in front of what I thought to be a closet. "There's more downstairs- just find me if you need it. Jasper's room is a fucking pigsty, so you just might."

I laughed lightly, "It's entirely possible that you're right."

Emmett gave me his heartwarming smile and nodded. He looked down for a moment before returning his eyes to my own, "You alright B? Rose told me what all happened. I know that you haven't talked to him. Me and Rose understand, completely. But now with all this... and it's like you're just expected to take care of him. And Alice is here and I know that you two talked but-"

"I'm fine Emmett. Swear. Don't worry about it, okay?"

He gave me a hard stare, "I can't *not* worry about it B. Just... you need someone too. And it isn't fair that all of this is being put on you."

"I have my Dad, Emmett. And a good friend of mine from Jacksonville will be here soon. She's a lovely woman, and I know that she'll be a great comfort, if I should need her."

He nodded slowly, "Just know that you got me too. Okay? If you need anything B."

I smiled and pulled him in for another hug, "You're a good friend Emmett McCarty. Thank you."

The water was still running in the shower when I re-entered Jasper's room so I set forth in my task. So much of Jasper's things were gone, presumably at his own house, so the dusting went quickly. I was just clearing the last of the clothes off the floor when Jasper emerged from the bathroom.

He was in a towel and nothing else, almost the whole of his body on display for me. I blushed and looked away quickly, "I uh... don't know where your clothes are- other than the ones on the floor. I would've found them and brought some in for you though, I'm sorry."

His voice was rough when he answered, "Nah its cool baby. I completely forgot to grab some before I went in too. My mind just... isn't working right or something."

I nodded and kept my eyes averted as he made his way to the closet, presumably to find fresh clothes. "There's plenty of hot water left if you want to take a shower Bell. I can run down and get your bag out of your car for you if you'd like."

I shook my head, "I actually forgot to ask Emmett where the washer and dryer was. I wanted to get your laundry started."

"You don't have to do that, baby."

I nodded, "Just let me, Jasper. Can you tell me where the washer and dryer are?"

He did and I left him to finish dressing. Once I'd located them and gotten a load started and made my way back to his room, he was done dressing and sitting on the edge of his bed, staring off into space. I didn't really *want* to go anywhere near a bed *and* Jasper at the same time, but it was unavoidable. I sat down next to him, drawing his attention to me. He reached for my hand, cradling it between both of his before raising it to his lips.

Jasper brushed a kiss across my knuckles before whispering, "I'm so fucking glad you're here Bell. I felt like I was losing my goddamn mind."

I was *extremely* uncomfortable, but I knew that this was why I was here. "It's all going to be okay. You know that, don't you?"

I looked to his face, there were tears in his eyes as he said, "I know. I just... *God*... I fucking miss him so much... already."

There was really nothing I could do for him but pull his head to my shoulder and lay a comforting hand on him. We sat there for a long time, while Jasper cried and the whole time I kept my hand there. Sometimes stroking his cheek, something running my fingers through his damp hair, most times just leaving it pressed to his cheek. I hoped that I was comforting him, but I really wasn't sure. I felt so awful for him. Peter was Jasper's best friend. Their relationship was unique to a father and son. Jasper had lost more than his father and I just wished I could do something for him. I knew though, that there really wasn't anything more that I could do than this.

A knock at the door brought his head up and I stood to grab him a tissue. I handed it to him and went to answer the door. I looked back to him before answering; to make sure he was okay with anyone else coming into the room. He nodded to let me know he was and I opened the door to find Alice standing there. I gave her a smile and opened the door wider to allow her to enter.

She was hesitant, that was clear. But when she saw Jasper sitting there, red-nosed and sad-eyed, she rushed to him. Wrapping her tiny arms around him she whispered, "I'm so sorry Jasper. He was... a... *great* man."

He nodded into her shoulder and wrapped his arms around her as well, "Yeah... he was."

I was pleased to find that the sight of the two of them hugging and being close to one another didn't faze me at all. I *had* been worried, a small nagging in the back of my head, that it might still hurt me to see this. That there might be some lingering feelings of possessiveness or intimacy toward Jasper inside of me. But the two of them hugging and whispering reassurances to one another, honestly didn't bother me at all. I was happy to see it and know that it wouldn't bother me anymore. I wondered if I had met Edward in high school, how different things might be now. These two might still be together and happy. And Edward and I wouldn't have this awkward stage to get through before we could be together. He and Jasper would probably even be friends.

But that wasn't the way things were, and they never would be. I made my way to Jasper and Alice, placing one hand on her back and one on his wrist, I whispered, "I'm going to leave you two alone for a bit. I'm going to run to Charlie's and drop my things off and shower, but I'll be back as soon as I can."

Jasper's head popped up from Alice, "What?"

Alice nodded to me, "Okay Bella. Is it... okay if I stay with you? I really don't want to put up with my mother."

I smiled at her, "Of course it is. Charlie will be happy to have you. Me too," I shook my head, willing the tears away. Thoughts of Alice and me in high school, camping out in my bedroom after Gilmore Girls running through my head. "I'll be back quick."

"Wait," Jasper whispered. He turned to Alice, "Could you... Can I have a moment alone with Bell?"

A pained look took over Alice's face, but she nodded before standing and turning to me. She smiled at me, though her eyes betrayed her sadness at his request. "I'll just be outside."

I nodded to her and watched her close the door behind her. Jasper grasped my hand, pulling my attention back to him. "What do you mean, Bell? I thought..." he shook his head and cleared his throat. He wiped the tears from his eyes and told me, "I guess I just thought that you'd be staying here. With me. If you're not comfortable at this house, we can go back to mine. I mean-

"Jasper," I whispered. I cupped his cheek with my free hand, "You should stay here, your Momma is probably gonna need you. I'll be here more than I'm at Charlie's, you won't even notice that I'm gone."

He shook his head, "Yes, I will. I haven't felt anything in the past twenty-four hours until you walked in to that kitchen. I *need* you Bell."

I closed my eyes, "Jasper..."

"Bell, please baby. I swear to you that I won't do anything. I won't make you uncomfortable at all. I won't talk about anything you don't want to or anything. I'm not trying to use my *father's death* to earn your forgiveness. I just... please baby... I just need you. Here. With me."

I drew in a shaky breath, “Jasper, just... let me go get cleaned up. And I’ll think about it, okay? I had already told Charlie that I would stay with him. I really did think that you would be spending night-time with your family...”

“You are my family, baby,” His love for me was plain on his face. When he spoke again, I was almost sure I hadn’t heard him right. His voice was soft and quiet, not much more than a whisper, “Or you will be... one day.”

“What?” The silence after my question was *deafening*. Was he truly implying what I thought he was? Surely he knew that even if we weren’t getting back together... even if we hadn’t fought... even if things weren’t awkward as hell between us right now... even if I didn’t care so much for Edward... There was *no way* that Jasper and I were, or had been, anywhere close to discussing *marriage*. I wasn’t sure what to say to him. I know that he knew I had heard him, and that my questioning was to indicate that I wanted an explanation. He was offering me none though, hell, he wasn’t even looking at me anymore.

“Nothing,” he finally murmured. “Nothing at all, Bell. I’m just,” he shook his head again. “There’s just so much... but it’s not the time. Go, go on to Charlie’s. I’ll be here when you get back.”

I hesitantly nodded and whispered goodbye to him. Turning to go, I was shocked when he forcefully pulled me back to him. His lips touched mine and I had to fight hard with myself to keep from struggling against him. I had to remind myself that he *didn’t know* what my plans were. I had to remind myself that Jasper *still thought* that we were in a relationship, no matter how rocky it might be. I had to remind myself that to him, I was his *girlfriend*. I had to remind myself that Edward knew what would most likely happen when I came to take care of Jasper. I had to remind myself that even Esme felt that this trip was the wrong time to break up with Jasper. I had to remind myself that I used to *love this man*, and I knew that in a way I still did. I had to remind myself of all of those things and still, it felt *so wrong* to be kissing him right now. To be leading him on, right now.

I pulled away, willing myself to do so slowly. To not alert him to how uncomfortable I actually was. I told him that I would be back soon and I walked out of there.

Catching my breath outside of his door, and trying to keep the tears from spilling over, I turned to Alice. She was leaning against the wall outside of his door, “I’ll be back soon. Do you need anything while I’m gone?”

She shook her head and answered quietly, “No. Is he...?”

“He’ll be alright. I think. I’m sorry you have to go through this, Alice.”

Alice smiled her pained smile at me, “I’m sorry any of us have to go through this, Bella.”

And then she turned and walked in to see her husband. I exited the house slowly, working hard to keep my breathing in check. Once I was in the safety of my rental, I pulled out my phone.

He answered before the first ring had finished, and I didn’t even let him say a word. “I... please, I *need* you.”

Edward didn’t hesitate, “I’ll be there as soon as I can angel.”

18. Far Behind

So! My dumb-butt totally uploaded that last chapter *without* an Author's Note. And I haven't the slightest how to change that, so! Here's the one for this chapter and last!

My husband and I are going to Houston to see my brother on Tuesday, and then to Seguin on Sunday to see his parents on the way back home. That means... no time to post chapters this week. Which is why you all got that one last night and now here's this one- love you guys! I just couldn't leave you all without *something*. Not after the update on Friday! I *will try* to get the chapter for *next* Monday done this week, but please forgive me if it comes out either really, really late on Monday, or not until Tuesday. I just don't see me getting much writing done with my brother around. . He's a bit of a drama queen and his nasty ass would be asking what I'm doing and I just couldn't write any kind of smut without him offering suggestions and that's just... ewwww.

And I really wanted to get this out earlier today, but *How to Save a Life* and *Just One of the Guys* updated and I had to fangirl... sorry. ^^;;

So yeah, enjoy the chapter! Thank you to everyone who is reading and those who are reviewing... love you all! Oh! In light of the stories being pulled from FFN or being requested to be taken down, whatever, I *tried* to make a blog. I'm still working on it and I feel like a total dork saying that I made it and it's not very good, but... if you like my story and you suddenly find it missing one day from FFN... It's [http://tiarwen\(dot\)blogspot\(dot\)com/](http://tiarwen(dot)blogspot(dot)com/)

All things Twilight still belong to Stephenie Meyer.

Now maybe,

I didn't mean to treat you oh so bad,

But I did it anyway,

Now maybe some would say you're left with what you had,

But you couldn't share the pain, no, no, no.

-Far Behind, Candlebox

The rest of the day was just... *exhausting*. For me, at least. After I'd dropped my bag off to Charlie's and showered and changed, I ran to the grocery store in town. I wanted to make sure that the Whitlock's had something besides casseroles and pies to eat for dinner. I picked up some fresh flowers as well, for Charlotte and Rose. I wanted to *try* to act normal... for those two at least. I set forth making lasagna for the family as soon as I arrived back at the Whitlock residence. Thankfully no one asked why I hadn't run to find Jasper straightaway. Everyone pretty much stayed out of my way and after I put it in the oven, I went to see where Jasper was hiding.

I had absolutely no idea how Jasper was going to react to Edward being there. Of course I cared and I truly didn't want to hurt him, but there was only so much that a human being could take. And I had just about reached my limit after less than a day spent with him. His hands and his lips and his words and his body were only going to become more demanding and I just... couldn't. Edward and I hadn't even talked about how or what to say to Jasper or the rest of the Whitlock's, he'd been sidetracked trying to find the soonest and fastest flight to get *here*. He was on a plane right now and he would be at my father's house tonight. He made sure to promise me that he would tell his mother of his arrival and they would drive together to Forks. I made sure to extend the offer of staying with Charlie to her as well.

I found Jasper where I left him, in his bedroom. He was asleep and much to my surprise, Alice was asleep against him. They looked as they used to and I briefly wondered if these two would reconcile after I broke his heart. That probably wasn't possible, and I knew it. She was just trying to comfort him, and receive some comfort in return. I didn't want to disturb them, so I turned to leave. When I opened the door, Rose was standing on the other side, hand poised to knock. She smiled guiltily at me before turning her eyes to the couple in the bed. Her eyes widened and she jerked her head back to me before grabbing me and pulling me out of the room quickly.

She led me down the hall, to another bedroom that I assumed had been hers. I'd *never* been in Rose's room before. She hated me up until a few weeks ago, why would I have been? I was shocked to find that there wasn't a hint of pink in it. It was decorated tastefully in neutral colors, the only indications that Rose had lived here were pictures of herself and Emmett dressed in formals.

She pulled me to sit on the bed, "Bella, I don't know what the hell that was but--"

I smiled at her, "Rose, stop. It's fine, really."

Rose shook her head, "No. It's not. It isn't fair that he's doing this. I don't care *what's* happening in our life. It's like he can't choose which of you he wants..."

My smile dimmed a little, "I don't think it's like that at all Rose. She's still his best friend. And things between us... are..." There really wasn't *much more* that I could say without having to tell her the whole story. Keeping it from Jasper meant keeping it from his entire family. They were all hurting right now. I reminded myself mentally that I was here to play a part. I told myself that *my comfort* would be here tonight. I just had to keep myself together until I could hear Edward's soothing voice and feel his arms around me again. Everything would be okay then. "Things between us are still rocky, Rose. If he can find comfort in his wife, who is also one of his best friends... well who the hell am I to take that from him?"

I realized that I was making myself sound like a martyr, and I sure as shit didn't want that. I was anything but, "Really, Rose. I'm not bothered by it. Please believe me."

She pulled me in for a hug, "You don't have to keep it from me Bella. Alice told me about Edward."

I gasped and pulled away from her, “Rose-”

“Hey,” she whispered, stroking my hair, “I was there. Remember? Jasper fucked up. He made you doubt him. He made you doubt your relationship. I’m not judging you Bella.”

“It’s not like that Rose. I think...” I just couldn’t think of what was *acceptable* to say to her. I was still afraid of the heartless shrew that she was when first we’d met. Yes, she’d been there. Yes, she’d taken care of me. Yes, I considered her my friend. Didn’t change the fact that I was talking about leaving her brother. She loved her brother very much, and now wasn’t really the time to be talking about this anyway. I’d prepared myself to keep this from her. I didn’t know what to say.

“I think... that you are one of the most... selfless people I’ve ever met in my life. Once I actually let myself look past what I *chose* to see, and saw who you really are? That was one of the first things that I learned about you. Bella,” she pulled my face level with hers. Her hands moved to cup my cheeks, “You’re *here* to take care of a man that has no business receiving your comfort. But yet you give it so willingly. Your concern for him is genuine, anyone can see that, but Bella,” she smiled beautifully at me. She shook her head once, as if to emphasize what she was about to say, “You don’t deserve *this*. And you know it. Don’t let him pressure you into anything that you don’t want. Right now? Is the time for you to set limits for my brother.”

I shook my head at her, “I don’t know what you mean...”

“Okay,” she smiled. “So for one, answer this for me. This guy, Edward? Does he... make you happy?”

A smile spread across my face, without my permission. “Never mind that question. The smile says it all.”

I laughed and Rose laughed with me, “Do you plan to tell Jasper about him?”

My laughter stopped abruptly and the smile left my face immediately. I whispered, “Not right now. But yes, I do. I don’t think that this is the right time...”

Rose nodded, “You’re right. And that’s the answer I was hoping for. It really isn’t fair to you Bella, but, I appreciate what you’re doing for him. So...” she looked down and turned her head from me. “We um... when you do... um... are we? I mean...”

I grabbed her head and pulled it back to look at me, “I couldn’t give you up Rose. You’ve been so good to me and you’re such a good friend. If that’s what you’re asking... don’t even think about it.”

Her face broke into a smile and she pulled me to hug her, “Thank you. I just... it hurt to think about losing you too.”

And then she broke down in tears. I held her for a long time, just letting her get it all out. I took a page from her and told her, “You cry Rose, cry and get it all out. That’s the only way it’ll get better. Promise.”

After a while, the door opened and Emmett came through. I caught his eye and sent him a smile, which he returned before sitting behind Rose and pulling her from me. “What’s going on in here ladies? I’m not complaining, don’t get me wrong, two fine young women such as yourselves all hugged up on a bed,” he wagged his eyebrows at us. We both broke into laughter, “Just warn a guy before. Ya know, I might’ve wanted to be here for it.”

Rose slapped at one of his hands that held her, “Hush you.”

I smiled at them. I could see now what I couldn’t when I was younger. These two loved each other unconditionally. The looks that passed between them were tender and sincere. The love they felt for each other evident in their every move.

Rose turned back to me, “Emmett knows all this too, so don’t feel uncomfortable, please.”

He turned his eyes to me, “Ohh, is this about ol’ boy? Edward? The one that Rose was all drooling over when Ali sent pics?”

I blushed and looked down. *Did everyone think he was gorgeous?* Rose laughed, “That’s the one. Hey, by the way, is he here? I don’t mean in the house, just... is he in Forks?”

And so I told them both that he wasn’t, but would be. It was actually nice talking to them; they readily offered advice on how to handle the situation. Never in a million years did I actually think that Rose would have acted this way, but the relief that spread through my body at *not losing her* overshadowed any doubts that I’d had to the contrary. Ultimately, they both felt that it would be best if Edward *didn’t* come by the Whitlock residence, though they both assured me that they would find some time to come by Charlie’s to meet him while he was here. They were both ecstatic to meet Esme as well, having heard such good things from Peter, Charlotte, Jasper *and* Alice about her.

Rose suggested that I tell Jasper, straight up, that I wasn’t comfortable with *that level* of intimacy right now. It wouldn’t be *exactly* lying to him and for that I was grateful. She said that he would probably bitch and moan about it, and if it were her, she would tell him exactly how I found him this afternoon. *I* couldn’t do that though, so I mentally prepared myself to deal with his tantrum, should he throw it.

When we finally did exit the bedroom and go back downstairs, the house had cleared of a lot of the people. We found Charlotte in the kitchen still, cutting a piece of my long-forgotten lasagna.

“Oh God, I *completely* forgot that I had put that in the oven,” I gasped. “I’m so sorry, Charlotte.”

She laughed, “Hush now sugar. I’m so glad I figured out who made it. I’ve had two pieces already! You’re gonna have to leave me your recipe,” she winked at me.

I put an arm around her, “Of course, thank you for pulling it out. And I’m so glad you like it.”

“Like it? Oh sugar,” she sighed. “I love it.”

I smiled at her as I heard Jasper ask, "Love what?"

He and Alice were walking into the kitchen, hand in hand. His eyes widened when he saw me standing there, half-hugging his mother and he dropped Alice's hand like it had burned him. A flash of pain ran across her face, but she recovered quickly, "Oh my God, Bella! You made lasagna!"

I laughed at her as she ran over and cut a piece for herself. Jasper walked over to me and placed his hands on my hips. Pulling me away from his mother and flush to him, he whispered, "Can I talk to you? In private?"

I took a deep breath, preparing myself for the argument I knew would ensue. Before I could nod my assent, a knock rang out from the front door. Emmett walked out of the room to get it and I pulled a bit away from Jasper.

"Later? I think you should be with your Momma for a little bit," I whispered back to him.

I felt him shake his head, "Its important Bell. I really think-"

"Oh Charlotte," Esme Cullen sighed as she swept into the room. My eyes widened and my throat closed up. Jasper's hands on my hips tightened and I turned my head to watch *Edward* follow his mother into the kitchen. I heard and felt Jasper's breath leave him at the sight. Edward's eyes found mine quickly and I watched the discomfort pass over his face at seeing me so close to Jasper. I pleaded with my eyes for him to understand, and his minute nod let me know that he did.

"Esme," Charlotte breathed and the two women embraced. The rest of the room was completely still. Rose, Emmett and Alice were inconspicuously casting glances at Jasper and Edward. Jasper was glaring murderously at Edward. Edward was looking anywhere but at the two of us. And I was trying to find a way out of Jasper's arms. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I was *so sorry* to hear about Peter," Esme told her. "Bella called yesterday to let me know. I came as soon as I could. I am *so sorry* that I wasn't able to make it out for Jasper and Alice's wedding."

My eyes widened, as did Edward and Alice's. Jasper's hands gripped even tighter on to my hips. *What was she doing?*

"Yes, well, I'm sure it was a very busy season. And we understood Esme, honey. Jasper told me that Bella was working for you. I'm so happy about that. Isn't she a sweetheart?"

Esme smiled widely at Charlotte, "A *very* lovely girl, indeed. My whole family is just taken with her," she turned her smile to me. Her eyes dropped to Jasper's hands quickly and then she turned to Jasper, "Ah, Jasper. Come here, sweet boy."

And just like that, she solved *my* problem for me. Jasper's hands left me and he closed the distance between himself and Esme. She wrapped him in a hug and whispered something against his ear. Jasper's sobs were immediate and he was gripping her for dear life. She held him steady and Charlotte helped lead them to the table, where they sat and Esme continued to hold him.

I turned to look at Edward, breathing out slowly. His eyes were already on me. A small smile was in place for me. He mouthed, "Don't," to me.

I shook my head. Don't what? His smile turned slightly crooked, and he mouthed, "Later."

Rose piped up, "Why don't we uh... head to the family room?"

We all nodded and aside from the three sitting at the table, followed her out of the room. My breathing still wasn't controlled, if anything it had gotten worse. Edward hung back, just a bit and brushed his hand down my arm as I passed him. He squeezed my hand, "Is there anything you need, angel?"

I shook my head and *tried* to smile at him. "Hey," he said quietly, "I'm not dumb, remember? I know that he still thinks of you as his girlfriend. I *am* prepared, Bella. No matter what I must have looked like in there."

This time my smile was genuine and un-forced, "Thank you. I *really* needed you."

"I have to warn you about something," he looked anxious as he told me this. My eyebrows furrowed as I looked at him. What did *he* have to be anxious about? "Tanya is here. When I called to tell her that you needed me, she suggested it. She thought it might make things a little easier for Jasper."

I gasped, "Where is she?"

"She's outside. She wanted me to tell you before she just waltzed in to play the role of my fiancée again," he rolled his eyes. His voice dropped even lower, "And it will be *just playing* that role. Just so you know. We aren't together, at all anymore. I'm all yours, angel."

My smile threatened to split my face in two and I looked down, closing my eyes. *Edward was mine*. I whispered, "Thank you."

I wanted to meet her at once and so I turned to head outside, but was stopped when Emmett spoke up, "Nuh uh little lady. You don't get to just run out of here. *We're* the family *here*. Introduce your man so I can read him the big brother act."

Alice and Rose burst into quiet giggles. I turned to Edward only to find a slight blush on his cheeks. I grasped one of his hands in mine and waited for him to look me in the eye before turning back to everyone else. "Charlie's gonna read him the father act tonight. Must I subject him to *you* as well?"

"Um... yes Bella. And don't act like I'm not the one that got you together," Alice *tried* to look serious as she said that. Her laughs gave it away, "I *dressed* you! Edward Cullen was *powerless* to my superior skills."

I rolled my eyes at her, "You realize that I'm *just about* to introduce you to him. So you can't really take credit for me and him. Right?"

"You're no fun," Alice huffed.

“Yeah, well,” I huffed back.

“If you would *just admit* how right I was about the two of you, I would *totally* lay off,” she smirked.

I rolled my eyes, “I don’t recall you telling me *anything* about the two of us. I only remember you calling him- what was it? Oh yeah! You called him *delicious*.”

Alice gasped, “I did *not!*”

I pointed my finger at her, “You did *so!*”

“Did not!”

“Did too! In fact, I’m sure I still have the text message saved...” I pulled my cell phone out of my back pocket as Alice tried to scramble off of the couch to steal it from me. Emmett reached around Rose to push her back down and she finally relented with a huff when she saw my smile. She turned her gaze to Edward and blushed before looking down and away.

Rose stood from the couch and walked over to us, “Pay no mind to them, they’re like little girls when you get them around each other. I’m Rose, it’s very nice to meet you,” she held her hand out to him.

Edward shook her hand, “It’s nice to meet you also. Bella has told me a lot about all of you. I’m Edward.”

He smiled that crooked, gorgeous smile at her and *Rose* blushed. I turned my eyes to Alice only to find her still blushing and her eyes were now glazed over. Emmett popped up quickly, making his way to where the three of us stood and whispered, “Look dude, you can’t be doing that shit around these women. Not cool,” he huffed.

Edward furrowed his eyebrows as he turned to Emmett, “I’m sorry?”

“The smile dude! These chic’s are like my lil sisters and *this* is my *wife*. So... go unleash that shit around someone else.”

“Aww Emmett, do you have a man-crush?” *Alice, please shut-up.* “I mean, none of *us* would blame you but-”

“Shut-up Ali!” Emmett huffed. He turned to me, “Why don’t you run along, and take the little annoying one with you. Me and Eddie here need to have a talk.”

Edward’s crooked grin widened, he was *so* taunting Emmett, “Edward, dude. Don’t call me Eddie. I hate that shit. And that’s cool, but first... I need Bella to meet someone. So... be right back?”

I told the three of them to *be nice*. That I would explain who Tanya was to them all later, but seeing as we were short of time *right now*... For them to just behave. I told them with a wink and a smile that she was Edward’s fiancée, and was awarded with a wink and a smile back from the three of them, along with a nod and a promise to not give her any shit. For that, I was grateful. Tanya had come to *help me*. I didn’t want her getting any more grief over her relationship, or lack thereof, with Edward.

Tanya was standing next to a sleek, black Mercedes with rental agency plates on it. I knew it was her before Edward said anything to affirm my assumption. She was beautiful. Her hair was shoulder-length and blonde, with hints of gold running throughout and it hung in loose waves all around her. Her eyes were light brown, almost golden in color. She was slender, with voluptuous curves in all of the right places. Her bottom lip was between her teeth and she was undoubtedly nervous.

Hesitantly meeting my eyes and wringing her hands, she said quietly, “Hello, Bella.”

Her voice was soft, gentle and warm. I smiled at her and grabbed her hands to stop her nervous fluttering, “Hello, Tanya. Thank you so much for coming.”

She smiled back at me and nodded, “Of course. Edward explained to me what happened. I couldn’t *not* do this. I do hope you aren’t upset with me though. I just assumed-”

“You assumed right. I’m not upset at all,” I pulled her into a hug and felt her breath even out as I held her. Moving back a bit, I whispered, “I can’t thank you enough.”

She shook her head, “There’s nothing to thank. Let’s go inside before um... *anyone* gets suspicious. We’ll talk later?”

I smiled again and nodded. We three turned back to go inside and found Jasper standing at the front door. I took a deep breath, “Jasper, this is Tanya. Edward’s fiancée.”

Jasper nodded politely to her, “Thank you for coming. Bell? Can I talk to you? In private? Please?”

Tanya squeezed my hand, “We’re going to go find Esme, Bella. See how long she wants to stay tonight,” I turned to look at her. With the eye that Jasper couldn’t see, she winked, “You have my cell though, if you need me... just call.”

And then she smiled beautifully at me and pulled Edward in to the house. Jasper stiffened noticeably as they passed beside him and didn’t turn to look at them. He kept his eyes trained on me, “Please Bell?”

I let out a slow breath and made my way to him. As soon as I was within reach, he grabbed my hand and pulled me to him. Keeping me as close as possible, Jasper led me back through the house to the stairs. When we’d reached his bedroom, he sat down and pulled me to sit on his lap. Wrapping his arms around me and squeezing tight, he pushed his lips into my neck and whispered, “Finally. God, I thought I would never get you alone.”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on not appearing as uncomfortable as I actually was. His hands were kneading the flesh on my back and sides and his lips

were parted slightly against my neck. Every breath he took made my hair push out and away and I felt like a live wire. *And not in a good way.*

After what felt like an eternity in that position, he finally pulled his head back just a bit, “Bell?”

My eyes were still closed and I was glad for the closeness only because he couldn’t see the twisted expression on my face, “Yeah?”

“I really fucking missed you,” he sighed. One of his hands roamed up my back, into my hair. I willed myself to relax as he turned my head to him and pressed his lips to mine. I was at least thankful that he didn’t try to deepen the kiss, but I still just really wished he would stop. When finally his lips stopped, he brushed them across my cheek one last time and said, “We need to talk.”

Breathe, Bella. “I don’t really think this is the time, Jasper. You-”

“I’m not gonna waste any more time, Bell. That’s what I’ve learned from this whole experience.”

“Yeah, but-”

“No buts,” he gripped me tighter and scooted back from the edge of the bed until his back was propped against the headboard. And then he pulled my legs to both sides of him, I was full-on straddling him and more uncomfortable than ever. “You know I love you. Right?”

I couldn’t think in this position, “Jasper, I’m not very comfortable like this. I can’t think... it’s... distracting.”

“Too bad. I’ve been without you for too long. I want to hold you, baby. And you don’t have to talk. So just listen to me. Okay?”

Fuck.

He put both of his hands on my face and placed his lips against mine shortly again. Before he pulled away, he told me, “I’ve missed your lips so much, baby.”

My eyes closed without my permission. If my body would just cooperate... I didn’t want him, my body didn’t want him and it was revolting against me. Tensing and trying to struggle within his hold. “Jasper,” I whispered. But he took it all as a sign of encouragement. He pulled me tighter against him, pushing his lips more forcefully against mine. One hand left my face and made its way down my back to my ass. He pushed me in to him and that was all I could take. I abruptly pushed off and away from him. Remembering Rose’s words to me I told him, “I’m sorry Jasper; I’m just... not ready for that again.”

His eyes shut tightly and his jaw clenched. He was working hard to control his breathing. He sat a bit taller, “Why?”

I looked away, “We haven’t even... um... talked...?” *Why did that have to sound like a question?*

“That’s sorta the point of us coming in here, Bell.”

“Yeah,” I snipped, “and that’s *exactly* what we *weren’t* doing.”

He reached for me but I pulled back. Sighing, he said, “Yeah... I... I’m sorry Bell. You’re right, baby.”

I really wish he would stop calling me that.

“Bell?”

I made myself raise my head to him. Looking into his eyes, I *almost* lost my resolve. It was so fucking clear in his eyes how much he still loved me.

But then a montage played in front of my eyes, Edward smiling at me the first time, Edward leaning over the receptionist desk to flirt with me, Edward smiling at me, Edward educating me on tequila, Edward smiling at me, Edward taking me to dinner, Edward holding my hand on the beach, Edward smiling at me, Edward *panting above me*, Edward smiling at me, Edward kissing me, Edward smiling at me. Realization hit me like a *fucking freight train*. And I knew then, I loved Edward. *I was in love with Edward*. The smile that my body had reserved for him and him alone lit up my face, without my permission once again.

“Bell?” The smile in Jasper’s voice was evident. *Oh, fuck.* He thought this smile was for *him*.

Well, it wasn’t really the best time to realize that shit Bella.

I shook my head and refocused on Jasper, “Sorry, yeah.”

He smiled at me. He smiled *my smile* at me. The Jasper Whitlock Trademark Smile. My heart didn’t flutter even once, “What are you thinking about baby?”

“Nothing,” I murmured. Smiling at him once more, a much different smile than what he’d just seen, “What did you want to talk about?”

His smile dimmed and his brow furrowed, “Um... us? Look what I said earlier-”

“It’s fine, Jasper. Really. You’re upset right now, I get that. We tend to say things without thinking when we’re upset.”

Jasper’s face turned frustrated, “No, Bell. That’s not it at all. I’ve thought *a lot* about this. I want you to know how I feel.”

“I know how you feel, Jasper.”

“Do you? You’re not really acting like you do.”

“What do you mean?”

"You keep... fucking... pulling away from me! And tensing up and shit. And I know I fucked up Bell, but I'm gonna do everything possible to fix that shit. Promise, baby."

"Jasper-"

"No Bell," he huffed. "I'm fucking serious. *I love you*. I want you here, with me. Always. I want to marry you and have babies with you and-"

"Jasper!" My breath was coming out in short gasps. "I don't think we should be talking about this. Not right now. I don't think we are *anywhere near*-"

"I told you Bell. I'm not wasting any more time. I want you to know *exactly* how much I love you-"

"Did you forget that *you're still married*?"

"*No!* And I'll be divorced in two weeks-"

"You're not going to postpone the proceedings?"

His brow furrowed, "Why would I?"

I frowned, "I guess... I just thought with your dad..." a flash of pain ran across his face. I sighed, "I thought you would take some time. That's all. Not just jump right back in to life before... you know."

He shook his head, "I don't want to wait. I want to be with you."

"But earlier-"

Shiiiiit. I told myself I wouldn't say shit about him and Alice. And was I really about to suggest they try to reconcile? Shut-up Bella!

"Earlier what?"

"Nothing," I mumbled. "I think you *should* take some time."

His features turned suspicious, "Tell me."

I looked away from him and sighed. Here goes nothing, "When I came back earlier... you and Alice were sleeping... together."

He inhaled sharply, "Nothing happened."

I looked right in his eyes, "You really want to have this conversation right now?"

Jasper raised an eyebrow at me, "I've *been ready* to have this conversation. You're my woman, and I want you back goddamnit."

I took a deep breath and raised my own eyebrow at him, "Fine. Then you tell me- who did you cheat on *Alice* with?"

He was up and off the bed immediately, pacing the room. His breathing was rough and he reminded me *exactly* of the way he was the day of our blow-up. I steeled myself for this outburst.

"Who fucking told you I cheated on Alice?"

So he's going to try *avoidance*? *Good luck buddy*. "Alice did."

"When the *fuck* did you talk to *Alice*?"

"Thursday night. After I called you. Who was it Jasper? Don't lie to me."

"You called me baby?" *Nice try*.

"Answer my question and I'll answer yours," I told him sternly. If he *really* wanted to do this, then I wanted to do it right. And that meant that he should answer my fucking questions, not try to sweet-talk his way out of them.

He stopped his pacing, sinking down on to the bed again. He reached for me but I pulled out of his reach. A pained look appeared again on his face before he nodded and it looked as if he resigned himself to answer me.

"Her name is Maria."

Who the hell is Maria? "Yes, I called, you didn't answer. Who the hell is Maria?"

He took a deep breath, "She's my secretary. Why did you call baby?"

Nice, Jasper. Fucking your secretary. "I thought I was ready to talk. Does she still work for you?"

He looked down and answered quietly, "Yes. She threatened to sue when I talked about firing her."

"Why'd you do it?"

His eyes closed, "I was... unhappy... she was there. She noticed something was up with me... she... comforted me."

I took a deep breath, “Has she *comforted* you since we’ve been together?”

He opened his eyes and popped his head back toward me, “*Fuck no!* I love you, Bell!”

I took in a sharp breath, “Jasper...”

I was hypocrite. That’s all there was to it. Here I was, grilling him on infidelity when *I* was the one that had been unfaithful to him. I was intending to *break up with him*. I didn’t deserve these answers. And I didn’t deserve to ask these questions.

I’d come here to comfort him. Not to have this talk. And it was *completely unfair* to him. He deserved to know the truth.

“Jasper, I need you to know something.”

His hand came to my face, “Baby, I’m sorry. I should have fucking told you about Maria. I should have told you that I cheated on Alice. It isn’t fair to you. Please, Bell. *Please don’t leave me.*”

I whispered, “It’s not about that Jasper. It’s about Ed-”

“Then it’s not important.”

I shook my head, “But it is. It isn’t fair to *you*-”

“I deserve whatever you seem to *think* I don’t. I deserve *way more*. Just... *please*... Bell don’t leave me.”

“You don’t deserve this,” I whispered and turned my head from him. If he really didn’t want me to tell him *right now*... then I would wait. But I was now almost positive that I would be telling him this trip.

“Bell, baby, please look at me,” he whispered. Jasper’s hands were on my neck, cradling my head *so gently*. His thumbs were caressing my jaw and I had to will the tears away. It was going to hurt *so bad* to break his heart. I turned my face though, for him. I looked back into his eyes, for him. I let him press his lips to mine, for him. And for him, I kissed him back. “I love you Isabella Swan. Nothing you can say will change that. Please tell me you still love me too.”

And I did still love him. Not the way that I loved Edward, but still. He was my first love and like he’d told me that he would always love Alice for that reason, I would always love him as well. I just wasn’t *in love* with him anymore.

But right now wasn’t about me. And I knew that. This trip had *never* been *about me*. And I needed to stop this wishy-washy bullshit that I was pulling with him if I was going to *comfort* him. Because what I was doing was anything but. His father *just died*. He called me to be there for him. I vowed to myself that I would. I knew what that would entail and so did Edward. Rosalie was wrong; this man *did* deserve my comfort. He deserved more than that because no matter what he had done in the past... well losing someone you love overshadows that. At least I thought so.

And so I told him what he wanted to hear. And with a smile he pulled my lips back to him. And when I told him I couldn’t stay the night, he sadly relented. And when I said goodbye to him for the night, I sped to Charlie’s house, where Edward was waiting, along with Esme and Tanya and Alice. And when Edward’s arms closed around me, I broke down. And when I introduced him to Charlie, who was more than a little concerned at my tears, Edward called my father ‘sir’ and told him how much he cared for his daughter and that he would take care of her. And the thought made my tears stop.

And so I led Edward back outside and whispered to him, “I love you.”

19. Tears in Heaven

I am sooooo sorry about the rather late update! ; ; Please don't be mad at me! The trip lasted longer than we'd planned, but we had a blast! I missed my brother so much! I hadn't seen him in seven years before the past week.

Thank you all for reading and reviewing! It means so much to me- and if I haven't responded to a review, know that I will, I just haven't had a chance yet!

All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

Beyond the door,

There's peace I'm sure.

And I know there'll be no more...

Tears in heaven.

-Tears in Heaven, Eric Clapton

"Does this tie match?" Jasper murmured while trying on *yet another* of his collection of business ties. He'd yet to find one that he deemed appropriate for the funeral and burial. We'd been in his room for over an hour now and I really just wanted to grab one for him to get it over with.

Stop being such a bitch, Bella.

And really, what tie could he pick that *wouldn't* match a black suit? "Yeah, looks good."

"You sure, baby? I mean, I don't know if red would really be... right? Doesn't it seem kinda wrong to wear *red* to a funeral?"

I wouldn't tell him that Rosalie's lips were painted this exact shade, "Well, maybe the blue one? That looked really nice, I thought."

Jasper sighed, "Yeah. Yeah, the blue one." He walked past me, yet again to grab the blue tie from the closet. I followed him with my eyes and sighed as well.

I'd been here for three days now, and every day was the same. I would cook and answer the phone and clean up after the family that would come over and then Jasper would find some excuse to get the two of us alone in his room together. He would whisper his love for me and push every physical boundary that I had set, all the while telling me about how sorry he was and that he was going to make up for everything. Every day that went by made it harder to think about what would happen when I told him about Edward and me. When I broke his heart.

Edward had been gracious and caring and anytime things got to be too much with Jasper, I would close my eyes and remember Edward whispering that he loved me too.

"I love you," I whispered to him after I had pulled him back outside.

His face showed his confusion. I didn't know what he thought I was leading him out here for, but I'm gonna take a guess that this wasn't it.

"I... uh..." Edward stammered. His brows furrowed and his eyes squeezed shut, "Um... angel..."

"Edward," I whispered and gripped his face. I willed his eyes to mine and when our gazes were locked, I told him, "I do love you. And I don't expect you to say it, not right now. This situation isn't really fair to you. And it wouldn't be fair of me to ask that of you right now. Hell, with all you're putting up with-"

"I love you too, Bella. That's not it."

My eyes blinked in rapid succession. I really wasn't expecting him to say it back; I just wanted him to know how much I cared for him.

"Shit, that didn't really..., that isn't how I wanted the first time I told you I loved you to go. Please believe that. You just... completely took me by surprise. I really didn't think you were ready for all that."

A smile stretched across his face as he stared at me, "Bella?"

I cleared my throat and shook my head, "Yeah. I mean, yeah?"

Both of his hands cupped my cheeks as he lowered his face to mine. He brushed his nose against my own and whispered, "I love you."

I wanted to say it back but his lips were on mine then, a slow, gentle brush that I didn't wish to ruin with my damn voice. He pulled back, less than a centimeter, and I took my opportunity, "I love you too, Edward."

Breathless chuckles escaped both of us and our lips collided again. We stayed that way until we heard the uncomfortable clearing of my father's throat, signaling that our private time had come to a close.

"Okay, how's this?" Jasper asked, pulling me from my thoughts again. He'd changed into the blue tie, and I was ashamed to admit that I actually did check him out. The blue did wonders for his eyes. He looked handsome, just like I always thought he had.

"You look-" I had to clear my throat, apparently the sight of Jasper in a suit and tie still had an effect on me. "You look very nice. And appropriate. We should go downstairs and see that everyone else is ready."

With a sad, small smile, he nodded and followed me out of the room.

~*~

The funeral and burial went by in a blur of tears. Jasper and Rose and Charlotte's eyes never dried. Try as I might, my eyes wouldn't stay dry either. At the funeral, Charlotte sat with Jasper to her right, hands clenched together in her lap the whole time. Jasper's left arm was around her shoulders and only when it was time to go up and view the casket did she hunch over. She sat tall and proud, with a pained smile on her face as various members of the community came up to recount memories of time spent with Peter. I sat sandwiched between Rose and Jasper, a hand held in each of mine.

I had fought with him on this. I had told him that it should be Alice, his wife, or no one at all here. But not me. I wasn't family and I shouldn't be sitting with them. Jasper, of course, argued that I *was* family and that my family wanted me there. He said that of all times in his life, this would be the one that he refused to stand on ceremony about. I *would* sit with them, next to him, where I belonged. According to him.

Edward reinforced this. He said that if it were he, in Jasper's place, there would be nothing that would keep him from sitting me right next to him for the entire day. After that, I relented. So there I sat, crying for a man that I wish so much I had known better, with his family. The only thing I could do to honor his memory was hold the hands of his children as they both reached for mine.

It was the same at the burial. Jasper tried so hard to hold himself and his Momma up when we all stood as they lowered Peter William Whitlock into the ground. The weight was incredible, even for me, to stand tall as we watched his casket go lower and lower. With a resounding thud, it was done. That was when Charlotte collapsed, taking Jasper with her. I hurriedly tried to get myself under control, to try to help pull the two back up from the cemetery floor, but it was impossible. I couldn't see through the veil of tears and, like all days in Forks, it had rained. My heels just sunk further into the ground and I couldn't balance myself to help at all.

Emmett tried to make his way around Rose and myself to help, but before he was able, Edward was there. He pushed himself between mother and son, and with an arm around them both, tried to pull them back to their feet. Emmett finally was able to make it over and helped, as did my father. They passed Jasper back toward me and Charlotte rested her head against Emmett.

I helped set Jasper back down and took a seat next to him, pulling him tight to me. His arms wrapped around me and he sobbed in to my neck. I held him there as I too cried, for a very long time. I felt another hand come to rest on one of my arms and brush past it as it rubbed Jasper's back. I looked up to see Alice there, crying as well. She had lowered her own head to rest on Jasper's other shoulder and her eyes were squeezed shut as she sobbed against him. I pulled one of my arms from around Jasper and laid it on her shoulder, trying to offer her some comfort as well.

A gentle voice broke through our sobs, Tanya asked, "Bella, Jasper? Would you two like some help to the car?"

I raised my head to meet her kind eyes, "Yes, Tanya. Thank you."

She nodded and immediately, Esme and Edward closed in around us. Esme pulled Alice's arms around her, murmuring caring words to her as she led her to her own car. Tanya came to one side of me, Edward to the other side of Jasper and the four of us together rose and slowly walked to our own car. Jasper was so far gone; he never tensed up at Edward being so close to him. I think he just didn't realize what was going on.

Charlotte, Rose and Emmett were already inside of the family car as we made our way. I slid in front of Jasper, placing my arms around Charlotte who was still crying. The car ride was mostly silent, aside from the cries sounding out from everyone. I turned my head to find Jasper and found him staring blankly out the window. My hand slid into his and he squeezed it, letting me know that he was aware of me. He didn't let go for the rest of the ride.

~*~

"Bella?"

My eyes rose from the cookie sheet where I was laying out pre-made biscuits, "Yes?"

"Did you need any help with any of this? I feel awful, you in here doing everything."

I smiled at Esme, "No, it's quite alright. I have it all under control."

She rounded the island counter, where I'd been working for a while now, and placed a hand on my arm. "It's okay to ask for help, now and again. Truly, I don't mind. I haven't been able to do much for Charlotte. She's not processed yet, I don't think." Esme's brow furrowed in worry. I hadn't realized how close Charlotte and Esme had become when Esme was working with Peter and Jasper. And I knew what Esme meant, Charlotte hadn't processed. I think today, hearing her husband's casket hit the soft earth at the bottom of his grave, was almost a shock to her. "I just wished I knew what to do for her."

I nodded and lowered my eyes back to the biscuits, "I know what you mean. I don't really know what else to do, but cook. They need to eat."

"Yes, you're right. Maybe a cake? There's so much pie here... don't know why people always make pies and not cakes at funerals. Or casseroles. I'll never understand what drives people to believe that a mourning person wants to eat Tuna Noodle Casserole. Never."

I chuckled in response, "That's like... my mother's favorite thing in the world to make. It really makes me a little ill. Not so bad as your son and his obsession with--"

"Picante sauce!" Esme gasped a laugh, "Oh my goodness, I know *just* what you mean! You should see his father though, and black pepper."

"Oh! I know! He told me! How *do* you put up with the two of them?"

I turned to her, catching her mid-smirk. My eyes widened at the sight of Esme Cullen *smirking* at me. "Well, you'll find out soon enough. I understand that my son has admitted his love for you, full disclosure and what not."

My cheeks heated up, I murmured, "Yes, he has. As have I."

Her smirk turned into a very motherly smile, "I'm aware. So, this is the speech. Not the best time, but we're on the subject," I nodded to let her know that was okay. I'd actually been expecting this; I hoped it wouldn't be painful. "My son is *very* important to me. My oldest child, my only son, heir to what I've built for my family, but most importantly- one of the three loves of my life. I would do *anything* for my children or my husband. *Anything*. You, Bella, have become very important to me as well. You will find, over time, that I can be your biggest ally or your biggest enemy," her eyes blazed at me. I wasn't afraid but in awe of her, "For example, if your intentions with my son are good, like Ben's were with Angela, I will treat you as my family. And like I've just told you, I would do *anything* for them. If your intentions are anything but, like Gianna, I will be your worst nightmare. Ask yourself why they steered clear of me at that barbeque and I think you'll understand. Have I made myself quite clear?"

My eyes were as wide open as they could go and my head of its own accord was bouncing up and down in agreement.

"Good. Then I won't feel the need to revisit this with you anytime soon. Now, I told you on the phone that I would not judge you for your actions here, and I won't. Just please, don't let things go too far in the name of *comforting* Jasper. Do you understand?"

Again I nodded. My eyes were starting to burn; I don't think I had blinked at all since she started talking.

"Okay. That being said, *have* things gone too far? Up until now?"

I shook my head no.

"Good," she sighed. "Prepare yourself though; he is going to be in need of quite a bit more *comfort*. Don't let yourself get caught up. Okay?"

I nodded, clearing my throat, "I promise that I won't let it."

She smiled, "Just be careful, Bella. *That* would break my son's heart."

"I know," I whispered. "He's been so patient with everything."

"He always will be patient with you, Bella dear. Tell me... have you changed your mind? About... telling Jasper, this trip?"

My eyes closed and more tears leaked out. I *had* changed my mind, until today, at the burial. Seeing him shut-down like that had put a dent in anything that I had planned. I didn't know if I could be the source of more pain for him. At least, not this soon after his father died.

"I thought I had," I whispered. "But then today..."

Esme nodded, "I understand, dear. Personally? I don't think you should. I think it's too soon for him to take. But, you need to not let him get his hopes up about certain things."

"What? I don't know what you mean?"

She sighed, "Tanya overheard him telling Emmett yesterday... he wants to ask Charlotte for their great-grandmother's ring. To give you. He intends to ask you to marry him."

"Oh God," I choked out. *He wouldn't! He couldn't!* We talked about this just the other day! "Oh *God*." But apparently he could, and was going to. Tanya wouldn't make something like that up. I *knew* her. We'd stayed up late the past three nights, with Alice, and the three of us had *talked!* "Oh *God*." I also knew what Jasper had said the other day. About wanting to marry me and have babies and whatever else he was gonna say before I cut him off. "Oh *God*." He really was going to do this. He was going to ask me to marry him. "Oh *God*." With his great-grandmother's ring. Oh *God*. "What do I *do*?"

"Calm down, Bella. I'll tell you what you do. You act like everything is fine. In a few days, you bring it up to him. No longer than that though, and not right now- he needs to mourn. I wanted you prepared, and I wanted you to initiate the conversation. That boy isn't in his right mind right now, he's liable to plop down on one knee and propose to you before his divorce is even final. That is why you talk to him first."

"What if he does it before I talk to him? What if waiting a few days isn't right?"

"Shh," she pulled me in and hugged me. Lowering her lips to my hair, she whispered, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. But I think Charlotte will tell me when and if he asks for the ring. He hasn't yet, so you're safe. I'll let you know, when I know. Okay?"

I took a few deep breaths before I was able to nod against her. When she felt I was sufficiently calmed down, she said, "Okay. Now, tell me where all the cooking stuff is. I feel like baking a cake."

And so I did. She made three cakes in fact. And everyone that came in, smiled as they watched her flutter around the kitchen.

After all, it was impossible to *not* smile at Esme Cullen.

~*~

It was eight-thirty at night before the last person left that evening. I'd said goodbye to Esme, Tanya and Edward an hour earlier. He was being even more understanding today, than he had been previous to this day. I guess seeing Jasper fall to the ground alongside his mother had affected him more than he cared for it to. It hit me very hard as well, I felt *so fucking sorry* for all of them. There was so much I wished I could do for them, but nothing seemed really right. At the moment, I was contemplating which family member to go to.

I was fairly certain that Charlotte was out for the night, I heard her say something to Rose about going to lie down. You truly couldn't blame her; I think that if and when I ever have to bury a husband... I'd want to sleep too. Try to forget what I was going through. There really wasn't anything at all that I could do for Charlotte, especially not now that she'd lay down for the night. I just hoped that things got easier for her, and soon.

Emmett was most likely taking care of Rose. He was an incredibly caring person; I'd always known that about him. Rose was putting up such a strong front

for everyone, but you could see the wear and tear she was taking from all of this- you just needed to look in her eyes. I had no doubt whatsoever that she was in capable hands, so I wasn't *as* worried about her. Emmett would sooner cut off all of his appendages before he'd let Rose suffer without his arms around her.

So, that left Jasper.

And honestly, today? It really hadn't been hard to comfort him, hell I took solace in his arms today as well. It was an emotionally draining day- as it should have been, and the toll was wearing on everyone. As much as I *didn't* know Peter, it was impossible to not feel the love, respect and admiration that the man had held. That alone would have had me in tears. Add to that, Peter's son and daughter had gripped my hand for dear life throughout most of the day and it was inevitable that I would feel the effects of the day as well.

What I really wanted to do was go home. After the conversation with Esme in the kitchen, it was like I had reverted right back to when I first arrived. Flinching and tensing and *genuinely uncomfortable*. I wasn't sure when Jasper planned to pop that question, and I sure as hell wanted to talk about it before he got all crazy in front of his family. I was in constant fear for the rest of the day, anytime Jasper moved, I was expecting him to drop to a knee and ask me. That would have been wonderful, after his father is buried- the day of, me turning down his proposal and having to explain why.

So yeah, I wanted to go home. I hadn't gotten to spend *nearly* enough time in the comfort of Edward's presence and I was seriously craving it. He would be leaving in two days, where as I would be staying for another week... at least. I wanted to cry too, and I couldn't cry here. I had to be strong here, in this house, for Jasper. That was fair to him at least. But that selfish, bitchy, uncaring side of me... well it wanted to go home and let Edward curl around me. And stay that way forever.

So, Jasper it is.

I climbed the stairs to his bedroom, but stopped just short of knocking when I heard voices inside. It sounded like they were arguing. I immediately recognized Jasper, and after a minute of blatant eavesdropping, I recognized Alice as well.

"What the fuck was she doing here, Jasper?"

"Fuck if I know. What the hell does it matter anyway?"

"You *know* why it matters! If it weren't for her, we'd still be married!"

Holy fuck... were they talking about me?

"You know that shit ain't true- don't even pretend like you don't know!"

"Really? You want to pretend like it's not the reason?"

"I'm not *fucking pretending*! She is *not* the reason our marriage is over- and you fucking know it!"

"What happened to you, Jasper?! You used to be so mild-mannered and laid-back and we *never* argued *like this*!"

"You wanna know what's the matter with me? Really? Okay, Alice- here it is. One? I'm in love with someone who lives all the *goddamn* way across the fucking country! Oh! And she's my soon-to-be ex-wife's *best fucking friend*! So you know what that means? I have to watch everything I do or say around her, because if I don't? She cries to you about it and you tell her shit about me that you *fucking* shouldn't!"

"I didn't tell her shit-"

"Oh? So you didn't tell her about Maria? 'Cause that's not what she said!"

"Yes! I told her about Maria! She deserved to know! And it was *so obvious* that you hadn't told her!"

"Not yet, I hadn't! But I was going to! And now she's ten kinds of distrustful with me. That's *all* thanks to you-"

"Fuck you, Jasper! You deserve it- you do! If you had been able to keep it in your pants-"

"What the fuck ever, Alice! You can blame me cheating all you want. But we both fucking know that I was in love with Bella- and I made a *mistake* with you!"

Sobs burst from Alice, loud enough that I made a move to go through the door. He was being a complete asshole to her!

"Fuck you, Jasper!" Alice sobbed, "Fuck you! You can go all high and mighty about it and say that you love her and that I was the mistake- but you know what? The truth is that *you're* the mistake! You're the mistake coming between me and Bella and everyone else in *my life*! You've always been a condescending *prick* and I've *always* looked past it! Even today! You think it was the proper time to be telling everyone how you wanted to give Bella your great-grandmother's ring and what you wanted for you and her and how you wanted to propose and where you wanted to take her for your honeymoon and how great and beautiful and wonderful and *fucking perfect* she is?! You really think it was the best time- you know, since your *wife* was standing not two fucking feet from you as you waxed poetic about the two of you? Huh?"

Oh God! He was doing that?!

"And furthermore- you might want to get all your fucking ducks in a row before you decide some shit for you and Bella. You haven't even talked to her about this-"

"Yes, I have!"

"Really? Then you tell me- why the fuck are the Cullen's here? Huh? Why the *fuck* is *Edward Cullen* here? In fact-"

Time to end this, it's about to get real ugly.

I burst through the door, surprising both of them and shutting Alice up. "What the fuck is going on in here? You two can be heard all the way down the hall!"

Alice huffed, "Talking!"

I rolled my eyes, "Yelling is more like it."

Her eyes narrowed at me, "Were you listening in?"

I *tried* to keep my face from showing any guilt, "No, like I said, you two were being fucking loud."

"That's funny."

Jasper looked from me to her, quietly he asked, "What's funny?"

Alice turned to look at him, "Oh! I think it's funny how your perfect Bella just happened to interrupt us when I brought Edward's name up--"

"Alice," I hissed, "enough!"

She scoffed at me, "What, Bella? Are you gonna tell him, or do you wanna do that chickenshit thing that you're so good at and let me?"

I gasped, "It's *not* the time!"

"Says. Fucking. Who."

"Someone wanna tell me what the fuck the two of you are hissing about?" Jasper was clearly suspicious; Alice and I looked about ready to murder one another. "Or you want me to take a guess? 'Cause I'm pretty fucking sure that I know--"

Alice laughed, "Trust me, you don't. So Bella, what's it gonna be?"

"Why are you doing this?" I whispered. Really, why was she doing this? Had I read her *completely wrong*? Did she want Jasper back and so she was trying to debunk me from my throne or something? I would have gladly stepped aside for her- she just needed to ask. "Seriously, why? Tell me what's going on?"

"Why? Maybe because I have stood by all my life and watched everything be so damned easy for you and I'm fucking sick of it! You have them both panting after you! Hell, this one wants to give you his great-grandmother's ring--"

"Alice!" Jasper hissed at her, "Don't!"

"Oh *shut-up* Jasper! Do you have any idea how much I wanted you to offer that ring to me? Do you have any idea how long I waited, patiently fucking waited, for you to decide what you wanted? Do you know how hard it was to watch you be so fucking insincere to me every time we were around Bella? Do you know? Do you know how much I fucking love you?! No! You don't! You've had your head so far up Bella's *ass* you don't know a *fucking thing*!"

"Enough, Alice! Jesus!" I yelled at her. Where the *fuck* was all this coming from? She could have told me some of this beforehand; I would have listened and not defended and asked questions and *been a friend*! She has to bring all this shit up today? Of all days? "Look--"

"No! You look! I told you I don't blame you for our marriage falling apart- I don't. I blame that whore Maria, who stumbled onto my husband's dick! But I'll tell you what I do blame you for! I blame you for carrying a fucking torch for Jasper for *so fucking long*... and then just throwing it away on someone with a pretty face and nice smile--"

"What?" Jasper voice was like a whip cracking.

"I mean, yeah, he's fucking gorgeous Bella- anyone can see that! But seriously! Seven goddamn years and you're just gonna throw it away? That's *bullshit*--"

"You *fucking* encouraged it--" I started.

"To see how genuine your feelings for Jasper were! Obviously, I was right in questioning them! They don't fucking exist!"

"Yes, they fucking *do*! That's what makes all of this so goddamn hard! Can't you see that? What the fuck is the matter with--"

"What's the matter me? What's the matter with *you*, Bella? Jasper is *everything*! Can't you see that? You could have him and you don't *want him*!"

"Oh! But you do? That's what this is about Alice? Blame Bella for all your misgivings because your husband isn't in love with you anymore and--"

"*Fuck you! Fuck you Bella!*"

"Enough!" Jasper roared over our bickering. I stopped immediately and took a deep breath. Did I really just say that to Alice? Better yet, did she really just say that to me? "Alice, shut-up. Bell, tell me what the fuck she's talking about. Now."

I looked down, closing my eyes to try to reign in the tears that had sprung up during our argument. I was trying to collect my thoughts, trying to piece together how much he could have figured out from our angry words. Trying to figure out how to salvage this, "Jasper--"

"She's not going to tell you, Jasper! She's been keeping it a secret the whole time she's been here--"

"Keeping *what* a secret?" His voice was quiet now, and eerily calm, "Bell?"

“I told you-”

“I asked Bell, Alice. So either shut the fuck up or get out.”

I looked up, straight into his eyes and knew that this was the moment. Of all the days that I *could* have told him- today is the day I would have *never* picked. It was there, already in his eyes, he already knew what I was going to say.

I took another deep breath, steadying myself to tell him, “I’m in love with Edward.”

Jasper’s breath left him all at once, his body sagged and his knees buckled. He sat down on the bed and started to gasp for breath.

I guess he didn’t know after all...

I watched him, the tears pooling freely in my eyes now and spilling down my face. I *knew* this would hurt. I don’t think I prepared enough, I don’t think I *could have* prepared enough. Even the day he *begged* me, *pleaded* with me not to leave him, had he looked like this. Even the day I came here, to comfort him in the wake of his father’s death and he looked so awful and heartbroken and wraith-like, even then he hadn’t looked like this. His eyes had dulled in a matter of seconds, the bags under his eyes resurfacing with the amount of tears that were flowing down his face. His mouth was open in a voice-less sob. His hands were gripping his knees for dear life and God help me, I wanted to pull him to me and take it all back. I couldn’t believe myself! I couldn’t believe I had done this to him! Alice was right- I just threw him away, and I was a *terrible fucking person*.

I didn’t deserve Jasper. I didn’t deserve Alice. I didn’t deserve Rose or Emmett or Charlotte. But that wasn’t it. Those were just the people that had been there from the beginning. The people that saw my heartlessness from the start.

I also didn’t deserve Angela, or Ben. Or Esme’s support. Or Tanya’s kindness.

But right there, looking at Jasper... seeing what I’d done to him... how I’d broken him... I knew that I didn’t deserve Edward either. I never did.

Time to burn all my bridges, time to make it all right. Time to atone for what I did to Alice, Jasper, my friends and family... and Edward.

I had to let Edward go.

So... for all of those who read the original summary... “loved them both so much, so much that I would let them go...” yeah...

I’m gonna go hide now. Next update will be on Friday.

20. Had Enough

Wow... so uh... I uh... pissed some people off last chapter... I'M SORRY!!!! I swear! So uh... I uh... damn I suck at this. I don't want to give shit away and I've already confirmed this as a B/E story. So, I suck anyway, but... I just want everyone to know... I love a story with a HEA. That is all.

Oh! I had some really lovely reviews come through after last chapter as well. People who have just started the story and are reviewing the chaps as they play catch up- thanks so much for giving it a chance!

One lovely reviewer asked, so I'll confirm- Alice's colors *were indeed* Blush and Bashful. Two shades of pink and one was *much* deeper than the other. ^.~

Love you all!

All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

You had to have it all,

Well have you had enough?

You greedy little bastard you

Will get what you deserve.

When all is said and done,

I will be the one to leave you in the misery and hate what you've become.

-Had Enough, Breaking Benjamin

Jasper took one deep breath, wiped his eyes and turned to Alice. Her face softened from the scowl she had been sending me to show the adoration that she claimed not to feel for this man anymore.

At least that's what she'd told me.

It would have really been nice if my best friend *of my whole life, my sister*, would have told me the fucking truth. A lot of this whole confrontation could have been avoided and I wouldn't be feeling the need to kick her ass. I *know* that I did her wrong. I *know* that I harbored feelings for her husband. I *know* that I played a role in her marriage ending. Regardless, she knew how Jasper felt. She knew what he was going through right now. Did she really think that this was the best time to bring any of this shit up? I had never wanted to hit someone so badly in all of my life.

He cleared his throat, reaching a hand to lay on her shoulder, "Alice, I need you to go. I need to talk to Bell. Please."

God, he sounds awful. Look what you did, Bella.

"What? No! No way in hell I'm leaving-"

"Alice, please. I don't want to fight with you right now. We'll talk later."

"But Jasper-"

"Alice, I need to talk to her. Alone."

Something in his face must have gotten through to her, because she didn't speak again. She raised a hand and cupped his cheek and whispered, "I'll have my phone on, please call."

He nodded and she turned to leave, brushing past me without a word or even a look. I wondered if this was truly the end for Alice and me... if she couldn't even bring herself to look at me. I can honestly say that I *hated* her in that moment.

I kept my eyes on Jasper after the door closed again; he just looked so... *lost*. His eyes were roaming over everything in his room- everything but me. It looked as if he couldn't figure out what to do or say either, and I knew that I had no clue what to say now. What do you say to someone after you've just broken their heart?

He finally moved, turning away from me and walking slowly back to his bed. He sunk down slowly, bringing both of his elbows to his knees and grabbing large handfuls of hair between his fists. I heard him sniffle often, but thankfully there was no more sobs coming from him. It hurt enough just to have to *see* what I'd done- to hear it too might break me.

I really felt the need to say something, anything to him, but I hadn't the slightest clue as to what. Still, I felt like this was my conversation to start. I owed him that much.

"Jasper," I whispered before stopping to clear my throat. I was completely clogged up from all the tears I'd shed today, "I'm so sorry."

A quiet chuckle escaped him, mingling with the sniffing and sounding so fucking awful, "What exactly for?"

"I-"

"I mean, are you sorry that I fucked up and you fell for someone else? Are you sorry that Alice outed you? Or is it something else?"

I shook my head, closing my eyes again as the newest round of tears made their way out. “No, Jasper-”

“Then what? What are you sorry for?”

“I never wanted to hurt you,” I cried out. And I didn’t, it was never about hurting Jasper and I had dreaded this conversation, knowing that would be exactly what I was gonna do. And I especially didn’t want to hurt him anymore today. “Not today, Jasper. I’m so so-”

“Oh! So you were cool with hurting me- you just didn’t want to do it on the day I buried my father?”

“No! That’s not-”

“That’s *exactly* what you just said! What...? What...? How? When did you become *this person*?”

“Jasper-”

“I fucking *knew* it! You made me feel like such an asshole! And all fucking along you were with him!”

“No! Jasper I wasn’t! I promise-”

“Nice, Bella. Promise? ‘Cause that phrase means so much!”

“Jasper stop! Please! Just let me explain!”

“Why? Does it matter? You’ve made your choice. It wasn’t me.”

“Because I’d like you to know the *truth*. From me.”

“How ‘bout this? I ask you a question, and you answer. I’ll get the truth like that. ‘Cause I’m not gonna sit here and listen to you spout off some pretty love story about that motherfucker!”

“Jasper, I wouldn’t do that! I just want you to know-”

“Have you fucked him?”

Oh, God. Straight for the damn jugular.

And now was not the time for me to confuse what Edward and I had done with each other. Whether it lasted five seconds or five hours, we’d had sex.

“Yes,” I whispered, my eyes not able to meet his anymore. I hadn’t been ashamed of myself or Edward when the moment was taking place, but now I was.

“Fuck!” Jasper spat. “Fuck, Bella! I can’t believe-”

“Jasper, *please*-”

“When? When did you fuck him?”

My hands gripped hold of the dress I was wearing and I willed myself to breathe. Why did he want to know this? I didn’t want to tell him *any* of this- it would only hurt him more.

I sniffled once, breathing in snot and tears and trying to get more air into my lungs. Finding my voice again, I told him, “There was a party, Friday night. That’s when we-”

“Who threw the party?”

I squeezed my eyes shut again; I knew what he was going to think when I told him. “Angela and Ben.”

“I *fucking knew it!*” he roared at me. He stood from the bed and crossed the room to stand in front of me, “You *lied* to me! You *told* me-”

“I *know* it sounds like that, but it isn’t-”

“There you go! Defending your new fucking friends, like they didn’t do anything wrong-”

“They *didn’t*-”

“No,” he scoffed. “Of course they didn’t! They just set the two of you up-”

“*No!* It wasn’t like that at *all*-”

“But you two fucked! After a party *his fucking sister* threw-”

“Angela had *no idea!* She was shocked as hell-”

“Then she’s a good fucking actress! Hell! Of *course* she is! She had my ass fooled!”

And something snapped inside of me. Who the fuck was he to talk about *Angela* like this? *He’d* lied to me! *He’d* kept things from me! Yet, he always found a way to make *me* feel guilty about it!

“You know what? Fuck you, Jasper! You wanna talk about fooling people? What about what you did to me?”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about! Besides, *I’m* not the one who cheated on *you!*”

“Oh! That’s right! You just cheated on *Alice!*”

“Fuck you, Bella! That had nothing to do with you!”

“Of course not! That’s why you kept it from me!”

A thought ran through my head at that statement, one that was undeniable. *This is why he overreacted so badly when he found I had talked to Rose!* He never intended for me to find out about Maria! He never intended for me to talk to Alice about it! He specifically asked me to hold off on talking to Alice until after he was gone. *Or longer.* So what was I to him? A week-long fuckfest to make himself feel better? Let’s boost our ego by spending some time with the girl who has dreamt about you for seven years?

“You were never gonna tell me! Were you? You never wanted me to find out about her!”

“Don’t turn this shit around on me!”

“Oh! Okay! Sure thing, Jasper. We’ll just forget that you’ve *ever* done anything wrong! How about I just never talk to your family, or your ex-wife- you know, so all of your skeletons can stay in the closet! That’s what *all* that shit was about! Wasn’t it?”

“What? No!”

“Do you even know what it is to love someone? ‘Cause, you know, first you say you can’t decide between me and Alice, but she sounds like the better option so you marry her-”

“Bella-”

“Then you don’t want her anymore so you fuck your *secretary*-”

“Stop! Now-”

“Then I guess she wasn’t good enough either so you decide to give me a go? Is that what it was, Jasper? That’s what it sounds like. Oh! And then I guess *I* wasn’t good enough either-”

“*What?!*”

“You know, since you were flirting with other women at that fucking barbeque-”

“Yeah. While you were in the bathroom, probably fucking Edward!”

“Fuck you! I *just met* him in that bathroom!”

“Yeah, and now you’re fucking him. Good for you!”

“Jasper!”

The door burst open and I watched Rose and Emmett come storming in. Rose looked to Jasper and then to me and sighed, “What the hell is going on? You guys almost woke up Momma.”

“Nothing,” Jasper snapped, not taking his eyes from me. “We’re talking. Privacy would be nice.”

“Yeah, right,” Emmett laughed. “This house has like paper-fucking-thin walls. Good try though.”

“Just get the fuck out, both of you. Me and Bella need to talk.”

“Bella?” Rose’s voice sounded her confusion. He only ever called me Bell, and now he was avoiding the nickname like the plague. “Since when do *you* call her that?”

“Since now. Get out.”

“Uhh... bro? Why don’t you and I take a walk? You look like you need to cool off,” Emmett suggested calmly.

“How ‘bout you two fuck off? I told you-”

“Oh shit,” Rose whispered. “Bella! You said-”

“Rose,” Emmett warned quietly. “Not our business.”

“Oh nice! Nice,” Jasper scoffed. “You told my *fucking* sister and brother too? Who *doesn’t* know about your new boyfriend? Was it just me?”

“Jasper, please-”

“Fuck this! I’m leaving! Don’t be here when I get back!”

“That’s nice, Jasper. Run away- do what you’re good at,” Rose huffed at him as he brushed past her out of the room. He raised a hand to flip her off and walked out. My brain was muddled and tired and still, I wondered to myself sadly, if Jasper flipping off his sister while walking away from me would be the last image of him to ever pass before my own eyes.

The thought made me sob, so much so that I fell to the ground, unable to hold myself up any longer. Rose immediately rushed to me, cradling me in her arms and calling to Emmett to help her get me out of Jasper’s room and in to her own room. They kept me there, one on each side of me, until I calmed down. Rose held me and stroked my hair, whispering reassurances to me all the while. Emmett just kept a hand on my shoulder and would squeeze gently from time to time.

When I was able to speak again, I apologized to her. I told her that I *never* planned for this to happen. I never planned for Jasper to come to me. I never planned to fall for Edward. I never wanted to hurt anyone. She would just squeeze me tighter and tell me that she knew. And then I told her about the argument, that I’d overheard him and Alice arguing and how it all came out.

Rose ground her teeth and muttered that she didn’t know why Alice couldn’t just leave well enough, alone. But such was the case with Alice, and I’d always known that. You didn’t tell Alice something if you wanted it kept a secret. Example? Rose knew about Edward before I ever had a chance to tell her.

I just couldn’t get my head around everything that Alice had said, well, I couldn’t get my head around anything that had taken place in his room tonight. But she’d seemed so *forgiving* to me, she’d been so *encouraging* with me. About Edward. She’d tried to warn me away from Jasper-

That’s exactly what she was doing! She wanted him back and me gone!

Fuck! How had I not seen this? I was so overjoyed at having her back in my life that I just looked right past it. I hadn’t talked to Edward about that conversation with her on the phone and so he couldn’t have known either. He probably would have seen it... But... didn’t she know? I would have stepped aside for her- the doubts I was already having about Jasper and myself, on top of what she told me... I would have done so graciously and kindly. And I wouldn’t have thrown shit in her face like she did with me.

“I have to go,” I said suddenly. I rose from the bed and went about making my way out of the Whitlock house. I heard Rose and Emmett, hot on my heels.

“Bella, wait! I don’t know if you should go right now. You’re upset-“Rose started.

“Exactly, and the answers I need to calm me down? They’re with Alice. I need to find her,” I finished.

“No, Bella! That’s not a good idea! You should wait until you’ve calmed down-”

“Like she waited? Hell she took the first opportunity to tell all my secrets! I want to know why!”

I fell into my car and slammed the driver’s side door, effectively cutting off whatever remark Rose might have had for me.

~*~

There were no lights on at the Brandon house, so I drove past Alice and Jasper’s old house. Finding no cars there either, I drove slowly through the town, trying to figure out where she would have gone. I was trying to get my thoughts straight at the same time, but I figured that was a lost cause- there was just too much running through my head at the moment.

Finally, after a straight hour of driving, I resolved that she’d left town. I made my way to Charlie’s to change clothes before I drove all the way to Seattle. I wanted fucking answers and I wanted her to own up to what she’d caused tonight. To what she’d done tonight.

So, imagine my surprise, when I pulled up to my father’s house, only to find Alice’s car parked in front of it.

Some fucking nerve!

I stomped in to the house, slamming the front door behind me. When I made it to the kitchen, I literally saw red. Alice was sitting there, sandwiched between my father and Edward and looking as innocent as the day she was born. She blinked at my sudden appearance before looking away from me and down. Everyone else at the table was clearly stunned- everyone was frozen, staring at me as I glared at Alice.

My father cleared his throat, “Hey there Bells-”

“What the *fuck* were you thinking?!” I roared out. I was *so mad*, I couldn’t see straight, and like I said, everything was tinged in red. My head was pounding with the adrenaline that was coursing through me and at this moment in time, it was a damn good thing that there was a table between me and her.

“Uh... Bells-” Charlie tried again.

“I asked you a *fucking* question! Don’t sit there like you don’t know what I’m talking about!” I yelled. She’d squeezed her eyes shut and you could clearly see the tears spilling from her eyes. I couldn’t even feel bad for her. She shook her head a little and took a deep breath before breaking into sobs. When my father’s arms came around her- I broke.

“Oh hell no! You don’t get comfort from *my* father!” I made my way around the table, prying Charlie’s arms from her and pulling her to her feet. “Do you have *any fucking clue* what you did tonight? Do you?”

“Don’t touch me!” she spat at me, ripping herself from my grasp. “Don’t ever touch me!”

“Answer my fucking question!”

She started crying again, sobs racking her small frame and Esme made to come to her, “No! Esme please!”

Esme paused her movements but looked at me with concern, “Bella dear, what’s happened?”

“Ask Alice,” I spat in Alice’s face. “Ask her why she can’t keep her mouth shut! Ask her why she thought it best to tell Jasper about Edward *for me!*” I heard both Tanya and Esme gasp and Edward cough at that. “Ask her why she thought it best to tell him *today!* We buried his father today! What the fuck, Alice!”

“Oh, go to hell, Bella! He fucking deserved to know! What you were doing was *wrong!* It should have been *me* there to comfort him!”

“Then you could have said something *before!* You know, when you were telling me to get me a piece of Edward? Oh! And that you were *so over* Jasper? You remember that conversation?”

“Hell yes I do! That’s the conversation that made me *hate you!* How could you do that to Jasper?”

“How could I do that to Jasper? Did you not hear anything that he said to me? Where was your head that whole conversation? Or, how about this? What about what he did to you?”

“I love him,” she sniffed. “I would forgive him for anything!”

“That’s funny,” I scoffed. “Because you sure sounded like you were done with him before I *ever* mentioned Edward to you!”

“Well I wasn’t okay?” she yelled at me. “I’m not fucking over him! I want my goddamn husband back!”

“That’s your fucking problem! But I’ll tell you one thing- sure doesn’t look like that’s gonna happen. Not with the way you are!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You tell me! I thought I knew you! You’re not at all who I thought you were! What happened to you?”

“You happened! You fucking happened, that’s what! My fucking husband left me for you! You just wait, Bella! When that shit happens to you- see how you act!”

“I didn’t fucking *ask* him to Alice!”

“No! Of course not! Poor, pitiful Bella fled across country! You know that saying? ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder?’ Yeah, well it’s fucking true! The minute you were gone... it was over!”

“That’s *not my fault!* I left to keep myself from falling apart, Alice!”

“Yeah,” she scoffed. “Without a fucking word to anyone! Like you wanted him to chase you!”

“Alice! You *know* that’s not-”

“Do I? ‘Cause that sure as fuck is what happened! What should I believe, Bella?”

“That I was trying to let you two alone! That I was trying to do what was best for everyone!”

“And that worked out *so well!* I lost my husband, my house, everything Bella! I lost *everything!*”

“That wasn’t my fault, Alice!”

“Nothing is *ever* your fault Bella! You’re the most selfish person I’ve ever-”

“Enough! That’s enough! Both of you!” Charlie yelled over our bickering. We immediately stopped, anytime Charlie had ever yelled at us, we did as he said. Right now was no different. “Jesus H. Christ! What the hell happened to the two of you?” I turned my head to look at my father. He was standing from his seat at the table, shaking his head and clenching his fists. “Bells, you sit over there by Edward. Alice, you sit right here. Now, ladies.”

We did as we were told and once everyone was seated, Charlie said, “Alice, tell me what happened tonight.”

“Why does she-“I started.

“Because it’s my house, and I choose to hear Alice first,” Charlie finished.

I grunted and crossed my arms, sitting back in my chair and pouting. She was just gonna twist shit around, I just had a feeling.

“Where do you want me to start?” Alice asked in a quiet, small voice. I rolled my eyes, she was milking it.

“Let’s start with why Bella thinks you told Jasper about her and Edward.”

“Because I did,” she whispered. Charlie made a noise of disapproval and so Alice continued quickly, “But I was upset! We were arguing! And I was *so mad* at him...”

“Alice,” Charlie said in a very fatherly tone. “You know that wasn’t your place to tell him though. You can’t honestly say that Bella *ever* interfered in your relationship with Jasper, knowingly. You should have extended her the same courtesy.”

Alice began to cry again- she never did like getting scolded from Charlie. Esme spoke up then, “Alice, if I may?” Alice nodded her assent, “What were the two of you arguing about?”

Alice sniffled, "There was someone at their house today. I wasn't happy about it."

"Who?" Edward piped up. I kicked him under the table, harder than I had intended to as he lurched forward muttering 'ow.' I mouthed that I was sorry and he grinned at me. A pain shot through me at the revelation I'd had about him. I was going to have to relive all of this again... soon. I had no intention of leading Edward on like I had done with Jasper. "Sorry, it's not really my place to ask anything."

"No, it's okay," Alice cried. "I'm sure all of you know *anyway*... And if you don't, well I guess it doesn't matter... but, Jasper cheated on me after we got married- not with Bella... anyway, she was there today."

I gasped, "*Maria* was there? Today?"

Alice turned a glare at me, but nodded anyway. "Bells, shut-up. You start talking again, we'll get nothing figured out," Charlie said.

I slumped back in my chair to pout again. I had to concentrate very hard on not leaning into Edward; the pull was so intense when I was near to him.

"So, you two were arguing about her? This Maria person?" Charlie continued his interrogation. Alice nodded, "And how did the subject of Bells come up?"

She sighed, "I was... hell, I was just so damn jealous! He was going around telling anyone who would listen about wanting to ask Bella to marry him!" I saw out of the corner of my eye, Edward tense up at that. It made me feel awful- his jealousy was misplaced with me. I should have never asked him to come out here. He shouldn't have to sit here now and listen to all of this unfold either. *God, I'm a terrible person.* "And I was mad! I knew that she wasn't going to be with him! She was going to break his heart and then run off with Edward and be so happy while me and Jasper are just left behind, broken and *not together!* I wanted to comfort him! I wanted to be there for him!"

Charlie sighed, "I understand that, Alice. But look, I told Bells and now I'm telling you- that girl right there?" He pointed to me, "That's your best friend. She's always been there for you, like a sister. Don't you think it was owed to her to be the one to straighten the situation out?"

"But-"

"No. You were wrong in what you did Alice. I never agreed with Jasper being with Bells, I told her so myself. But *they* made that mess. *They* needed to clean it up. Alone. Without interference from you, honey."

She broke into tears again and I had to grind my teeth together to stop myself from saying something when Charlie reached over and pulled her in for a hug. I felt for her- truly I did. I would have been pissed *for her* if she'd told me Maria had been at that house. I was pissed *for her and myself* that Jasper was going around talking about proposing to me. Still didn't excuse what she did.

"Bella dear," Esme said gently, effectively taking my attention from my father and Alice. "Did you and Jasper talk?"

I inhaled sharply before nodding. Esme smiled understandingly at me, "How are you?"

I looked down and mumbled, "I've been better."

Alice scoffed and Charlie made a noise to shush her. Quietly, Esme asked, "How is he?"

I shrugged, not looking up from the table, "He was pissed and flipping off his sister last I saw him."

Alice gasped, "You told Rose?"

My head popped up, "No! *You* told Rose! About me and Edward! Could you keep anything to yourself?"

"Apparently not," Tanya murmured under her breath. I thought no one else could hear her; I only did because she was so close to me.

But Alice apparently did, "What the *fuck* is that supposed to mean, *Tanya*?"

"Hey!" I barked, "Leave her out of this!"

"Oh! Leave your *new best friend* out of it? You think so much of her- even though she's fucked your boyfriend here," Alice swiped at Edward with the back of her hand. "But you can't think enough of me, to keep my husband's dick out of you?"

"Enough," Charlie warned us quietly. "Tanya, please, let's leave *our* comments until the end? We need to get this all worked out. Okay?"

Tanya's guilt showed on her face, "Of course, I'm so sorry."

I reached my hand under the table and grasped one of hers, trying to show her that she didn't need to feel guilty- Alice was acting like a bitch. She raised her eyes to my own and smiled kindly, nodding slightly to me before I released her hand and turned back to Esme.

Esme looked at me reassuringly before continuing, "I'm going to assume that the two of you argued?" I nodded, looking down again and not meeting anyone's gaze. "And it didn't end well?"

"No," I said quietly. "He assumed things that he wouldn't let me correct. Though I don't know if it would have made a difference at all if I had corrected him."

"Big fucking surprise," Edward muttered *very* quietly under his breath. I looked to him, and though his head was turned toward me, he wasn't looking at me anymore. His hands were clenched tight on the table, the knuckles white and he looked *pissed*.

"He didn't hurt you, did he Bells?" Charlie asked, taking my attention from Edward. "I mean, he didn't harm you *physically* at all, did he?"

I shook my head, "I don't think he'd ever do that, Dad. I *am* worried about him though, the way he sped off out of there..."

Charlie nodded, looking at me closely and then turning to look at Alice just as intensely. After a few moments of contemplation he said, "I'll call the station, have them send out an APB for Jasper. We'll make sure he's okay."

Alice and I both nodded as he rose from the table and to the phone. She still wouldn't look at me, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I wanted her to *apologize*. I spend so much of my time trying to make up for mistakes I've made in my life and she can't fucking apologize to me for this! I was working myself up, making myself mad again. I needed to breathe, and to get away from her. Maybe with some space, I could think more clearly.

I felt a hand on my knee, squeezing me gently and shaking slightly. I looked at Edward and he asked quietly, "You okay, angel?"

My eyes clenched shut at his concern and at him calling me 'angel.' I nodded my head slightly, hoping that he would turn his attention elsewhere- I didn't deserve his concern. *Especially* not his concern.

It was completely quiet at the dinner table, though we could hear Charlie, mumbling through the phone to the station. Though an All-Points Bulletin was a little drastic for the situation, I knew he was just trying to do everything to make his girls feel better. I slowly opened my eyes and looked from under my lashes at the occupants of the table.

First there was Tanya. Tanya looked as if she felt absolutely awful. I had gathered from the time that I spent with her, that she was a very empathetic person. I could only imagine that the feelings coursing around this table were a lot for her to handle. She just wanted to help, that's why she'd come. And in the end, Alice had unraveled her entire reason for being here. Though I must say, I was so glad she did. Tanya was a wonderful person and I'm so glad to know her.

To have know(n) her Bella. You're letting Edward go, remember? Tanya is a part of that deal.

I fought hard with myself not to cry out at that and distracted myself by moving on to Esme in my observations. Though for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how looking at Edward's mother would help to distract me from the thought of giving Edward up. She was truly a beautiful woman, I would have been *so fucking happy* to have called her my family. Esme was staring straight across the table, at Edward I guessed, with a look of extreme concern. I could understand, I would be concerned for my son too- you know, if they had gotten themselves mixed up with a bitch like me.

You're wrong, Bella. Think about this-

Moving on to distract myself again, my gaze turned to Alice. She was openly glaring at me. I raised my head straight up and stared right into her eyes. I cocked my eyebrow and she grinned wickedly, "Didn't think we'd ever be here, did you?"

My brow furrowed, "Where? On our separate fucking ways?"

She scoffed, "Please, Bella. We'll get past this, we always do. I meant, fighting like this. We've never fought like this."

"Does that make you happy? And what the fuck do you mean, 'we'll get past this?' I'm not getting past anything until you admit you were wrong."

"I'm wrong? You don't think what you did was wrong?"

"Yes! I do! And I've apologized time and time again for what happened with me and Jasper! And I've told you that I had no idea-"

"That's not what I'm talking about! I told you I don't blame you! And if I said something in anger that was misplaced, then I'm sorry!"

"Then what the fuck are you talking about?"

She sighed, "I'm talking about pretending! You! Over there *comforting* him and then coming home to Edward every night? You don't think that was wrong?"

"Of course I do," I snapped. "But you have to admit- to tell him I wanted to break up, *right in the fucking wake* of his father's death and burial? I wanted him to be okay before he had to cross this bridge!"

Her eyes opened wide, "Wait! Wait a minute! You were going to tell him? You really weren't just doing that chickenshit thing?"

My brow furrowed even more. *Hadn't we talked about this?* I racked my brain, trying to remember the conversations late at night between Tanya and me and Alice. *Holy shit!* We'd talked about so much, but it was all light and unimportant conversations, nothing of real importance. The subject of Jasper really hadn't come up. It was almost purposely avoided. Alice had thought... what had she thought? "You thought I wasn't going to tell him?"

Her face pinched together in a pitiful, guilty expression. She whispered, "No, I thought-"

But she didn't get to finish. A heavy, fast knock rang out from the front door. The five of us looked at each other and then to Charlie as he made his way back through the kitchen to the door.

He paused before leaving the kitchen and turned to us, "Are we expecting anyone?"

We all shook our heads 'no' and he was turning to head to the door when we all heard it.

Jasper's drunken, sobbing voice yelling, "Bell! Please Bell! I'm so fucking sorry! Please talk to me! Bell!"

I sighed, it was going to be a *long* night.

21. Blue Eyes Crying In The Rain

First off, it's not really necessary, but it was fun- and requested. There's outtakes for Through Glass now- check my profile if you're interested. It's only one chapter, so one POV long so far- Tanya's POV (an outsider POV) from last chapter. It *might* answer a few questions, but really, it's just fun to read! :p

The number of hits to last chapter *astounded* me! Thanks so much to everyone that is giving the story a chance *and* sticking through the Jasper/Bella bits! You guys are so awesome! To those who are leaving me reviews (thanks to you all – it means so much to me) if I haven't responded, 'cause I suck at being timely, I will! Promise!

Again thanks everyone for reading!

Everything Twilight belongs to Stephenie Meyer.

Love is like a dying ember,
And only memories remain,
And through the ages I'll remember,
Blue eyes crying in the rain.

-Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain, Willie Nelson

I rose from my chair to make my way outside. From the sound of him, Jasper was *beyond* drunk, there was no telling what I would find out there. I was really not looking forward to dealing with this. It had been bad enough earlier, when he was sober, now... well I just didn't have any idea.

"Bella-"Edward started, grabbing my arm gently to get my attention. I turned my head to him and was overwhelmed by the emotions shining through his eyes. The love for me was absolutely there, but there was also worry, anger and... was that regret?

"Bells stay here. I'll go deal with Jasper," Charlie said in his authoritative tone. I tore my eyes from Edward to him and shook my head at Charlie. I opened my mouth to protest, but was cut off, "Don't argue with me young lady. No good can come from you walking out there right now."

And with that he strode from the room. I made to follow, I knew Charlie was wrong- no good could come from him out there dealing with Jasper, but was held back by the hand still wrapped around my arm.

"I think you should listen to him, angel," Edward said softly. "Jasper is obviously drunk. Just let Charlie do this, please. He's right- it wouldn't be a good thing if you went out there right now."

"You're wrong," I argued and pulled my arm from his grasp. Swiftly moving out of the kitchen to keep someone else from trying to stop me, I approached the door just as Charlie stepped out of it.

"Jasper," Charlie nodded to him. "You mind telling me how you got here?"

Straight to business, Charlie- trying to give him a DUI?

"Chief Swan," Jasper croaked. "Please- I need to talk to Bell. Please, sir- it's important."

"Yeah, I heard," Charlie said shortly. "I asked you a question, young man. How did you get here?"

I stepped out onto the porch, behind Charlie and took a long look at Jasper. His head was down, so I couldn't see his face, but his hair was matted and wet- there was no telling where he'd been or how long he'd been outside. His clothes looked drenched and clung to him messily. There was a bottle of Jack Daniels in his right hand and a wet, limp cigarette in the other. Belatedly I wondered why Jasper thought it was a good idea to show up at the Chief of Police's house like *this*. And then I worried about him getting sick from being out in the rain and the cold in this state. I opened my mouth to say something but Jasper cut me off.

Without raising his head, he told my father, "I drove. I'll willingly let you arrest me for that- I know I broke the law. Just... please sir... I *need* to talk to her."

Charlie sighed, "Jasper... you really think it was a good idea to go drinking and driving? I'm gonna-"

"I swear I wasn't out drinking and driving! Well, I was to get here- but I didn't get drunk while I was driving!"

"That doesn't matter, and you know it. Right now? I'm looking at a DUI, a public drunkenness, and an open container- you wanna tell me how I'm supposed to ignore that?"

Jasper didn't answer and after a moment, I raised my hand to my father's back. Charlie jumped slightly- he hadn't realized I was there and turned an angry expression to me. "Damnit Bells! I told you to stay inside!"

Jasper's head popped up to look at me and I felt the breath leave my lungs at the sight of him. His face looked as it did when I told him that I was in love with Edward, but there was something else there as well now. He was looking at me with *hope* in his eyes and I knew then- Charlie was right. I'd given him the wrong impression by coming out here. No good could come from this.

When I found my voice, I asked, "Dad, can I just... have a minute? With him?"

Charlie shook his head, "No. You wanna talk to him- say what you gotta say. Same goes for you, Jasper. Anything you wanna say to her- you say it in front of me."

I sighed as Jasper nodded his head. I didn't want to admit how comforting it was that my father refused to leave me alone with Jasper- I didn't really want to be.

"Bell- I'm *so sorry*," Jasper started. "I thought about it- really thought about it, and I realized that you were right. I didn't want to listen to you- I didn't give you a chance to explain anything. It's my fault, Bell. Please, you have to forgive me!"

I took a deep breath, turning my eyes to my father and finding the reassurance I needed to say, "Jasper... I... I... we've both made mistakes."

"And you were completely justified in what you did, Bell! The way I acted toward you- hell! I'm just... fuck, baby, I'm so fucking sorry." And he broke into a fresh round of tears, crying loudly and just repeating how sorry he was over and over.

I didn't know what to say to him. Really, I had thought that finding out about Edward, whether it was what he had thought it was or not, would have been the final straw for Jasper. Now, he was willing to forgive me for that? I just... didn't know what to say to him.

"Bell, please, just hear me out, okay?" His cries had subsided slightly, allowing him to talk a little more clearly. "Look- I know that shit I said to you in Jacksonville was wrong. I had issues with trust from before you and I let those totally rule me. I was *wrong*, Bell. So fucking wrong and I'm sorry," he bent over, setting the bottle in the grass at his feet along with the limp cigarette. Straightening back up, he said, "But you have to forgive me, baby. You have to! I don't know how to... to... to *be*, without you! You- you're everything! Everything to me Bell, and I *promise* I won't pull shit like that on you again!"

"Jasper-"

"No, Bell, just let me finish, please?" I sighed but nodded for him to continue, "I'm also sorry for what I said to you tonight, at my parents' house. You didn't ask for me to treat you like that and I didn't even let you explain anything. Again. If you want to tell me the whole story- I'm all ears, baby. Tell me whatever you want, but please forgive me. Give me a chance, Bell."

He took two unsteady steps toward me. *How in the hell did he drive?* My father grunted in disapproval next to me, loud enough to stop Jasper where he stood. He looked toward Charlie and nodded once, "I know that I messed up, sir. I messed up bad and I know that you don't think much of me. But, I love your daughter- I think I have forever. I will make it all up to her, I swear that to you."

Charlie sighed, "Jasper, son, it's not me you need to be sucking up to. And I think you need to take a step back and really think about what's going on here. Bells is... she's happy with him. If you love her... you'll let her be happy, no matter how."

Jasper's bottom lip quivered as he stared at my father, and he sniffled loudly before saying, "I respect that, sir. But you'll have to forgive me for not wanting to let her go. I love her too much." He turned his gaze back to me, "Bell, I won't stop loving you- you can't ask me to. And I can't give up on us- so don't ask me to. *I know* how bad I messed up but-"

And I couldn't sit there and listen to him browbeat himself anymore, "Jasper, did you miss the part where I said that I cheated on you? With Edward? Who I'm in love with? Because it sounds like you've just blocked that out-"

"No, I didn't forget," he mumbled. He looked down at the ground and shuffled his feet in his spot. Minutes passed and I thought maybe I had gotten through to him when he dropped to his knees in front of me and said, "Isabella Swan, I know this is fucked up and I don't have anything rehearsed and it's not the best day or time to be doing this, but... I love you," he raised his eyes to stare in to mine. I knew exactly what he was about to do and I couldn't for the life of me stop him. My whole body was frozen in place, my mouth was stuck shut and dry as hell. His right hand reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, black, velvet box. "I asked my Momma for this yesterday, and I know you heard from Alice earlier... anyway," he opened the box and showed me his great-grandmother's ring.

Guess Charlotte decided not to tell Esme after all.

I opened my mouth to cut him off before he could get the question out, but I was cut off by Alice. I didn't even know she'd been listening in, or standing right behind me for that matter.

My powers of observation continue to astound me.

"Are you fucking serious, Jasper? After what she told you today, you're still gonna do this?" she shrieked at him.

"Alice," Charlie started.

But I was still staring at the ring. The ring that his great-grandmother wore on her finger through thick and thin. She wore this ring when one century turned to another and she wore it when she could barely put food on the table to feed her children. Her husband put this ring on her finger when she was seventeen years old and her family took it off when she died at the age of eighty seven. Seventy years she wore this ring. She wore this ring when she married her husband and it was there when she buried him. Charlotte treasured this ring; hell the whole family treasured this ring- much like they treasured the woman who had worn it. The ring itself looked brand-new. Five diamonds, round cut, lined up perfectly on the thin band of white gold. It had served as her engagement and wedding band, as was the tradition in her time.

Conversations were going on all around me. I could distinctly hear Edward and Tanya bickering from behind me, and Alice and Charlie bickering to each side of me. I heard Esme's voice trying to reason with everyone all at once and I couldn't take my eyes off of the ring that Jasper had just presented to me. Only when the ring moved, did my eyes. Jasper had stood from his position and was walking toward me.

My eyes popped up to meet his. The blue was sparkling again, pleased with my reaction to the ring. A small smile stretched on his lips as he made his way, as gracefully as his drunken body would allow, to me. He stopped less than a foot in front of me and raised his hand to cup my cheek.

"I know that I'm not the man you thought I was," he whispered. "But I can be, if you just give me a chance, Bell. I'm never gonna stop loving you, baby. I don't think I ever can," he reached for my left hand, cradling my ring finger gently between his pointer finger and his thumb. Mentally, I screamed at myself to stop him, to look away from the spell his eyes were casting on me and the inevitable hurt involved in his actions. Physically, I was still frozen. The ring slid

smoothly onto my finger and he asked, "Will you marry me, Isabella Swan?"

My eyes closed of their own accord- they were burning from being left open while staring at Jasper and the ring. He must have taken that as affirmation because his lips touched mine quickly. My eyes popped open and my body came back to life. I raised my hands to push him back from me but all of a sudden, and without help from me, Jasper was flying backward.

The noise hadn't registered in my fuzzy ears and everything happened in slow motion. Edward's form flew past me, at Jasper on the ground and I heard the noise for what it was. Skin against skin, bone against bone. Edward threw another punch at Jasper, to the opposite cheek this time. And then again and again until Jasper's body caught up to what was happening and then he was off the ground. As if the punches had immediately sobered him up. He began to throw a punch at Edward and everyone came to life.

My father made his way quickly to the two men, trying to push and pull and get them away from each other. His voice was drowned out because of all of the yelling. Edward yelling at Jasper, Jasper yelling at Edward, Alice yelling at Jasper, Tanya yelling at Edward, Esme yelling at Jasper, Alice yelling at Edward, Tanya yelling at Jasper, Alice yelling at Tanya. Lights were flickering on all up and down the street, doors were opening and people were stepping out in their robes and nightclothes. A loud rumble got louder and the old truck that my father had bought for me when I was in high school pulled up in front of the house.

I belatedly wondered how it was still running- Charlie had made me sell it and helped me buy my car when I went to college. He wanted me to have a more reliable form of transportation. He had bought the truck from Jake's father, Billy Black and Jake had been overjoyed. He did all of the work on the truck himself and used it as an excuse to try and woo me with his mechanical skills. When we had told him that we were going to sell it and buy me a new car, Jake had begged my father to let him buy it back. He paid for it with a year's worth of yard work and a new paint job on Charlie's house.

Jake hopped out of the driver's side of the truck and I saw two more Res boys hop out of the passenger side. I remembered them immediately but was still shocked at how different they looked. Quil and Leah's brother, Seth had grown up a lot since last I'd seen them both.

"Dude!" Jake yelled, grabbing hold of Jasper's arms and yanking him backward. He motioned with his chin toward Edward and Seth immediately stepped in between the two men, effectively cutting off any cheap shots that Edward could have and possibly would have taken. "What the fuck, Jas?"

"Thanks, boys," Charlie grunted, wiping his jeans free of the grass and leaves that were stuck to him from trying to get Edward and Jasper apart. "Are you the ones that got him drunk and let him drive tonight?"

"Got him drunk, yes. But we sure as hell didn't let him drive. He snuck out while we were getting snacks. Swear, Chief," Jake said and then grunted as Jasper got an elbow free and promptly juttet it into Jake's side. "Fuck Jas, that shit hurts!"

"Let me go then, dumbass," Jasper spat, struggling against Jake's renewed hold on him. "I'm not gonna do anything! Besides, that fucker started it!"

"You kissed my woman! What did you think was gonna happen?" Edward yelled at him. He was trying to find a way around Seth- Edward would take a step one way only to have it mirrored by Seth. "You should learn to keep your hands off what doesn't belong to you!"

"Fuck you! She's wearing my ring, you asshole! That means she's *my fiancée*! Did you forget that you have one of those yourself?!"

Edward laughed mirthlessly, "Funny. I, in fact, *don't* have a fiancée. Which you would know if you ever let Bella talk! Did *you* forget that you have a *wife*? So you know, having a fiancée on top of that is kind of... trashy. Don't you agree?"

"Doesn't fucking matter! Nothing changes the fact that Bella is gonna be *my wife* so you'd do good to get the fuck out of here! What the fuck are you even doing here, anyway?"

"I'm here for Bella. She called, I came. What are *you* doing here? Besides pissing me off!"

"Enough!" There! I found my voice! All heads turned toward me with wide, shocked eyes and gaping mouths.

Jake recovered first, giving me one of his big, goofy grins, "'Sup Bells? Where you want us to put these two?"

But I didn't have a fucking clue as to what to do with the two of them. I didn't want them in the same room with one another but I didn't trust them to their own devices either. I knew one thing though- this ring *had* to come off my finger. It fit too perfect and looked too amazing and it was seriously clouding my judgment. So, I decided to talk to Jasper first. "Could you guys all go inside? I need to talk to Jasper, please," my voice was so quiet, I was almost sure no one had heard me. But then I saw Jasper's smug grin and knew that *everyone* had heard me. Even Edward.

He trudged back toward the house, slowly and it looked as if every step was a test to him. He stopped just to the left of me and glanced down at the ring that was nestled on my finger. Gulping, he began, "Bella, please tell me-"

"I'll be in soon, Edward. I promise we'll talk then," I interrupted him. I needed to do one thing at a time. My list was made; I just needed to check things off now. First thing was giving this ring back and telling Jasper that I couldn't marry him. "Please, Edward. It has to be him first. That I talk to, I mean. I have to talk to Jasper first. Please?"

His stare was intense, so much so that I had to look down and away from him. I hadn't changed my mind in regards to Edward, and all of this was just making things worse. It was going to be harder than ever to do what I'd resolved to do. I heard his eventual sigh and peeked at his face from under my eyelashes. His face was twisted in an anguished grimace- he had to have known what I'd decided. The look on his face was one of resignation and regret. I ignored the tears threatening to spill over onto my face, thinking about being without Edward- I loved him. I didn't deserve to cry for my callousness though, and I wouldn't allow the tears to fall. His eyes closed and he nodded, taking the last few steps into my father's house.

Alice, glaring at my ring finger was followed by Tanya, Esme, Seth and Quil into the house. Charlie walked close to me and quietly told me, "I don't feel really comfortable leaving you out here like this, Bells. I think I should stay-"

"No, Dad," I croaked, still fighting with the tears in my throat. "I need to do this alone, please."

Charlie sighed but nodded, "Don't let him leave; one of the boys can drive him home. Okay?"

I nodded and Charlie reluctantly made his way past me through the door. That left only Jasper, Jake and me outside. I turned to Jake and raised an eyebrow- he was still strong holding Jasper's arms.

He grinned again, "You sure you want me to set him free? I got a pretty good lock on him right now."

Jasper grunted and struggled again as I rolled my eyes, "Yeah, Jake. I need to talk to him. Do me a favor?" Jake nodded, his expression solemn now, "Keep prying eyes and ears away from the front of the house?"

He let Jasper go, clapping him once on the back and sending him a playful grin, "No prob, Bells. Hey- Leah told me to tell you that you need to come by while you're in town. She got some new kitchen thingy she wants to show you. I think she wants you to tell her how to use it."

I laughed lightly but nodded, hugging Jake as he went past me into the house as well. The door closed with a resounding click and I turned my full attention to Jasper. He was still wearing that smug grin and the twinkle in his eyes was showing his happiness, clear as day.

I cleared my throat, "I need you to let me talk. To not say anything at all and let me say everything that I need to. Okay?"

His grin dimmed a bit at the sober droll I'd used. But he motioned with his hand and a nod to let me know that he would grant my wish. I took one deep breath and spilled it all. How long I had loved Jasper, why I had moved, what I felt when I found he returned my affections, how overwhelmed I'd been when he'd shown up at my door, how upset I was that we hadn't talked that week, meeting Edward in the bathroom, how I'd knocked my head open, how hard it was to send him home, therapy after he'd left, conversations with Rose, conversations with Edward, conversations with Angela, *that* conversation with Alice, dinner with Edward, party at Angela and Ben's, an extremely edited version of what happened between Edward and I that night, Edward's admissions about his relationship with Tanya- everything, like I said. And he kept his promise, he remained quiet throughout. His emotions were plain on his face, the anger, sadness, regret, hurt.

When I'd finished, I told him, "But regardless? I can't marry you, Jasper," he opened his mouth- the first time in almost an hour. "No, please. I need to finish." He sighed and ducked his head mumbling his assent. "You were right, Jasper. This? Us? We weren't meant to be. If we were, you wouldn't have turned to Alice that day. I think that the attraction was always still there, and neither of us could help that. I *do* love you, and I don't doubt that you love me, I just... I don't know. It just shouldn't be this hard, should it?"

He raised his head, not looking at me and whispered, "Is it easy with him?"

I blew out a breath, "That doesn't matter. I'm not talking about him. I'm talking about us, Jasper. I mean, we argued within a *day* of being together."

Jasper nodded, "I'm sorry for that, Bell. Really I am."

"Jasper, it doesn't matter, not anymore. I forgive you- if you even want my forgiveness anymore."

He turned to me, "So, that's it? You're done with me?"

I closed my eyes, "I'll always love you. I just... can't be what you need me to be. I am sorry for leading you on- I just didn't think it was the best time to bring any of this up."

"I get that. Really, I do. Bell?"

I re-opened my eyes and stared into his. He whispered, "I love you. You know that right?" I nodded; I did know he loved me. "If he fucks up, I'm here. I'm not getting past this anytime soon- but I'm not like extending an invitation or anything. I just mean... I'm here. If you need me."

The tears that had been threatening to spill over, finally did. He pulled me into a hug and I cried on his shoulder this time. He was being far more amicable than I would probably be able to and he didn't know what he was saying. He shouldn't be offering me his comfort when I'm the one that ended things. I pulled back from him- it felt wrong to receive solace from the man who I had hurt so badly. I slid the ring from my finger and passed it back toward him. He took it gently, holding it out in front of him and examining it.

"It's a gorgeous ring, Jasper."

He smiled, "Yeah. I mean, thanks," he laughed a bit. Rolling his eyes at himself, he told me, "Grandma Maggie told me it would be mine one day. She told me I had to ask my Momma for it when I was ready, and that I would know when the time came," a sharp pain stung my heart again at his words. I never meant to hurt him like this, "I never even thought about giving it to Alice. I don't know why- I had thought I was sure about her when I decided to ask her."

"She really wanted that ring," I sniffed. Her attitude from earlier still had me a bit upset.

"Yeah, she really wanted a faithful husband too," he scoffed. He tucked the ring back in its box and slid it into his pocket. "She'll find one, one day. But, if I've learned anything from all of this- it's that Alice and I aren't meant to be."

I laid a hand on his arm, "You sure about that?"

He looked at my hand and placed one of his own over mine, "I'm sure. She deserves more than I can give her- she's a good girl. She needs to learn to keep her mouth shut, but she is a good girl."

I nodded, "I don't know if she's gonna accept that. She's made it pretty clear that she's holding out for a reconciliation with you."

He jerked his head up, "Are you shittin' me?"

I shook my head, "She said so, earlier. We had a bit of a screaming match here before you showed up. She let it out then."

He gasped, "You and Alice?"

I smiled, "I'm not her favorite person right now. She thought I was leading the both of you on. She didn't understand why I was doing what I was doing."

He shook his head and sighed, "Damn. For a minute there I was holding out hope that you two were fighting over me. That's pretty hot to think about."

I looked at him incredulously, "Are you still drunk?"

He nodded unashamedly, "I drank a whole bottle before popping that one open," he pointed to the forgotten bottle of whiskey sitting in the grass. "I think I'll still be drunk tomorrow."

I laughed at him, "You're terrible. And a lightweight. You know that right?"

He smiled, embarrassed at his inability to drink like he could in college. We sat there; enjoying the silence between each other for once- all the tension of before was gone and replaced with a tranquil hum. The rain had let up, just a bit, the pitter-patter a delicate lull now.

Suddenly, he turned to me and asked, "Was it love at first sight?"

I looked at him, confused at the question. He clarified by asking, "With ass-Edward. Was it love at first sight?"

The peaceful was gone, just like that. It was all the reminder that I needed as to what I was going to do. I had fooled myself, sitting out here with Jasper and thinking that everything was okay now. It wasn't- only two things were marked off of my list. And Edward was the next thing.

I hated doing that. I hated departmentalizing everything going on around me right now- especially Edward. He wasn't an item that I bought and could return. And I didn't *want* to return him. I didn't *want* to give him up. I wanted to walk in there and tell him I loved him in front of God and everybody and fly back to Jacksonville with him and spend forever with him. Yes, it was love at first sight- I knew that. But in light of what I was going to do... it felt wrong to admit to it.

"Bell?" Jasper's tone had turned concerned. "What is it? I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable, I'm sorry."

I shook my head, "It's not that."

"Then what, darlin'?"

I sighed, "It's nothing. Just thinking."

Jasper's hand grasped one of my own, "Hey now... we just got everything out- let's not start right back to keeping secrets."

But it wasn't something I could talk to *Jasper* about. So I consoled him with, "I'm just... It's just... weird to talk to you about him."

He chuckled and muttered, "Tell me." He squeezed my hand, "Bell?"

I looked up, meeting his eyes. "Look- for all the shit I talk about him and regardless of the brawl we got in to earlier... He was the first motherfucker up there today, pulling me and Momma off the ground. And I was gone, but not so gone that I didn't know that was him that kept my ass from falling on the way to the car. He's- fuck," he raised his free hand to his face and roughly scrubbed at it for a moment. When he'd collected himself, he told me, "He's a good fucking man. Anyone can see that. If the situation were reversed- I would've punched his ass too."

I furrowed my brows. *Was Jasper giving me his approval? Seriously?* "Jasper-"

"I just- okay I'm sorry for cutting you off, but I gotta get this out while I'm still being all gracious-like," I sent him a small smile and tilted my head in acknowledgment. "It's so fucking obvious how much he loves you. He's here, for one. And he's so protective of you. It's just *there*, in his eyes and his face. It's *been there*. Since that day in the bathroom, and that's why I reacted like I did. It was love at first sight for him. I just didn't really believe that it was you guys' first time meeting. Now, I know different."

And with a long breath he said, "There. That's it. That's what I wanted to say. I'm sure you know now that he loves you. I mean, I'm sure he told you he loves you. Did you tell him you love him? What the fuck, Jasper?" He hit himself in the forehead with the butt of his hand. "Of course you told him you love him. And he's here- you called him and he came. That's love. And- fuck I'm rambling."

I laughed at him and he eventually gave in and joined me. "I think... it's time for me to go home."

"Give me your keys- you got off light ya know. I don't think Charlie is gonna haul you in. But he asked me to get one of the boys to drive you home. Jake can follow."

He nodded and pulled them out, handing them to me, "We didn't get to do it in my truck, Bell. That's kind of a tragedy, ya know?"

I rolled my eyes, "Yeah, yeah."

"Hey! C'mon! I *know* it's obnoxious of me to ask- I'm gonna pass it off on my drunkenness, 'cause I can," Jasper gave me my favorite smile. He asked, "We were good together. Yeah? Like that, I mean? I mean, in bed we we-"

"Yes, Jasper," I cut him off. While it was funny listening to him ramble, I didn't want to think about sex with Jasper Whitlock anymore. And especially not the night I gave him up as my lover. "We were perfect in that department."

He leaned toward me, watching me closely. I could give him this- one last kiss.

His lips met mine hesitantly, testing my reaction. I wouldn't resist him. I moved my own lips against his and with that encouragement, he began to move his own against me. It was the most heartbreaking thing I had ever experienced and when I tasted salt from my tears, I opened my eyes and pulled back from him. He was crying too. He whispered his love for me and turned his head away from me swiftly. I raised my hand and touched his hair, one last time. I whispered that I loved him too and stood quickly, making my way back inside.

I stood at the front door for a moment to collect myself- this was the hurt that I had anticipated. The hurt that I prepared for. The hurt I *deserved*.

I wiped my eyes and made my way to the kitchen, where I heard everyone's voices. It was late, they all sounded as tired as I felt. My eyes found Jake and I told him Jasper was ready to go. He nodded and the boys said their goodbyes before all stopping to hug me on their way out. I made myself look toward Edward and tried to find my voice to ask him if we could talk. I couldn't make it work- my body didn't want to cooperate with me again. Everything in me was screaming at me to not do what I was about to.

I didn't get a chance though, Tanya's voice cut through the silence, "Bella, we're all exhausted, perhaps we could all talk tomorrow?"

I jerked my head toward her and saw her cut her eyes at Edward and then back to me. There was a warning in her expression. It baffled me.

"Uh..."

"Tanya's right," Esme said. "Tomorrow, everything will be much clearer. We can discuss this further then. Alice? In light of... things... perhaps you would like to share a room with me tonight?"

Alice nodded and rose to follow Esme out. Edward wasn't looking at me. I needed to talk to him! This couldn't go on any longer.

I was vaguely aware of Tanya murmuring goodnight to everyone and snapped out of my trance when her fingers dug painfully into my arm. I jerked my head up, shocked at the grip she was holding me with.

Her voice was quiet, muted, but hard as nails, "I think we need to talk. Now."

22. Almost Lover

Sorry- this one is a few hours late. My mind was preoccupied for most of the day, yesterday- I'm so sorry. It just didn't want to spit this chapter out. But! Here it is! On Friday! At least I didn't make you all wait any longer, right? Right? ^^;

Thanks to everyone who's reading this story and big thanks to all of you dear people leaving me such nice reviews! (Hopefully, Bella hasn't pissed you off enough that you've given up.) Next post will be on Monday!

All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

Goodbye, my almost lover,
Goodbye, my hopeless dream,
I'm trying not to think about you,
Can't you just let me be?

So long, my luckless romance,
My back is turned on you,
I should've known you'd bring me heartache,
Almost lovers always do.

-Almost Lover, A Fine Frenzy

"Ow! That hurts!" I whisper-yelled to Tanya as she drug me up the stairs and into my room. She'd dug her fingers in deep and I could feel the tingles left from blood being cut off. I repeatedly tried to pull my arm free on the way only to have her pull harder and walk faster. She stopped just inside the door to my bedroom and only when she'd closed and locked the door, did she turn loose of me. "What the hell?"

"Sorry," she murmured. Only she didn't really *sound* sorry. "We need to talk, like I said."

The look she was giving me was anything but friendly, and the tone of her voice matched it perfectly. For a moment, I saw Tanya through Angela's eyes, I wondered if *this* is the Tanya that Angela and Ben get to see, a cold, calm, calculating looking woman. Or if she has reserved this for me. Regardless, I don't know what I've done, but she looks less than pleased. "Yeah, sure, I need to talk to Edward first though."

And I did. I had resolved to not lead him on, and I refused to do that. The longer that all of this went on... the more it would inevitably hurt. I wanted it done, so I could at least justify crying over it. At least, that's what I told myself.

"Yeah, I know you do. That's gonna have to wait," I opened my mouth in protest only to be cut off with a stern glare.

Furrowing my eyebrows at her, I asked, "What's so important? I mean, you look *pissed* at me. I don't remember doing anything or saying anything to you Tanya..."

She sighed, "You didn't do anything to *me*. I think you plan to do something stupid though, and I'm not going to let you."

I stared straight into her eyes, trying to figure out what she *thought* she knew. Her eyes were too pissed, too distant, to *unfamiliar* to get a proper read. In the end, I guessed, "You think I'm going to say yes to Jasper?"

She scoffed, "I'm not stupid, Bella. I *know* you wouldn't do that."

"Then what? Because seriously? We can talk anytime," it was a lie. Once I broke things off with Edward, I knew I would lose her friendship, along with everyone else from Jacksonville. And possibly my job. I hoped she couldn't hear the lie in my voice though, "It's really important that I talk to Edward to-"

"Excited? Because you can be with him now?" She was fishing; I recognized the tone from Renee.

Suspiciously, I asked, "What do you think?"

"I think that you don't look the *least* bit excited. I think you look pretty damned miserable. I think you feel bad about what you did to Jasper. And I think you're going to break Edward's heart."

I looked away, focusing on taking breaths that wouldn't betray my hurt and anxiety from her assumptions. I don't even know if assumptions would be the proper word- she was spot on with everything she said. Slowly, I walked over to my bed and sat down. Still looking anywhere but at her eyes, I told her, "I *am* miserable. It would be impossible to not feel bad about what I did to Jasper- even though he was incredibly nice about it all. So far as Edward goes..." I looked up, staring into her steely expression with one of my own, "Well, that's just really none of your business, Tanya."

Her expression turned incredulous, "Are you *serious*? I came here to *help* the two of you out! I've been there for him when it got to be too much to watch you and Jasper! Which I doubt you even *knew*, seeing how Edward has done everything in his power to keep you from worrying about him!" *Wait, what? He assured me that he was okay with everything! This is the first I've heard of him having to turn to Tanya for any kind of solace!* "We all understood, Bella! Hell, we all tried to help in any way that we could! I'm sorry, but I'm personally vested in you guys' relationship! If you're going to hurt him... well I just can't let you!"

This is not something that I had planned on at all. I mean, I hadn't really planned much- the decision to let Edward go was only really a few hours old. But I really hadn't accounted for Tanya's fierce loyalty and keen detective skills. She'd figured out what I had planned, she didn't have to spell it out for me. Never in a million years did I think I would be sitting in my bedroom hearing her argue Edward's case for him.

And *God!* Knowing that he had to turn to her because of what I was doing... That I was hurting him with my actions, *that much*... I'm not stupid, I knew it had to be wearing on him, I just figured that he would address the situation with *me*. Edward had never struck me as someone to pussy-foot around a subject,

because he never had with me. He was straight-up and honest in his opinions and forthcoming with his questions. His concerns were laid on the table always, so how was I to know that it was affecting him that badly?

“Can’t you see, Tanya? I’m hurting him-”

“*You* haven’t hurt him, not yet. The situation was hurting him, yes. But he’s a big boy- he knew what he was in for when he signed up for it. Don’t you see, Bella? He would do *anything* for you!”

“He shouldn’t have to,” I whispered.

She gasped, “You’re going to leave him, aren’t you?”

I didn’t respond, I couldn’t. I had thought that she knew, and maybe she did, but my words and my actions were the validation she needed.

“Why? Bella, you *can’t*!”

My eyes closed as I told her, “I can’t watch Edward go through what I watched Jasper go through. I can’t do that to him.”

“But, Bella-”

I opened my eyes to stare straight in to hers and declared, “I *won’t* do that to him, Tanya.”

She didn’t say anything for awhile, just stared back at me. I realized that what I was doing probably sounded ridiculous to her. It sounded a bit ridiculous to me. But I knew this to be the best thing for Edward. I refused to hurt him like I had hurt Jasper.

Eventually, she let out a low breath and said, “You’ll break him, Bella. I know you think that you’re doing this for his own good... you’re not. This... you’ll *break him*.”

I shook my head, “It’ll be better for him-”

“Bella, have you ever been in a relationship before?”

I furrowed my eyebrows, “Well, no, not before Jas-”

“Then that’s why you’re doing this. You have this pre-conceived notion that things with Edward are going to end. And end like they did with Jasper. Bella that’s ridiculous-”

“Is it? I don’t think so, Tanya. I’ve already hurt him, you said-”

“I said that *you* didn’t hurt him. I said the *situation* hurt him-”

“The situation pertaining to *me*-”

“*No*-”

“I just think-”

“Stop, okay, just stop for a second. Hear me out?” I closed my eyes and concentrated on my breathing. She wasn’t going to listen to me anyway. She had already made up her mind that she was right- just like I knew that I was right. “Okay, so think about this. Say you don’t just *break things off* with Edward. Say you tell him that you feel you need a little time- to get yourself back together. He’ll accept that, absolutely without hesitation. Bella...” she took a deep breath before continuing. “When you find it- what you two have? You *don’t* throw it away. *Ever*. And that’s what you would be doing and believe me- he’s worth it. You won’t ever find anyone like him and you will *hate yourself* if you do this. Please believe me.”

I already hate myself, Tanya.

I could see the point she was trying to make. I understood where she was coming from. I still thought that she was wrong. I didn’t want to hurt him- I *never* want to hurt him. And I know that this will hurt him *right now*, not nearly as bad as it’s gonna hurt me, but... But he’ll get over it, right? And find someone better for him, right? Right.

But what to tell Tanya? She wasn’t going to accept the whole ‘I’m doing this for his own good’ speech. She was his best friend; she wanted what was best for him.

I settled for, “I’ll think about it.”

She sighed, “No, you won’t. I can hear that in your voice. Just- do me a favor? Talk to him? Don’t make this decision without him.”

But the decision was already made. I nodded to appease her- which didn’t really; I could tell in the set of her shoulders. And so I slipped out with pajamas in hand to change for bed. When I came back to my bedroom, Tanya was sitting at the window, staring out and I knew that any chances of slipping out to talk to Edward were gone. So I laid down for sleep. I was so exhausted; I was out as soon as I hit the pillow.

I didn’t dream at all.

~*~

It was still dark when I woke up. Turning my head to the opposite side of the bed, I saw Tanya laying there, still sound asleep. Heaving a deep breath, I slowly raised myself to a sitting position. I was cotton-mouthed and my mind felt like it was lost in a sea of clouds as well. I knew I wouldn’t be able to go back to

sleep now- looking at Tanya had reminded me of *everything*.

I exited my room cautiously; aware of Esme and Alice across the hall and my father next to the guest room they were sleeping in. After a quick trip to the bathroom, I made my way down the stairs, being extra careful not to hit the creaky ones. I couldn't see Edward from the hall once I was downstairs, but decided that was probably for the best- I had a lot to think about. Seeing him might interrupt my thoughts.

I sat down at the kitchen table after grabbing a bottle of water from the refrigerator, and thought about all that had taken place tonight.

It was crazy to think that the Jasper chapter of my life was over now. Even crazier was the way he had acted after I had spilled about everything. I had expected some big blow-out, his past behavior showed him to be irrational and overly argumentative whenever he was faced with something he didn't want to see or hear. He'd been so *accepting* of everything last night. My only guess was that last night, he had learned the *truth*, in full and from my mouth. He wasn't able to make assumptions because I left nothing to question, and Jasper had learned to trust me. He had no reason to doubt me when I told him that it was over.

I was going to miss him. I knew that I would probably never see or hear from him again. Not after what we went through.

Surprisingly, the next thought that popped in to my head was Renee. I realized that I had yet to call her to tell her where I was or anything that happened. She probably wasn't worried- she probably didn't even realize I was gone. I hadn't spoken to her since the day she asked me to leave and not come back until my attitude had improved. I rolled my eyes, that was so typically Renee. Still, she would be upset when I called to let her know what was going on, and she didn't deserve the way that I have passed her opinions off as crazy. She may be eccentric, but she's still my mother. If I've learned anything from this experience, it's that your parents stand by you, thick and thin. She deserved the same and so I would call her as soon as possible.

And then I thought of Tanya. Everything that she'd said last night... she'd truly thought she had Edward's best interests at heart. But, didn't she see that was what I was trying to do, too? I mean, I *can* see what she means, and I can see why she thinks she's right. So why can't she see what I'm saying? It hurt *so bad* to do that to Jasper. To hurt Edward like that? I just don't think I'd survive that. The bottom line was that I didn't deserve him. I never did. I had been so selfish in my relationship with Edward, hurting him badly in the process. I didn't want to hurt him anymore. I deserved to be alone. And he deserved to move on and be happy.

Honestly, what Tanya said had affected me more than I'd let on. She made a good point- if I talked to Edward about taking a break; not just breaking up completely... the thought was tempting. It made sense, if I took some time to myself... stayed single for awhile and gave Edward a chance to move on or decide he wanted this after all. But that didn't make sense to me- how could he want this? How could he want me, after everything that I've put him through? I needed to let him go, to not be selfish and remember my reasons for deciding this in the first place. I needed to forget Tanya's words and remember Jasper's face as I broke his heart.

There were too many thoughts running through my head. I couldn't concentrate, no matter what I tried. It didn't help that most of the thoughts conflicted with each other, and all of the conflicting thoughts were to do with Edward. My brain and my heart were somewhat in agreement with each other. My heart was at odds with itself- it didn't want to let Edward go, but knew how bad it would hurt to see him look like Jasper had earlier. My brain was screaming at me that I was an idiot for doing this, for even thinking this. They both were calling me a dumbass.

I heard a quiet yell of 'fuck' come from the living room and my eyes went wide. I sucked in a breath and held it, turning an ear in the direction of the living room. I heard a soft clacking, but no more words.

Curious, I padded softly to the couch. What I saw almost made me laugh.

Edward was sprawled back, almost lying down. His legs were kicked out in front of him and spread wide as his feet caught on the edge of the coffee table. His flannel pajama bottoms were pulled up to his knees and his t-shirt rose slightly to reveal the waistband. His hair was more disheveled than ever and he looked about fourteen year's old right then. He was holding a hand held video game in his hands, his eyes intent on the screen as his thumbs flew across the outside buttons.

Like I said, I almost laughed. And I won't mention that my mouth went dry at the peek of his abs that was in plain sight from where his t-shirt was up.

"Having fun?"

He jumped off the couch like he'd been burned. His hands went behind his back, obviously trying to hide what he'd been playing with. He *tried* to look innocent.

"Huh?"

I couldn't help but smile, "What are you hiding?"

Surprisingly, his face hardened and he turned from me, setting the video game down on the coffee table before plopping back down on the couch. To say I was shocked would be an understatement- I'd never seen Edward upset. And that's how he looked. He roughly scrubbed his face with his hands before muttering, "I feel like I should be asking you that."

I rounded the couch, sitting in my father's recliner, "Edward?"

Pulling his hands from his face and leaning his head back to rest on the couch, he sighed, "What, Bella?"

Was this the best time to do this? No. Absolutely not. I should tell him to get some sleep, though it didn't look like he would be able to. I was guessing that to be the reason he was up, playing video games in the middle of the night. Was there a *right* time to do this? Well, that I wasn't sure of. So, right now it is.

I cleared my throat, "We need to talk."

He laughed a sigh, "That sounds ominous."

I looked down, "It kind of is."

I heard him shift and looked up, trying to keep my eyes from meeting his. I had a feeling that my resolve would slip further if I looked into his eyes.

"Bella?"

Buck up, Bella.

"I... um... I don't think-"

"I'm not gonna let you break up with me. I told you he wouldn't give you up without a fight-"

"This isn't to do with him-"

"So you *are* trying to break up with me?"

I sighed, "Not trying, Edward."

He huffed, "Well, I'm not gonna let you."

His hand touched mine and I jerked away. From under my eyelashes, I saw the anguish pass over his face at my actions. I needed this to be done, I don't know how much longer I'm gonna make it before I burst into tears and my heart can't take much more of seeing him in pain.

"That's not really up to you."

"Really? Because I was of the assumption that we were in a relationship. That usually involves two people Bella."

"Were we, Edward? Because I was pretty sure-"

"Don't. Don't try to discount what we have. And don't talk about it in the past tense. *Talk to me*, Bella."

"I am talking to you."

"You can't even look at me, and you're talking nonsense."

It was true, I couldn't look at him. Looking at him would weaken my resolve, like I said. There was enough noise in my head with my brain screaming that I was a dumbass to actually look at him, I knew that it would only further entertain the thoughts of *not doing this*.

"I'm not talking nonsense. I've thought a lot about this-"

"When? When Jasper was screaming at you or Alice? Or were you thinking about breaking up with me while Jasper was proposing to you? You weren't like this, this morning, angel. So I know that something happened-"

"Of *course* something happened. You didn't see, Edward! I *broke* him-"

"Broke *up* with him. But he'll be fine, Bella. It wasn't the best time and I know you feel bad about that-"

"No, it wasn't the best time, but I don't think it would have ever been a *good time*. And that's beside the point-"

"No. It isn't. If you'd think about it-"

"I *have* thought about it-"

"No. You haven't. If you had you'd see that I'm right, he'll be okay. Bella, listen to me. Please."

"Edward-"

"Please? Just hear me out? Nothing you say is going to change the way I feel about you, Bella. Nothing you say is going to make me *want* to end this relationship. The least you could do is hear me out, save me some trouble."

"Save you some trouble?"

"Yeah. From having to win you back. Because I'm not giving up. I told you that night- I'd fight for you. It doesn't matter if I'm fighting Jasper or anyone else, including yourself."

"Edward-"

"Please?" I sighed; he wasn't going to listen to me. Not right now, anyway. I'd let him say what he wanted, and then I'd do what I'd set forth to do. "Okay. So one? It wasn't the best time. That's why Tanya came with me. To put a front for Jasper. Alice, of course blew that out of the water for all of us- but I won't lie to you and tell you that I'm not just a little relieved that she did. Whether it was her business to tell or not, she still let out a secret that I was more than ready to be known. I can't be too terribly mad at her for that."

But, I could. And still was. I get that she didn't know my true intentions, but still. I would think that my past actions would have spoken for themselves. I moved across country to avoid any backlash from their wedding. To avoid being hurt- and she damn well knew that was the reason. Even if she threw out the notion that I'd wanted Jasper to chase me- she knew that I didn't. I moved there *for me*, to try to move past Jasper Whitlock. I never planned for any of this to happen and I didn't know if I could forgive her for the hurtful words she'd spat at me earlier.

“And I’m not trying to sound like a callous asshole- though I’m sure that’s exactly how I sound. I *do* feel bad for Jasper. I can’t *imagine* how he feels right now. But I know that he’s got an awesome family and support system and I know that its time he started to rely on them instead of the woman in his life. Charlotte and Rose and Emmett are going to take good care of him, angel. You shouldn’t let it eat at you so bad.”

But how could I not? I *know* that his family will be there for him. And Alice, if he lets her- though I doubt that he will. Edward didn’t see him earlier; he didn’t see the horrific pain on Jasper’s face and in his actions. And while I could forgive him for his words now- he knew the truth and apologized for his wrong assumption, I wouldn’t ever forget them. *I* had hurt him enough to make him say those things. *I* had broken him. *I* was responsible for his pain.

“Two? You’re not thinking clearly. Please, trust me on this angel. I’ve never been through *this* situation before, but I have been through some pretty bad ones. I’ve dealt with Gianna and Felix and I don’t know how many ledges I’ve had to talk Tanya down from. It’s not until you’re past the situation, and away from it, that you can see clearly.”

I understood that. I said to myself earlier, that I needed to get away from Alice. That if I stepped back, maybe I wouldn’t hate her quite so much. And I know he went through some really rough times with Gianna and Felix. I can’t imagine what kind of hurt he was feeling then- I actually would imagine that *he* would be a good person for Jasper to talk to about what’s going on. They’d both been cheated on and they could relate to each other. Of course that wasn’t a good idea, considering that Edward is the person I cheated with, but still- if the situation were different... I’d said once how I thought Jasper and Edward would have been good friends and I believe that. If only they weren’t in love with the same woman. And I know that Edward has been there for Tanya, time and again. I know they both look out for each other, and I know he’s trying to do the same thing with me that he’s had to do with her before.

“Three? *I love you*. I know that Jasper said the same thing to you. And I know that you still love him. But I also know that you love me. And you’re a selfless person. You think that breaking up with me is the right thing to do. That you don’t deserve happiness after you caused someone else pain. But angel? People break up all the time. Relationships don’t work out and people get hurt. You’ve never really been in a relationship before Jasper- that’s what you told me. I remember everything that you’ve told me, Bella. So please remember what I’m telling you right now,” he paused and reached his hand back out to me. He placed a finger under my chin and forced my eyes to his, “This? Us? This is what people wait their *entire lives* for. I’m not gonna let you throw it away. I can’t. Because I’ve waited my *whole life* for you. And I’m not willing to give you up.”

I sighed; this was going to be harder than I thought. I actually figured that he knew *something*- his face had been pained the whole day. And at the table during the argument with Alice, I knew that my not touching him was hurting him. I couldn’t help it though, it was harder than he knew to *not* touch him. I didn’t know what to say. He’d heard me, he knew why I wanted to do this and he wasn’t going to accept it.

“Edward, I’m trying to keep you from-”

“From being hurt? Right? Angel... the only thing that could hurt me is to not have you. Being with you... it’s like breathing. It’s natural and it’s easy and that’s how it’s supposed to be. That’s what people wait for. That’s what my Mom and Dad, Angela and Ben and that’s what Peter and Charlotte and Rose and Emmett have... That’s what you want to throw away, Bella. But I’m not going to let you. Like I said, nothing is going to change my mind.”

I shook my head, “You don’t understand. Being with me *will* hurt you- in the long run. That’s what you don’t want to see- I’m trying to keep you from-”

“No. You’re afraid and you’re running. You’ve always run, Bella. You ran away from Jasper in the first place and... God help me,” he mumbled. Shaking his head, he told me, “And you were running from Jasper when I came to you that night. I knew that and I took advantage of it- I’ll admit that. Admittedly, I *did* think that talking to Alice might have changed your mind, but I knew you hadn’t talked to him. You were running and you still are. You can keep running if you want, but know- I’ll chase you. Forever.”

I wasn’t running! I can admit, I *did* run in the first place. But that wasn’t what I was doing. Right?

“I don’t think that’s what it is, Edward. I know you don’t want to hear it, but I’m just trying to keep you-”

“From being hurt. I know. We covered this already, angel. And I told you what would hurt me. Think about this,” again he reached his finger under my chin, gathering my full attention. “Do you plan to fall in love with someone else?”

Is he crazy?

I couldn’t fall in love with someone else, if I tried. I knew that. The love I felt for Edward was... *forever*. Love at first sight and I knew that I would love him forever. But it wasn’t about me- that’s what he wasn’t seeing. I was trying to keep him from hurting. I knew that I was going to hurt- I deserved it.

“No, but-”

“Do you plan to cheat on me, with anyone?”

Huh?

Of course I wouldn’t cheat on him- but that was beside the point. He was still talking like we were staying together. I needed to make him see that I was right. I mean, I was right, right? Right?

“No, but that-”

“Then that’s all that matters. Those are the only two things that would hurt me besides not having you. So if you think that neither of those things is ever going to happen... Then I don’t think you have a very strong case.”

“Damn lawyer,” I huffed. He chuckled and scooted off the couch to kneel in front of me. I wished he wouldn’t- him being too close to me would cloud my judgment. It was cloudy enough, already. “Edward-”

“Just hear me out?” I sighed but nodded. He was so damn *pushy*. “If you need some time- that’s fine. I’ll give that to you, angel. I get if you need to sort yourself out in the wake of everything that’s happened. I’d probably recommend it actually. So would Ben, most likely,” he chuckled. I closed my eyes- I

could *only imagine* what Ben would have to say about all of this. “But I won’t let you walk away from me, angel. I know where you work and I know where you live and I’m not above stalking.”

I laughed, I couldn’t help it. The tears that I had tried so hard to keep in were streaming down my face now. I wish I could say that I was going to try to talk him out of this, but- he was weakening my resolve. Everything he was saying was making sense to me.

“There’s my girl,” he whispered and pulled me to him. His arms wrapped around me and I breathed his scent through my snot and tears. His musky, spicy, *man* scent was clouding my thoughts. “I’ll give you time, Bella. If that’s what you want. I told you, angel. I’m yours- I don’t really have a choice in the matter. I don’t think you do either... you just don’t want to admit it, yet.”

I cried harder at that- he had no idea. I didn’t have any kind of choice in the matter- I was his, completely and totally. I didn’t know what to do.

“I- I need to think,” I stuttered out. My decision wasn’t final anymore; I didn’t know what to do. My brain was smirking at me- I wanted to slap it. My heart was jumping for joy- it believed Edward completely and was glad that I wasn’t walking away from him. I didn’t know if I had the strength anymore. “I- I don’t know w-what to- to do...”

“Shh,” he whispered and hugged me tighter. “Cry, angel, its okay. You don’t have to do anything. And you don’t have to decide anything. Not tonight.”

He picked me up, my legs wound themselves around his waist and he sat back down on the couch, keeping me in his lap. He held me there as I cried for what felt like days, but was probably only minutes, or seconds. Never saying anything, just running his hands through my hair or rubbing my back but always keeping one arm secure around me. He would lay a kiss on my temple from time to time, but he didn’t try to stop my tears. He just... held me.

After a while, he asked, “Do you need time? To think, Bella?”

And I knew- with certainty, time was all he was going to give me. He wouldn’t walk away like I wanted him to. He wouldn’t give up on me. He wouldn’t let me end things altogether.

So I answered him honestly, “Yes, I think- I need to think.”

He nodded against my neck, “Crazy talk is gone though, right?”

I laughed lightly, though it sounded like a snort with my tears. I mumbled, “I didn’t think I sounded crazy...”

“You don’t hear yourself clearly. That’s why,” he chuckled out.

I huffed and tried to pull back from him but he held me tight, “Don’t please. I promise when you wake up- I’ll give you all the space you need. I’ll even change our flights and me and Mom and Tanya will go tomorrow- if that’s what you need. But please, let me hold you tonight.”

I sniffled and whispered my consent. We didn’t speak again, and that was okay- there really wasn’t any more to say right now. I needed to think and to sort myself out. There were other things that needed to be straightened out as well but I couldn’t think of any of them right now. Not with Edward’s arms surrounding me and the pleasant buzz emanating from every spot that our skin touched each other.

I laid my head back on his shoulder and pushed my forehead against his neck. I must have fallen asleep there because the next thing I knew, he was laying us down beside each other on my father’s ratty, old couch. His arms still wrapped tightly around me and his lips against my forehead, I felt him mouth his love for me and then his breathing evened out. I stayed there and allowed myself the comfort of his presence and tried not to think of everything that I needed to.

I was pretty sure that we weren’t over- pretty sure that we wouldn’t ever be over. I was pretty sure that I was lying next to the man that I would spend my forever with. I was absolutely sure that he wouldn’t ever let me go.

And I tried not to admit to myself how relieved I was for that.

23. Falls On Me

Shame on all of you that reviewed and didn't tell me that I posted on *Thursday*! (I really had my days messed up and thought it was Friday...) Tsk, tsk. Ah, well, now I feel bad- making you wait an extra day and sooo... I'm updating on Sunday and not Monday! I don't know if I'll update on Thursday or Friday next- so I won't commit to Thursday yet... I really do want to keep it to what I'd set it on, but like I said- I feel bad!

NZTwiligher- you're in trouble! The damn Jasper/Bella alt ending *still* won't get out of my head and it's at 9k words right now and nowhere *near* done! I hope you're happy woman! :P Beausoir- I thought of you last night when I was watching *Steel Magnolias*! When Truvy said "Time marches on..." I spit my drink out- my husband thinks I'm crazy now! Love ya, darlin'!

Thank you to everyone who's reading still and those leaving reviews- THANK YOU! You are all so awesome!

All things Twilight belong to Stephenie Meyer.

And all of your weight,
All you dream,
Falls on me, it falls on me,
And your beautiful sky,
The light you bring,
Falls on me, it falls on me.

-Falls On Me, Fuel

I was warm when I woke, warmer than I remember being since leaving Jacksonville. I didn't really want to move but a throat being cleared alerted me to the fact that I wasn't alone in my warmth and I raised my head to see who was here with me. Still drunk from sleep, my eyes recognized Edward's bronze head of hair and I smiled involuntarily.

So that's where the warmth is coming from- Edward.

I made to snuggle back into him, now that I knew that I was lying next to him, I was even more reluctant to leave the warmth that his body cocooned me in. Unfortunately, just as I pressed my nose back into Edward's chest- the throat cleared again. My head popped up to look over Edward, in the direction the annoying throat clearing was coming from. My eyes met my father's and embarrassment flooded through me even as I took in the amused twitching of his moustache. My cheeks flamed red and Charlie scratched the back of his neck.

Looking me in the eye, he whispered, "I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I've got to head into the station for awhile."

My voice was thick with sleep when I answered, "I'm fine. What time will you be home?"

"Around noon- you should go on back to sleep, it's only seven. Anyway, uh... you look alright so I'm gonna go," he looked toward Edward's peaceful sleeping face and then back to me. A tenderness took over my father's face as he stared at me for a minute longer, then he murmured, "Love you, Bells."

I whispered my love for him as well and he leaned forward to kiss the top of my head before heading out. I was fully awake now though- awkward sentimental moments with Charlie usually lead to that. Not entirely ready to leave the comfort of Edward's arms, I allowed myself to push my nose into his chest- like I'd tried to do before Charlie interrupted me.

My mind wandered to everything that Edward had said last night again and one thing stuck out more than the rest. He said that he would change his flight arrangements for me, if that's what I needed. I couldn't believe he was willing to spend that much money on a whim like that. Stupid of me, I know- he was just trying to be supportive of what I needed. Still... My ticket had taken up the rest of what I had saved from before and what I've been able to put up since starting at Cul de Sac. There was no way I could change it, just like that. But I knew that realistically... he could. It was quite obvious that the Cullen's had money and they weren't afraid to spend it.

Looking around my father's house, I realized just how shabby everything looked in comparison to what I'd seen at Esme's. I thought back to the past few days and realized that Esme and Edward hadn't acted any differently here, than they had at their home in Jacksonville. They weren't snobs, and that was nice to know- my family was the farthest thing from snobby than anyone ever. They seemed comfortable here, and they got along really well with Charlie. He liked having a full house.

I'd overheard him once, when Alice and I were around eleven. Harry Clearwater was over and they were divvying up their fish haul for the day. Alice was running around the yard like a little monster- we'd spent the day with her parents' while Charlie was enjoying a fishing day. I was running inside to grab us a drink and heard Charlie telling Harry that he'd always wanted a big family. At least one son and one daughter and then he didn't care how many of either he had. I was hurt at first- I thought that I wasn't what my father wanted, but he continued to tell Harry what a blessing I was and that he understood why Renee had left. I left after that, telling Alice we were out of pop and running after her while trying to get my father's tear-filled voice out of my head.

I knew that Charlie had never really gotten over my mother. The fact that he hadn't ever dated since their divorce alone was proof of that. There were plenty of single, middle-aged women in the town of Forks that would be happy to receive my father into their homes and, I thought with a shudder, their beds. But Charlie hadn't ever looked. He hadn't ever tried. He didn't want to. He still loved Renee.

Charlie was never *unhappy*. I knew that. But he was never the same father that he'd been before I turned nine and Renee had left us. They married young, right out of high school, and had me young, only two years after they married. I knew from Renee that they had been high school sweethearts, and I never doubted that my mother *had* loved Charlie. But she'd never liked Forks. Her parents had moved her here from Arizona when she was thirteen. The rain and the lack of sun had never been my mother's *forté*. Charlie was smitten with her from the start and wasted no time at all making her his. Two years after I was born, her parents moved away- to Jacksonville, and when I turned nine, being away from them and the sun proved to be too much for Renee so she left.

I remembered mornings with my parents, before school when Renee would try to make me breakfast that almost always resulted in a near-fire. Charlie would

waltz in and calm her frazzled nerves before turning a grin to me and sneaking me some Pop-Tarts to take with me on the bus. I remembered Thursdays, when Renee would pick me up and take me to the only park in Forks and then later we would meet Charlie at the local diner for our weekly traditional cobbler. He was a different man then- he was genuinely happy and it was so fucking obvious that he would have done anything for her and me.

That he would do anything for *me* never changed, but the light died in Charlie's eyes the day he received the divorce papers in the mail from Renee's lawyer. I'll never forget my father wiping his eyes and shakily asking me if I wanted to go see Jacob. That night, I remember sleeping beside Jacob's overly hot body in his tiny twin size bed while I listened, helplessly as my father cried to Billy.

I hadn't thought of any of that in so long, and it wasn't lost on me as to why the memories had returned to me now. I had been contemplating- no, I had been *sure* that Edward and I weren't going to stay together. I had prepared myself to send the man that I love, that I'm *in love with* away from me, to send him out of my life. My heart hurt as the image of Jasper's crying face flashed before my eyes, but just as quickly the image of Edward, last night replaced it. He was sure that we were going to make it, that we were going to last. He told me that he loved me and that he'd fight for me and that he only wanted me. The only way that I could hurt him would be to do what I had decided to do.

I believed him, now. He was right- I needed time, to think and realize that *this* is what I wanted. He was right- what we have, you *don't* throw away. Tanya had told me that too. But they'd both said that I should take some time and I knew that they were right. Not that I really wanted time away from Edward- no. Upon waking, I realized that I wanted nothing more than to stay beside him... forever. I knew that before he talked to me, but I thought that what I was doing was for the best. Now, I know that I was wrong.

Edward moved, slightly, readjusting his body against my own and murmuring my name in his sleep. I smiled remembering the last morning that I spent with him and that he'd done the same thing then. Silently, I wondered what time apart from him would accomplish- I knew now that I wanted to be with him, so why wait?

I knew one person that would give me the words that I needed to hear. The only person that could give me an unbiased opinion, and an opinion that I would heed and value. I rose from beside Edward, careful not to wake him and made my way to the kitchen. I'd slung my purse on the counter there last night when Alice and I were arguing and I hoped that it was still there. Everyone in the house was still sleeping, to my knowledge, and I didn't want to wake them.

Thankfully it was, so grabbing a cup and some coffee, silently thanking Charlie for brewing it this morning, I made my way to the back porch. It was early October, and chilly. I was grateful that I'd packed my heavier pajamas when I was getting ready to come, and my slippers were by the door. Granted they were the slippers that I'd worn in high school, but whatever. If someone wanted to come outside and make fun of my Powerpuff Girls house shoes- I'd let them, I *did* look a little ridiculous.

Zafrina, Ben's secretary answered his phone, telling me he was just ending a session. She stopped me before I could hang up though, asking if I could wait and stating that Ben would want to talk to me. I agreed, relieved that I would be able to talk to him and kept myself and my mind occupied with peeling the paint off of the step I was sitting on. Charlie really needed to get someone over here to paint this- with the weather about to get *really* cold and a lot more wet, it was only gonna get worse.

"Bella?" Ben's voice sounded through my cell phone and I breathed a sigh of relief. "Is that you?"

"Yeah," I croaked and then promptly broke down in tears. Ben did what he always did- told me to breathe and focus and after five solid minutes of gut-wrenching sobs, I calmed down.

He asked, "What happened?"

So I told him everything that had happened. From the first phone call with Edward to the conversation last night along with the decision I'd made after breaking up with Jasper to Tanya's talk with me last night. I realized that I'd probably said too much in regards to her though- he quickly asked, "What the hell is Tanya doing there?"

I sighed, "Ben... look- it's not my story to tell. But you and Angela need to let up on Tanya. She's not who you think she is and she doesn't deserve the way you two treat her. Just... try? To be nice to her and know that she was only trying to help Edward last night."

He didn't say anything for at least a minute and then, "Yeah, okay. I'll uh... talk to Ang about it. But I think that Eddie needs to tell me what's going on- I respect that you don't feel it's your place, and you're probably right. Anyway," he mumbled something that sounded like 'unbelievable' before continuing, "that's beside the point. Tell me why you thought you had to let Edward go."

I breathed in deeply, and let loose my laundry list of reasons why I thought that I should let Edward go. I didn't deserve him, he deserved better than me, I didn't want to see him go through what I'd done to Jasper, I thought he could be happier without me, I didn't ever want to hurt him. Ben listened and then asked if I had told Edward any of this. I told him that I had tried and that Edward hadn't wanted to hear it. I told him what all Edward had said to me last night in response to my protests about our relationship.

"And now? After all that he's told you... what are you feeling now?"

I shakily breathed, "I love him, Ben. I knew that I loved him when I made the decision and I love him now- I... I told him that I needed time to think. But now--"

"Okay, I'm gonna cut you off there. I think I know where you're about to go with this and I need you to listen to me," he paused waiting until I mumbled out an 'okay.' "You *do* need time, Bella. All of this- Jasper and Edward- it's all happened fast. I told you my opinions on Jasper and your relationship. I tried to be unbiased there and I *will* be unbiased now. You and Edward do have something special; I've never seen him like he is when he's with you. But you need to be careful, Bella. You need to not rush into a relationship with Edward- that's where your doubts came from in the first place. Everything with you and Jasper happened so fast and Edward should have known better than to go after you like he did."

He cleared his throat, "Look, we all thought that after you talked to Alice... we all thought that something might have changed. Edward still should have waited- I *told* him to wait, but he couldn't help himself, I guess," Ben paused, letting me digest his words before rushing through the next part. "Angela was no help- she *did* want you two together, Edward wasn't just making that up to annoy her. And after Alice called her and let her know that you did have an

interest in Edward... well she got overly excited- you know my wife. So she needs to apologize too, because she let Edward know that you were interested."

I figured- she had run screaming from the room that Alice was right... Yet another instance where Alice stuck her nose where it doesn't belong.

"I'm getting sidetracked," he mumbled. "Look, Edward is right- you've never been in a relationship before Jasper; you haven't ever had to suffer through a break-up. They hurt, Bella. The people involved usually don't end up all chummy afterward. Now, I am going to make an exception to that rule for you and Jasper. The relationship was building for *seven years*. Of course it was gonna hurt- and probably hurt more than a normal kind of break-up. Especially considering how the relationship came to be... but, that's the point. You need time to recover from that, and not rush right into another relationship straight away. I'm not saying that you and Edward can't see each other, that would actually be an excellent idea. For you two to spend time together *as friends*, like you were doing before. Get to know each other a little better- without either of you in another relationship. Let it build, like most relationships do. Let him *pursue* you and do some pursuing of your own. But I think a timed separation would be good. Like a week or two? Where the both of you don't see each other or talk to each other and *then*... start talking. Go to dinner, go to the movies, go to the beach, do things that *friends* do together but would also be a couple type thing. *Don't rush*."

I saw his point, albeit reluctantly, but I knew that he was right. And that was why I called Ben in the first place. We talked for a little while longer and he reaffirmed what Edward had said to me about my running. He told me that was yet another reason not to just jump right into a relationship with Edward. In the end, I decided that one week was enough- my week here in Forks. Edward was leaving tomorrow; I wasn't going to ask him to leave early. We still had a bit of talking left to do and I didn't want to send him home with any lingering doubts about me.

I promised to call Angela soon and bid Ben goodbye. He begged me not to be *too hard* on her and I agreed quickly- I blamed Alice for her interference in my life.

That was another thing that I wanted to take care of fast, quick and in a hurry. *Alice*. I knew *exactly* what I wanted to say to her. I wanted to tell her to stay the fuck out of my life and go mess up her own, but I knew that I wouldn't and shouldn't do that. She had been betrayed, and I was one of the people involved in her betrayal. I still didn't understand why the hell she felt that the day of the funeral was the best time to say what she'd said, but... well we've all been mad and said things out of anger without thinking before. I was confused as to what to say to her but figured the best thing to do would be to just *talk*... and maybe straighten things out with her. At this point, I wasn't too concerned if she didn't want me in her life anymore, but I knew that when I'd had more time to think on the subject... that I would miss her.

I made my way, as quietly as possible, back into the house, only to find Edward leaning against the counter, running a hand through his hair as he sipped a cup of coffee. He smiled at me when he saw me and I smiled back.

"I promise I wasn't eavesdropping, but I'll tell you that I heard some of what you said. You were talking to Ben?" His voice was quiet and warm. I nodded, "Good, that's good. So..."

"A week- give me this week in Forks to think and you can't call me or *anything*. He said he recommends we don't talk at all during the week. And then," I paused, my smile widening as I prepared to tell him the rest. "He said we should see each other as friends- only friends. I don't really want to do that, but he's right. He said we should get to know each other a bit better before we jump right into a relationship."

Edward nodded, smiling as he looked down. He peeked at me from under his eyelashes, "So that means that you're not running away from me then?"

"No," I whispered. "I don't think I *could* run away from you."

~*~

"Tanya and I were thinking of making the drive to Port Angeles today, get out of the house. Do you two want to come?" Esme and I were cleaning up the dishes from breakfast, when she asked. I'd made omelets, bacon and fruit salad for everyone for breakfast- with Edward's help. I even let him bogart the jar of picante sauce which earned me a big, sexy, crooked grin.

Alice had skipped out sometime in the night, unbeknownst to everyone else in the house. I deduced that she'd either already left or went after I came down to think and talked to Edward. Surely I would have heard her. And it was probably for the best, I didn't want to have that conversation with her *today*. It was Edward's last day here and I wanted to spend it with him. I made him promise that after he left tomorrow, that he would give me the week. He had no problem with that but begged to have this day with me without talks of our week apart- a reprieve from our troubles. I accepted his proposition wholeheartedly, and I was more than ready to spend the day with him.

So Esme and Tanya going to Port Angeles for the day was a good thing.

"No, thank you though. I think Edward wanted a tour of Forks. I was going to take him down to First Beach, too. Show him what beaches in Washington are like," I chuckled.

Esme smiled, "That sounds like a wonderful idea. I'm sure he'll enjoy his ten minute tour of the town," she winked. "Listen, I wanted to get your father something- he's been so gracious about opening his home to us-"

"You don't have to do that-"

"Oh, I know," Esme interrupted. "But I'm going to anyway. So... any ideas?"

I smiled and told her that anything pertaining to fishing or food would suit Charlie. She laughed and thanked me before making her way upstairs to change for the day. I finished up in the kitchen and went to go upstairs as well when I noticed Tanya and Edward in the living room. I could tell they were talking but their voices were too quiet for me to hear. Not wanting to eavesdrop, and figuring that they were discussing me anyway, I turned to go upstairs. I only made it up one step though before I heard Edward's voice call for me.

Smiling as I entered the living room, I said, "I didn't want to interrupt. I'm pretty sure you two were talking about me."

Tanya laughed lightly, “Yeah. Well bitching is more like it. Those omelets were disgusting- who taught you to cook?”

Her grin gave her away. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Her smile widened, “So, I heard you came to your senses?”

I nodded, blushing as I answered, “Yeah, I did. Edward’s so damn pushy.”

He scoffed as she laughed, “Damn right, he is.” Tanya hesitated before saying, “I’m glad, Bella. I *really* didn’t want to beat you up.”

I looked at her, incredulous, “I would whoop your ass, anyway. So you should be glad.”

She stood and pulled me into a hug. She whispered, “Don’t ever let him go.”

I nodded and we hugged each other tight. When she pulled away and went to leave the room I remembered what I’d told Ben this morning.

“Wait! This morning... I called Ben- to talk. I was telling him all that went on here and that you and I had talked,” Tanya’s face visibly paled. “It’s time, Tanya. I didn’t tell him- it’s not my place. But he wanted to know why you were here and when I told him that he and Angela needed to let up on you... well he said that Edward needs to talk to him. But you could do that too- or I could, if you aren’t comfortable with it.”

She took a deep breath and her hand reached out to the wall to steady herself. Edward shot up off the couch and put his hands on her shoulders, shaking her slightly to get her attention. She looked ready to pass out.

Edward’s voice was gentle, “Tanya? Come on, look at me. Look at my eyes, Tanya.”

I felt awful- I shouldn’t have said anything, “Oh God, I’m so sorry, Tanya. I just-”

“No. It’s okay, angel. You were right- it’s been time. Tanya?”

Her eyes finally met his and her breathing began to slow, “Can you get me some juice, Bella? She needs the sugar.”

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me and ran to the kitchen quickly. Coming back with a glass of juice for her, I found Esme sitting on the couch with her, rocking her gently back and forth. She smiled at me and told me to go on and go- she’d take care of Tanya. I hesitated, looking around for Edward and not finding him. I assumed that she’d sent him away as well. I smiled, weakly and nodded to her before making my way upstairs. I met Edward halfway up, he asked how she was and I told him that Esme had her. He nodded and mumbled something about socks before making his way down the rest of the steps.

I really did feel bad; I just wanted her to be prepared. I should have watched my mouth to begin with though, when I was talking to Ben and not said anything about her. While I agreed with Edward- it *was* time, I still felt bad for forcing her hand. I tried to take my mind off of her paled face while I was in the shower, but it wouldn’t leave me. She’d done so much for me and here I was, sticking my nose in her business.

Just like Alice.

And that made me feel *so much better*. I rolled my eyes at myself, pissed that I’d acted in a way that I was ready to condemn my best friend for. I dressed quickly and made my way back to my bedroom to get ready for the day. Tanya was there, on the edge of my bed, waiting for me.

She smiled gently, “I’m sorry for freaking out like that.”

“No,” I said quickly. “*I’m sorry* for saying anything to Ben in the first place. God, just like-”

“Don’t you *dare* say Alice,” she snapped at me. “What you did is *very* different. Alice went around telling things about you that you wanted left alone- secrets. You didn’t tell Ben my story, you told him that you talked to me and left the rest in my or Edward’s hands. You didn’t go running off at the mouth about my past. That’s entirely different, Bella. That’s *respectful*.”

I shook my head, “Still...”

Tanya *growled* at me, “Stop! You have to quit thinking so negatively of yourself! Not everything is your fault or yours to fix, Bella! I love you to death, honey, but you just gotta quit putting all this on yourself.”

I sighed and nodded. That sounded like something that Ben would tell me. “Are you okay?”

A small smile appeared on her face, “I will be. You and Edward and Esme are right- it’s time. I’m just not looking forward to hashing it all back out.”

“Anything I can do?”

She nodded, “Don’t think stupid things like last night. And be there when I do tell them. I would really appreciate that.”

I told her I would and hugged her. She smiled a real smile at me before telling me she’d see me later and heading downstairs to leave with Esme. I took a deep breath and set forth to drying my hair as fast as possible- I wanted to get to the spending time with Edward part. Like now.

~*~

“And *this*,” I opened my arms wide and spun in a half-circle to face Edward, “is Forks High School. Go Spartans!”

He chuckled, “You were *not* a cheerleader, were you? That might be a deal breaker.”

I scoffed at him, “I was the one on *top* of the pyramid!”

His eyes shut and his head tilted back, “If I try *really hard*... yeah no. Can’t see you as a cheerleader.”

He shook his head and grinned at me. I grinned back and sighed, “Yeah... I was too busy reading Jane Austen to memorize the cheers. They kicked me off the team.”

He rolled his eyes, “I’ll bet. They probably were worried about all the extra they would have to pay in insurance- you’re not the most graceful-”

“Hey! I resent that remark!”

He chuckled and I laughed along with him before grabbing his hand and dragging him to the brick fence where Alice and I used to sit before school. Hopping up, I patted the seat next to me and he obliged. “Now *this*... this is where I used to sit and wait for the bell to ring to signal class. My favorite time of the day was right before school started.”

I told him stories from high school. Things that Alice and I would do or talk about. Jessica and Mike’s break-ups and how he’d never fail to ask me out during them. Jessica’s glares from across campus and how they would always get back together after I’d decline his request for a date.

“And... was this where you sitting when the sun followed Jasper Whitlock to you?” His voice was quiet and unsure- I didn’t like it. I also didn’t like talking about Jasper to him. It felt wrong now, not like before when I’d belonged to Jasper and Edward was just being a friend.

“Why? I mean, does it matter?”

He shrugged and looked in my eyes, “Honestly, no. I have to admit that I’m curious though...”

I sighed, “Yeah. I was here, but not sitting. Alice was standing where you are. And Jasper was,” I pointed in front of us, toward the parking lot, “there. The sun followed him from there.”

Edward nodded and looked in the direction that I’d pointed. His eyes squinted and he seemed to be contemplating something.

“Hey,” I pulled on his sleeve, trying to get his attention focused back on me. “That’s done now. You know that right?”

His head jerked back to mine and he quickly said, “Oh, shit. Yeah- sorry. I mean... that’s not what I was thinking about. I guess... I’m just happy to know this part of you. I mean... I can’t imagine taking you to my school and showing you where I was when I saw the first girl I had a crush on... but...” he shrugged, smiling at me. “I kind of like the fact that you held on to just *the thought* of him for so long. *God*, that makes me sound like a douche doesn’t it?”

I laughed, “No, it doesn’t. But I’m not sure if I know what you’re getting at...”

He nodded, looking back toward where I’d pointed, “I mean... you don’t give up on shit. You saw him, you liked him, you grew to love him- against your will, but your heart just wouldn’t give up. You stuck to him, whether you wanted to or not. It took *him* to get you past him. You know what I mean?”

“Kind of...”

“Words and advice didn’t help, Bella. You needed Jasper in your life, telling you that you weren’t crazy to allow yourself to move past that hold that he had on you. I know he didn’t really do anything to encourage what you felt for him, it was just *there*. And your heart had to have what it always wanted to move on. It had to have Jasper. It’s encouraging- that your heart didn’t just give up.”

I looked down, “I moved though-”

“Yeah, and we all know why. The move didn’t help at all, Bella. I hope you’ve realized this- it might save us a lot of trouble in the future. Well that, and I’m totally taking away all of your running shoes.”

He laughed at that and I joined in. He was absolutely right- moving away from Jasper hadn’t helped one bit. I never got over what I was feeling. He was right about what else he had said too... It took Jasper Whitlock to get me over Jasper Whitlock. My heart had idolized him for so long and it needed to see him knocked off the pedestal that it had put him on. It needed to see who he really was to be able to move on.

Of course, Edward might have had something to do with that too.

And that was true- I would probably still be with Jasper, if not for Edward. I would have forgiven him and possibly said yes to his proposal of marriage if Edward hadn’t come into my life.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is,” Edward’s voice broke through my inner musings, *again*. “I don’t know what you said to him to get him to let you go. Jake was pretty adamant about all of us remaining in our seats to give you two privacy... But whatever you said- it’s what he needed to hear. To let you go and in turn, let you let him go. That’s really nice to know. *For me*. Because I hope that you realize how much you mean to me and... that there’s nothing you could ever say that will allow me to let you go. I just... can’t ever do that.”

I blushed and looked down as he continued, “And yeah I *know* we have to be *friends* first, and I’m totally okay with that. But I want to be very clear on this, Bella,” his finger went under my chin, pulling my eyes to his. His other hand went to his chest and he pointed a finger at himself, “I belong to you. I’ve belonged to you since the moment I saw you and I will belong to you for the rest of my life. Anything you want or need, angel? It’s yours. You want to take a week away from each other? That’s cool. You want to be friends for awhile? That’s fine- it gives me a chance to pursue you... like I told you that I wanted to. You want to go to Vegas and get married? Let’s go. Anything, *anything*, Bella. Believe me, okay? Don’t doubt us- ever. And think about all of that this next week, okay?”

How I could dread the word marriage so much coming from Jasper, but light up inside at the thought of it with Edward is beyond me. But I did, the wind wasn’t as cold at the thought and the drizzle felt good against my overheated skin. His words sunk straight to my bones and I knew, *knew* that I’d made the right choice.

“Edward-”

“Please don’t. Anything that you want to say to me, say it when you come home- to *Jacksonville*. I want to know for sure that you’ve thought about it, and that you aren’t rushing into something again or saying what you think I need to hear. Okay?”

Ben’s voice echoed through my head, telling me not to rush- exactly what Edward was asking me to do, too. So, I smiled and nodded and made a promise to myself to do just what he’d asked of me- *think*.

“So, you’ve seen all of Forks. Want to go to the beach?”

His face transformed into a look of confusion, “Uh... we drove for like... fifteen minutes and then we stopped here, at the school.”

I nodded, “Yep. You’ve seen it all.”

Nervously, he chuckled, “A beach? Isn’t it a little cold?”

I couldn’t help myself, my voice lowered and a mischievous grin popped on my face, “I’ll keep you warm.”

He huffed a breath, “That’s not fair!”

My grin widened, “Who said anything about fair?”

He rolled his eyes, “I’m trying to be fair, Bella. I thought-”

I cut him off, “The week starts tomorrow, the friend thing starts after that. I thought we agreed that today was just us?”

He inhaled sharply, searching my face. After a moment, he nodded, “You’re right. We said that.”

My grin turned into a gentle smile, “We don’t have to go to the beach. I just thought you might like to see it. I spent a lot of time out there with Jake when I was younger.”

His grin took my breath away, “Well then, let’s see this beach.”

His hand found mine and I gripped it with all of my might. I took him to the beach and showed him where Jake and Quil and Embry used to set bonfires with driftwood and where I got drunk for the first time and where Alice had thrown up all over me, successfully sobering me up. I blushed when I showed him where I lost my virginity- to Embry Call when Alice and Jasper had snuck away at one of the bonfires and I was too drunk to care. I took him to Forks Diner and bought him cobbler and told him all about when I was younger and Thursdays with my Dad and my Mom at this very table. I took him home and my father and Esme and Tanya were waiting- checking out the new fishing pole that Esme had bought for him. I fixed him dinner and held his hand and when we fell asleep beside each other that night, in my bed this time, I told him I loved him and smiled when he said it back.

I stood outside the next morning staring into the distance long after his rental tail lights had disappeared from view. When Charlie came out, to lead me back inside, I broke down in tears and he had to carry me. I cried myself to sleep and when I woke it was still light. My phone dinged and I looked at the screen to see a new text message. From Edward.

I promise this will be the last you hear of me for the week. Just know- I love you and I miss you. Get out of bed and stop crying, angel. Charlie is worried about you. The week will be over before you know it and... I’ll be there to pick you up when you come home. Don’t cry anymore, angel- we’re not saying goodbye forever, just for now. –Love, Edward

My answering smile lit up my face and I flung myself from my bed and down the stairs and right into my father’s lap. I told him that I was sorry for worrying him and he rocked me there, telling me it was okay. He asked me if I knew what day it was and I looked at him, confused.

He grinned, “Its Thursday, Bells.”

I grinned back and *then...*

My father took me out for cobbler- just like when I was a little girl. I won’t even try to deny how much better I felt.

24. It Ends Tonight

So... I almost made you wait 'til Friday! But I'm a nice person, so I updated a *tad bit early!*

I'm so happy that everyone that has given the story a chance seems to like it- you all are so awesome to me. I hope that you continue to like it- even you pesky Jasper/Bella fans who I *know* are only reading it because I promised an alt. ending... *cough cough* We're just past the halfway mark in the story- in case anyone was wondering. Still have that pesky friendship to get through... just sayin'. Thanks for reading and those leaving reviews- you all just make my day!

Everything Twilight belongs to Stephenie Meyer. (And here's where I grumble that she decided to write Bree's story instead of releasing something worthwhile- like Midnight Sun.)

Your subtleties, they strangle me,
I can't explain myself at all,
And all the wants, and all the needs,
All I don't want to need at all.

The walls start breathing,
My minds unweaving, maybe it's best you leave me alone.
A weight is lifted,
On this evening, I give the final blow.

-It Ends Tonight, The All-American Rejects

Friday brought the last of the bonfires for the year at First Beach, Leah called to tell me that I was required to attend and I accepted her underhanded invitation wholeheartedly. Sleep had evaded me the night before and I knew it was because Edward was gone. I missed him terribly, already and couldn't wait to go home.

Seven days, Bella.

Leah's invitation was just the distraction that I wanted, though I know that it wasn't one I needed. I should be spending my time thinking about what I want and need. But then... I know what I want and need- and that's how I'm justifying going.

Driving the familiar road brought me back to the day with Edward, showing him around the town and La Push and I was happy to realize that not all of my memories of Forks were tainted anymore. Before, it seemed as if everywhere I turned, I was accosted by unpleasant memories of Jasper and Alice and days that existed before everything went to shit. Thinking about those times used to hurt so bad... and they still did, but, instead of seeing Jasper and Alice sneak off to seclusion, I see Edward laughing at me as I tell him clumsy Bella stories and jokes that were made at my expense.

Pulling up, I was able to see that everyone was there- it looked like the whole of La Push had shown up and some stragglers like myself, from Forks. My father was there, of course, he'd offered to give me a ride. He didn't miss bonfires- at least he didn't miss the adult bonfires. I remembered bonfires without adult supervision and underage drinking.

Please God, don't ever tell Charlie all the things I did as a teenager- he'd probably die from shock.

I heard Jake before I saw him; he was singing some sort of hilly-billy song about tequila. This was more than funny but I was hit with a wave of nausea wondering *who* he was singing with. It sounded like something that Jasper would sing when he was drinking, and I mentally kicked myself for not thinking that he might be attending this bonfire. I looked up to the sky and rolled my eyes at my luck- I just couldn't get a break.

My inner turmoil was for naught though- I caught sight of Jake and Emmett singing. *Thank God.*

But shit- if Emmett is here... then Rose is here... and she probably doesn't want to talk to me right now...

"Bella? I was wondering if you were gonna come," the woman I'd just been thinking about was next to me. Rose had just appeared beside me as I'd been cursing myself. I turned to her and found a gentle smile on her face, "I'm glad you came."

I drew in a shaky breath, "I wasn't thinking... I know you probably don't want to see me."

"Oh, hush," she chided. She moved a step closer to me and wrapped her arms around my shoulders, "He didn't leave you with much choice, Bella."

I pulled her close, taking comfort in her warmth, "I'm so sorry, Rose."

She shook her head, "Don't. Don't apologize. Not for telling him- because you weren't left with a choice, thanks to Alice. Don't apologize for Edward- because you love him and that's apparent. And lastly, don't apologize for saying no to a proposal from my drunken brother who couldn't pull his head out of his ass long enough to know what he had when he had it. Like I said, Bella- he didn't leave much choice."

I pulled back from her, searching her eyes for reassurance and finding it. I whispered, "I never wanted to hurt him."

Rose smiled at me again, "I know. It's a Whitlock curse- we all have our heads stuck up our asses. I had mine up there for a long time when it came to you. I'm sorry for treating you the way that I did all these years," I shook my head- she did *not* need to apologize to me. I knew how loyal Rose was to her family and she felt that I was trying to come between them. "No, don't shake your head at me. Just let me apologize- I don't do it often and when I do, I mean it. And... remember the day in my bedroom, when you came?" I nodded, I was pretty sure I knew where she was going with this and I would be so happy to be right. "You're my friend, Bella. A damn good friend at that and... I don't want to lose you. So...?"

A genuine smile broke out on my face. *I was so happy to be right.* "Are you asking if I want to be your friend? Like, hinting at it like we're still in grade school

and shit? Because that's really cute if you are and-"

"Bella! *Shut-up!*"

I laughed and pulled her back in for another hug, "I *really* want to be your friend, Rose."

She laughed with me and looped her arm with mine as she pulled back from our hug. We began to make our way down to the beach, talking and laughing with each other the whole way. As we neared the rest of the people, another set of arms rested themselves around our shoulders.

"Ladies, what did I tell you about warning a guy before you do this shit?"

I rolled my eyes at Emmett, but before I could respond Rose had whacked his hand and told him, "You better behave yourself. I don't want Bella thinking I'm married to some kind of... sex fiend or something."

"But Rose-"

"Oh it's cool, Rose. Emmett already told me how much he likes that thing you do with your mouth," I cut him off, spouting his own words back at him.

Rose gasped and pulled back as Emmett sat there with his mouth flopping open and closed like a dying fish. I held my laughs though, "Rose?"

She reluctantly tore her gaze from her husband, who was still with the flapping jaw and looked at me, "He didn't tell me *what* you do with your mouth."

I winked at her and let my laughs loose before turning and making my way to rest of the crowd. Leah found me almost immediately and after a thorough bitching out for leaving town without telling her, she broke down in tears and fell against me. I looked for Jake and found he was already making his way over. She blubbered for what felt like forever and Jake held her the whole time, whispering reassurances to her and rubbing her back. I tried to give them their privacy, many times, and every time I would go to walk away, Leah would snatch hold of my hoodie and pull me back to her. When she'd cried all she could, she barked out for Jake to go get us some beers and then turned a wicked grin at me.

"So, Bella... tell me what you know about Kitchen-Aide mixers. Because I just got one and..."

I pushed her gently and rolled my eyes, telling her to figure it out herself. That earned me a push of my own and then Jake was back with our beers, laughing at our play-fight. Rose and Emmett joined the three of us not long after and then my father came along. The six of us sat around the fire, drinking beer and singing songs and telling legends of the land. And there we stayed for the rest of the night.

The only thing that was missing was Edward.

~*~

Saturday passed without much actually happening. Rose came over and visited with me for a long while. I had tried to call Alice many times during the but she wouldn't answer her phone. I asked Rose and she rolled her eyes.

"She went back to Seattle."

I gasped, "You're kidding me!"

Rose shook her head, "Nope. She stayed at our house all day on Thursday, trying to get hungover Jasper to talk to her. She finally did and they disappeared for less than ten minutes before she came storming through the house and out. She went back to Seattle right after."

I couldn't *believe* her! Did our friendship really mean that little to her that she would leave without a single fucking word to me? And what had her storming out like that?

None of your business, Bella.

Something else wasn't my business, but I couldn't help quietly asking, "How is he?"

She sighed, "He's drunk. Still. But... he'll be okay, Bella. No one has ever broken up with my brother-"

"Alice left him-"

"Bullshit. She'll tell anyone that she left him, to make herself look like some kind of martyr for doing the right thing. The truth of the matter is that she begged him not to leave after she caught him with Maria. He told her that Maria was just a catalyst- you were who he wanted and he couldn't be with Alice anymore."

Well... that's certainly news to me.

"Look, I love Alice. I always will- I thought of her as a sister for a very long time. I thought that my brother really loved her and I was wrong. Well, he does love her. He just doesn't love her enough. And he probably won't ever. But she needs to wake up and smell the coffee. Alice has always been about herself, and she always will. This was all a wake-up call for her because... even knowing that he'd gone to see you in Jacksonville... she thought he'd fuck you out of his system or something. But then it was right in her face and even when you left him, she didn't get him back. It's time for Alice to grow up."

And that... I couldn't and wouldn't argue with. And I was pissed that she just ran away instead of coming here and trying to talk to me like an adult.

"I need to talk to her," I told Rose. "I can't leave everything like this."

Rose nodded, "You're right. Just... don't expect too much. Okay?"

I smiled and told her that I wouldn't. Later that night, I heated up some of what Esme and Tanya had made for me and Dad and we talked about the situation.

Charlie was rather insightful- something that I wasn't expecting.

He told me that I should talk to Alice, and I told him that I had planned on it. He asked if I was sure about everything and I told him that I was. He told me that he liked Edward and that he had a good feeling about him- something he'd never had with Jasper. He knew that Edward would look out for me and that's all he ever wanted for me.

Sunday was much of the same, except there was no visit from Rose. There was no visit from anyone and I practically pushed Charlie out the door to go fishing with Harry Clearwater. He argued that I wouldn't be in town much longer and I rolled my eyes and told him to get over it- and come visit me in Jacksonville.

Alone time turned out to be just what I needed. I thought a lot about everything and what Ben had told me. I thought back to my actions and admitted to myself that Jasper and I had rushed way too fast into a relationship. The whole barbeque debacle might not have been blown so far out of proportion if we'd had a little more time on our side.

But then I knew that I was lying to myself. It might not have been as bad as it had turned out, but the fact of the matter was... I loved Edward. I loved him more than I could ever love Jasper and I knew that our relationship was doomed from the minute that I laid eyes on Edward Cullen. There was nothing that Jasper could have done or said to keep me from eventually going to Edward- he was working his way into my heart from the beginning.

I missed Edward; I knew that it was completely pathetic- he'd only been gone for a few days and already my heart hurt at not being able to see him. I compared missing Edward to missing Jasper and realized that there was nothing similar at all between the two. I knew that Jasper had left right after a fight- I'd made him leave. Still... I didn't miss him like I missed Edward and I dreaded the phone ringing, knowing that it was probably Jasper and I didn't want to talk to him. Edward and I had promised not to talk this week and even though he'd broken that rule once and I wished he would break it again, I knew that it was the best thing for us.

I could see exactly what Ben meant about rushing, and why Edward had stopped me from saying anything that would have made us doubt our promise of friendship first. Everything with Edward had been on the verge of going down the same road that Jasper and my relationship had and I sure as hell didn't want that to happen. I realized that Edward was a completely different person from Jasper but... I didn't want to do anything to ruin it.

After too long spent sitting on my Dad's couch and willing myself not to lean down and try to get a whiff of Edward, I decided that I needed a distraction. Leaving the house was pretty much out- there was no telling who I might run into. I planned to leave a day early for Seattle to track down and talk to Alice- Rose had given me her address and I knew where she worked. Aside from that, I didn't want to just up and leave my father like that. He'd worry.

In the end, I decided a phone call was in order. Angela was probably beside herself wondering about me.

"Oh thank God!" She said in place of a hello. "What *took* you so long?! Edward and Mom have been back since Thursday!"

I chuckled, "Sorry, sorry. I had some things to think about. I'm calling now though, and I'm all yours for like... however long you want."

"Mhm, 'kay. Now- tell me why my husband told me that you said to be nice to Tanya. He said you said she wasn't who we thought she was. I didn't realize that you and Tanya knew each other so well, in fact- I didn't know Tanya had gone to the funeral with my brother. My brother who is in love with you. My brother who she was and might still be- because he won't tell me shit- engaged to. Tell me-"

"Why do you dislike her so much? What did she do?"

She huffed, "Why are you asking?"

"I just want to know."

"Well, I just want to know why you suddenly like her so much!"

I sighed, "Angela, it's not my place- please understand that-"

"Well, you try to understand that no one is giving me answers, what am I supposed to think?"

"I get that. Really, I do. Just... we'll talk to you when I'm back. Okay?"

She sighed, "Yeah, okay. I'm sorry for snapping at you- I'm just confused."

"I know. Just trust me, please?"

"Of course I trust you, Bella," she told me. And then her voice dropped to a whisper, "Are you angry at me?"

"Why would I be angry at you?"

"Ben told me about your phone call. He said that he told you about Alice telling me about Edward and then me telling Edward what she said and I swear-"

"Angela! I'm not mad at you- stop rambling," I shook my head and then rolled my eyes at myself when I realized she couldn't see me through the phone.

"Why is everyone rambling but me these days?"

She laughed, "Guess you're rubbing off on us."

I laughed with her, "Guess so. But please know- I'm not mad. At you. I'm of the firm belief that Alice needs to keep her nose in her own business and out of mine though. Which I'll be telling her when I see her."

Angela sighed, "Yeah, I figured. And I'm not gonna try to talk you out of it. She's called- just so you know, but I haven't answered. All of the voicemails are

her in tears and hardly understandable so... I don't know why, but I felt that you should know that."

I told her that I was glad she let me know, and proceeded to tell her, in detail, all that had happened here after the funeral. The fight and then later, talk with Jasper. The screaming match in my kitchen with Alice. Edward's refusal to do what I'd stupidly tried to get him to. She began to cry as I told her that part and I instantly felt bad.

"I'm sorry, Angela. I was stupid- I'm not gonna do that again, promise."

"I'm going to hold you to that," she told me shakily. "My brother really loves you, Bella. He's been a first class mope since he got back."

My heart hurt at the thought of Edward sad, "I love him too. I won't do that to him again, Angela. I don't think I *could*."

She was quiet for a moment and then she said, "Have you seen Jasper since that night?"

"No."

"Are you going to?"

"I think... that Jasper and I have said all there is to say to each other," I told her after some thought. "I would hope that one day we could be friends again, but... I'm not gonna hold my breath."

Angela sighed again, "I'm really sorry, Bella. The timing of all of this and that Jasper- who you do still love in some way and don't deny it- is in pain. But... you know it's all going to work out don't you?"

I nodded to myself, "I do."

"Say that to my brother one day, 'kay?"

I laughed, "That's a long way away, I think."

Angela gasped, "But... you *are* thinking about it?"

My brow furrowed, "Well..."

"Okay- prying, sorry. Ben just made that disapproving noise at me."

I laughed again, "Tell him to mind his own business."

"He's denying that he was listening in," I heard Ben in the background, talking quietly to Angela. "Yep, he's lying to my face- he said he just knew that I was doing something wrong. He said he *felt it*," I swear I *heard* her eyes roll. "He said he would *never* eavesdrop."

I couldn't help myself, "He's a real gentleman, bet he takes the dishes out of the sink before he pees in it."

Angela was immediately laughing. Full-out brain rattling laughs that had me laughing with her in a matter of seconds. We joked around a little more and she asked if she could pick me up from the airport. I told her that my car was parked there and that her brother would be waiting to welcome me home. She pouted, for about five seconds before muttering something about Ben being no fun at all. We laughed a little more at that and said goodbye to each other. I was more than looking forward to going home.

To Jacksonville.

~*~

Saying goodbye to my father was a tear-filled event. It was Tuesday and tomorrow I would fly home, but I was leaving early to go to Seattle to find Alice. He understood and wanted me to try to work things out with her. I told him not to set his expectations too high- like Rose had told me, and he promised he would only *hope* for the best. After a promise to call him when I arrived in Seattle and then when I arrived home in Jacksonville, I hugged my father goodbye.

I stopped at a convenience store before leaving town for a drink for the road and my heart jumped into my throat as Jasper's truck pulled up when I exited the store.

I froze, unsure of what to do. He jumped out of his truck and turned toward me. His eyes were still dim and red-rimmed, but he looked much better than the last time I'd seen him. He made his way to me slowly and stopped a few feet away.

"Rose told me you were leaving today- I went by your Dad's but he said you'd just left."

I nodded, unable to meet his eyes, "I was just getting a drink before heading out."

He nodded once, and then asked, "I thought your flight left tomorrow?"

I took a deep breath, "I'm going early, to try to get Alice to talk to me."

He made that disapproving noise in his throat, "You should just leave it alone. She's not gonna come around that easy."

"I just can't go back without trying."

"Yeah," he sighed. "You're too damn nice for your own good."

I shook my head, "I'm not going there to be nice to her. I'm going to straighten out the situation."

"She's not happy- with any of us. You should be prepared."

"Yeah," I whispered. "Rose told me that she stormed out of your Momma's the other day."

Jasper barked a harsh laugh, "That's one way to put it. Another way would be to say that Alice threw a fit because she didn't get her way. That would be the truth."

I nodded, "I figured."

We stood there, not staring into each other's eyes and fidgeting nervously. After a few minutes he stated, "You were going to leave without saying goodbye."

It sounded like a question, but I knew it wasn't. "I didn't think you would want to see me."

He looked away, his lips forming sound-less words and his brow furrowing. He shook his head before looking back at me, "You thought wrong. So... I don't want to be difficult or make things any more awkward... but I wanted to tell you bye. And tell you to be safe. And..."

I stared at him, now willing his eyes to meet mine. They didn't and after a minute he said, "I just wanted to know if it was okay...? If I...? Can I...?" He huffed and then quickly asked, "Can I still call you? Sometimes?"

I let out a breath of relief before nodding, "Of course! I just..."

"You didn't know if I would want to or not?"

I chuckled, "How'd you know?"

"I know you. And I do want to. And I won't pressure you for anything more than friendship... I just... I'd like to keep you in my life- if that's possible. If you'd even want that."

"I do want that- if you do, which you sound like you do and I'm really happy about that because I was so worried about you and I'll miss you and-"

"Stop rambling. Hug me goodbye and get out of here."

I smiled at him and we closed the distance together to hug each other goodbye. There was nothing not-friend-like in the hug and when we pulled away after only a few seconds, he smiled and told me goodbye and left first.

I took a deep breath and made my way to my car- glad that I'd been able to say goodbye and see him again, after all. And I really hoped that Jasper Whitlock and I could remain friends. It sounded promising.

~*~

The drive seemed to fly by and I knew it was because I was dreading this talk. I found her apartment easily, though Seattle traffic was unforgiving and the parking even worse. I ended up having to park in a structure six blocks away and huffed at the walk I would need to make. It was drizzling slightly and I was annoyed that I would have to walk through this shit to get to her.

Standing at her door and contemplating knocking, I pressed my ear to it- trying to hear if she was home or not. There was no way to know where she was parked and so I couldn't use the whole look for her car thing to know for sure. I could hear faint music playing inside and took that as a sign that she was home. One deep breath was all I allowed myself before raising my fist and knocking three sharp taps.

There was a distinct male voice coming from the other side of the door and I was so embarrassed- I'd gone to the wrong apartment. I prepared my apology to the person who lived here but it was cut short by a bare chest and a distinctly Italian accent bidding me hello when the door swung open. I gaped at him- he was just holding a towel around his waist.

Who the hell answers their door like that?

Finally, my mind and mouth caught up with each other, "I'm *so* sorry! I thought my friend lived here-"

"Oh, Alice?"

What the hell?

"Um..."

"Demetri? Who is it?"

That... was Alice.

And then she was there, standing in just a towel herself. She'd walked in from a hallway and stopped short when she saw me at the door.

"What the hell are *you* doing here?" She spat at me.

I shook my head, not trying anymore to make sense of what I was seeing, "We need to talk."

"No, we don't! You have some nerve showing up here!"

"You said yourself- we'd get past this. I don't know about that but I do know that I'm not willing to leave this shit like it is."

She laughed, "I hope you enjoy disappointment then. I don't have shit to say to you!"

"Why? You had plenty to say just the other day."

"I *said* I don't have anything to say to you."

"Because you didn't get your way?"

"*What?!*"

I shook my head at myself- snapping at her wasn't going to accomplish anything. And throwing accusations around wasn't what I'd come here to do, "I don't want to argue with you, Alice."

"Then leave- I don't have anything to say to you."

I sighed, "So that's it? Jasper Whitlock is gonna be the end of you and me?"

"You should have thought about that before you invited him to your bed-"

"You're right."

That stopped her short and she just stood there gaping at me for a minute. Then she said, "Is this you apologizing again?"

"No. I've apologized for that enough. If you can't forgive me, that's fine- I probably don't deserve it. But... you and I have been through so much shit together, Alice... I didn't want to just bail without trying to straighten things out."

"Really? You think you've apologized enough? Because the last time I checked you took everything from me!"

I huffed and glanced pointedly at the man standing between us, "Doesn't look like you're hurting too bad to me."

She took a step forward and pushed him behind her, "Don't look at him! And you don't know what you're talking about!"

Even after mentally berating myself for doing the exact opposite of what I'd set out to do, I still couldn't stop my mouth from spitting, "Oh, okay. So the two of you in towels- still dripping wet doesn't indicate that you did *anything* together. In fact-"

"*Shut-up! Shut-up! Shut-up!*"

"That's real mature, Alice."

She glared at me and then whispered, "Go on back in Demetri; I'll be there in a second."

He nodded and turned a glare of his own at me before turning around and heading back down the hallway that Alice had come from. I rolled my eyes because he didn't know me for shit, who was he to glare at me?

Alice glared at me for a beat longer and then said, "You don't know anything, Bella."

Apparently not, here I was thinking she was pining over her lost husband. The reality of the situation evaded me but I knew that was exactly what she *wasn't* doing. But... that wasn't what I was here for, I reminded myself again and prepared myself to get the conversation on the right track.

I sighed, "I'm really not here to argue with you, Alice. I wanted to talk-"

"Oh! So the accusation about me and Demetri was what then?"

I rolled my eyes, "It was an observation- nothing more."

She crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow at me, "Well, I don't owe you shit. So I guess you can just take that observation and shove it up your ass."

Bitch... and she's back to that? Really?

I mirrored her position, "We're back to that? What I owe you? Let's see- so far I owe you a house and a husband, what else do you want?"

She chuckled darkly, "I don't want shit from you."

"That's good- because I'm not offering. Now. As for what you *think* you don't owe me-"

"I *don't*-"

"I think you owe me an apology, for one."

Her jaw dropped at that, "An apology for what?"

"Hmm... First off- for sticking your nose in where it doesn't belong with Angela. If you hadn't opened your big mouth then she wouldn't have told Edward what you said."

“That *hardly* warrants an apology! I was trying to help you!”

“You mean help yourself,” I bit at her. “You said yourself- you wanted Jasper back. You didn’t stop to consider anyone else.”

“Like you stopped to consider *me* before you jumped in bed with my husband?”

I rolled my eyes, “I’ve apologized for that. Now then, oh! How about you apologize for spouting off things you know nothing about to a man who just lost his father?”

“Please,” she scoffed. “I was doing you a favor- you were too chicken to tell him-”

Did she lose her memory? Seriously.

“Haven’t we been over that? I *told* you that I was going to tell him! I just didn’t think that the day of *his father’s funeral* was the right time!”

She rolled her eyes, “Yeah, you said that. Problem is... I don’t believe you. I don’t think you *ever* intended to tell Jasper-”

“You know- you probably wouldn’t even be pissed at me if he’d agreed to take you back.”

Damn, Bella- you’re all about the low blows today.

“Go to hell!”

“That’s mature, Alice,” I told her and then stopped to take a breath. We weren’t accomplishing anything except pissing each other off even more. I resigned myself to the fact that she didn’t want to listen to me- not right now, at least. Jasper had been right. “Look, I really didn’t come here to argue-”

“Then you should have stayed away-”

“So I’m gonna go, but you should know Alice... I love you and I always will. I’ll forever be sorry that I did you wrong in any way and I wish that you would accept my apology. One day, maybe you will.”

She stared at me; her eyes were hard and sharp and focused on my face. I know she was searching for any signs of insincerity, or maybe she wasn’t but I couldn’t bring myself to grovel at her feet. Not today, when she was being such a bitch and not willing to listen to me at all.

“So that’s all. I’ll go now, I’m sorry for inconveniencing you at all.”

And I turned and walked to the stairs, pausing at the first step and looking back toward her. Her eyes had softened but there was no apology in them. She was just staring at me.

“Goodbye, Alice.”

I made my way down the stairs quickly, expecting her to come running after me the whole way to my car. The sad thing was- she never did.

~*~

I didn’t cry that night, surprisingly enough. I was pretty sure that my friendship with Alice was over and while that hurt... I just couldn’t cry. The past month or so had been filled with so many tears that I felt certain my body was dried of them forever. If I couldn’t cry over losing the best friend of my life... what would I cry over?

When the plane landed in Jacksonville and I walked out to the entrance, bag in hand- I found out that I *could* still cry. Edward was waiting- leaning against the wall outside of one of the automatic doors- three doors down from the one I’d exited. His hair was what led me to him, and when he spotted me, his face broke out into a huge, crooked grin. The grin made me cry- or maybe it was Edward himself. But they were the first tears that I’d shed out of happiness in so long that I found myself crying even more because of that.

I broke into a dead run toward him and he caught me in his arms as I threw my bags to the ground and leaped at him. He was laughing and maybe he was crying too, but I couldn’t hear. I could only feel his chest rumbling and his arms surrounding me and his hair against my cheek and I knew... *knew*...

I was home.

25. Clumsy

I apologize for this coming out later than usual-I know that I normally post pretty early-like after midnight my time early-and this one's closer to early morning. I absolutely blame Easter weekend and beer-but I also blame stalkers on Facebook that demand my attention! (Facebook stalking is addictive, btw.)

I hope you all had a great Easter weekend! It was lots of fun here! Thanks to all of you that have continued to read and review and those putting me on alerts-mwah! Seriously thanks, everyone!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

You got me trippin', stumblin', flippin', fumblin',
Clumsy 'cause I'm fallin' in love,
You got me slippin', tumblin', sinkin', crumblin',
Clumsy 'cause I'm fallin' in love,
So in love with you.

-Clumsy, Fergie

"Bernice Matisse?"

"That's *Hope Floats*."

"Ah, yes. How dare I get my girly, cry movies mixed up."

"Well, you should be sorry. It's your sister's favorite movie."

"That's true," he says. After a brief pause, he tells me, "I have a confession to make."

"I'm all ears."

His voice drops to a whisper and his eyes search the surrounding area. If I didn't know better, I would think he was looking for his sister. "I've never seen *Steel Magnolias*."

I gasp, "Seriously?"

He nods, "Swear to God. That movie scares me. I've seen bits of it...walking through the room, but...I run screaming every time someone cries on the screen. Which is like, the whole movie."

"It is *not*," I scoff. I shake my head at him, "You really don't know what you're missing."

That crooked grin that makes my insides turn to liquid forms on his face, and he lowers his head to look at the table between us. I grin at him, because he looks adorable-like a little boy that just got in trouble. After a moment, he looks up from under his eyelashes and asks, "How long?"

"It's only been a week, Edward," I snap. The snapping can't be helped; time is crawling just as slow for me as it is for him. I sigh; it really feels as if I've been home for a lot longer than a week. But, a week is all it's been, and a hell of a week at that.

After Edward met me at the airport and we made our way to our cars, he asked if I would have dinner with him. I was all for that, but told him that I felt yucky, and I probably stunk. He didn't seem to mind but wanted me to be comfortable anyway. So he took me to a taco stand on the beach and we ate at a community table. He asked about my week and I told him all about it. He shook his head when I told him about my confrontation with Alice, but didn't seem surprised. When I told him about seeing Jasper at the convenience store, he was surprised. But he was glad that it sounded as if Jasper was acting mature about it all, and he hoped that a friendship could bloom for the two of us.

The rest of the week was much of the same, with Edward coming to me or me calling him and we would find something to do with each other. There was no time limit set on how long our 'friendship' would need to last before we could become more serious in our relationship, and that was already wearing on the two of us.

It was in his eyes and his lips and his movements. The way his eyes would follow me, no matter which way I would turn or where I was in the room from him. I knew that it was the same with me-whenver Edward would enter a room that I was in, my eyes were automatically drawn to him, and my lips would pull into a grin without my permission. Many times, we would have to leave the room that the one was in for fear of overstepping boundaries that were quickly diminishing. I just wasn't sure how much longer we could spend time together under the guise of friendship before we snapped.

"Yeah," he mutters. "Only a week."

Today, he's taken me to his next favorite restaurant. It's a lovely little coffee shop that doubles as a sandwich eatery, and I have just finished the best chicken salad sandwich known to man. We have to leave soon, to go back to our respective offices and the fact that our time is winding down has put a damper on the playful mood.

"What are you doing tonight?" I ask. I'm hoping he'll say nothing, and agree to come to my apartment to let me cook for him. He's not been to my apartment yet, nor have I been to his condo. It's almost as if he's purposely avoiding the two areas.

"I have a late meeting, well... international call. I have to stay at the office to catch it," he tells me as he gulps down the last of his coffee.

“Oh,” I respond, somewhat dejectedly. There went that plan.

“Hey,” he whispers, “if I could get out of it...believe me, I would. I’d much rather spend the night doing...whatever it is that you have cooked up in your head.”

I smile and nod, “Yeah, I know. Can’t get enough of me and all...”

He smirks at me, knowing exactly what I was trying to say. His tongue swipes his lower lip and it’s almost as if I can feel it *on me*. My eyes follow it, the pink tip gliding slowly back and forth on his bottom lip, even as his mouth turns up in a grin. My breathing becomes labored and the buzz in my head has blocked out all sound. The dampness between my legs is warm and slightly uncomfortable. I adjust my position on the bench seat, and the motion creates the slightest of friction. My breath hitches and my right hand unclenches from the fist it was in, to reach out toward that lip and that tongue.

Was a tongue ever that sensual?

The lips are moving but I can’t figure out why. The closer my hand gets to him, the louder the buzz in my head becomes and just as I’m about to touch him, he grabs my hand. I jerk, coming out of the tongue-licking-lip trance that I was in and glaring at Edward. He’s grinning, widely at me and holding my hand close to his face. He cocks an eyebrow and pulls my hand the rest of the distance. He places his lips against my palm and leaves the gentlest of kisses there before quickly pushing my hand back toward me.

He shakes his head, “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” My voice is breathless and deep.

He shrugs, “Okay, I’m not really sorry. If I had my way, we’d be doing a whole lot more than that.”

I look down; my guilt over making him endure this friendship is eating at me.

“Hey, angel. Don’t look away from me,” his hand comes into view and I feel the shock as his finger curls under my chin, raising my head to look at him again. “I’m just full of the dickhead comments today, aren’t I?”

I shake my head, “It’s my fault—”

“No. It’s not. So don’t bother finishing that sentence. We both agreed to this—it’s the right thing to do. But we knew it was gonna be tough, and we just have to deal with it. Okay?”

Hesitantly, I nod. “Okay, good. Come on; let’s get out of here before my sister calls asking where we’ve gone to elope.”

I giggle and scoot out of the booth to follow him. Once outside, he pulls me in for a hug and whispers, “I’ll call you tonight?”

My lips go to his ear, “You better.”

~*~

“C’mon! That’s not fair! Tell me where he took you,” Angela practically yells at me when I refuse to confirm or deny that we went to La Popular for lunch.

I grin at her, “Didn’t I tell you that the next time I go to La Popular would be with you?”

“That doesn’t answer my question, Bella,” she snaps. Rolling her eyes, she tells me, “At least tell me that he took you some place *good*. Geez.”

My grin softens to a smile, “He took me to his second favorite restaurant, I don’t remember the name. Don’t tell him that, though!”

“Are you asking me to keep a secret from my brother? I don’t know, Bella. Secrets are kinda a big deal...”

I rolled my eyes, “What do you want?”

She leaned over the counter of the receptionist desk, her finger drawing lazy circles on the surface and her eyes were lowered, not meeting mine. When she finally looked up at me, there was a curious grin on her face.

“Tell me about Tanya?”

I huff, “Shouldn’t you be working?”

She rolled her eyes, “It’s slow today. C’mon, Bella!”

“I told you that Tanya and I would come to talk to you—”

“When you got back! You’ve been back for a week!”

“Fine,” I grumble and pick up the phone, pressing the number to connect me to Tanya’s office. Angela leans a little further over the counter and her eyes widen when she sees the line I’ve just called. She opens her mouth but Tanya cuts her off. I’ve put her on speakerphone without Angela knowing.

“This is Tanya.”

“Hey, it’s Bella.”

“Am I on speakerphone?”

“Yes.”

Silence and then, “Why? Edward is here...”

I stare at Angela, “Someone wanted to ask you something.” And then because I’m a lovesick fool, I ask, “Is Edward in your office?”

“Yes. I’ll tell him you said hello. Bella, what’s going on?”

I hear Edward’s voice in the background and Tanya arguing that I called *her*, not *him*. I allow myself two seconds to act appropriately-I giggle at the sound of his voice and him wanting to talk to me. And then I mouth to Angela, ‘ask.’

She rolls her eyes and inhales before saying, “Tanya, hi. It’s Angela.”

There is complete silence on the other end of the phone and then someone sounds like they’re choking.

“Bella, one sec. Hey, sis,” Edward’s voice comes through, finally. Again, I give myself two seconds of giddy giggles before I stop myself. “I think Tanya got a bad piece of fruit or something-”

“Edward, just put me on speakerphone so I can talk to her,” Angela cuts him off. “Geez. It’s not gonna be painful, please tell her.”

I roll my eyes and tell her, “Be nice.”

She shrugs at me but a blush rises on her cheeks, and I know she feels bad.

“Okay, I’m back. Sorry about that,” Tanya sounds breathless when she speaks again.

Angela rolls her head on her shoulders before saying, “Do you think that you and Bella could come over soon? She won’t tell me anything about you and it’s apparent that I’ve misjudged you but I’d really just like to hear the story for myself and if you don’t want to that’s cool, I guess, but-”

“I’d love to. Edward is working late tonight, so I know that Bella will be free. Is tonight too soon?”

I breathe out in relief as Angela mutters, “Um...no? I mean, no. Tonight’s fine.”

I give her a thumbs-up and we finish up the rather awkward call that just took place.

The rest of the day is slow, and I know it’s because I won’t get to see Edward again until tomorrow. I walk out of work somewhat depressed but cheer up immensely when I see Tanya waiting beside my car. She smiles and pulls me in for a hug and asks if we should take dinner or anything to Angela’s. I call Angela and Ben tells me that she’s fixing enough food for an army...and he asks if Tanya is allergic to any fruit. I ask and tell him no and he explains that Angela doesn’t know anything about her, except that Edward said she must have choked on a piece of fruit today.

I smile, because even though Angela was sure that she hated Tanya, she still wants to make her feel welcome. So typical of her.

Tanya decides that it’s best to get the whole thing out of the way first...and that we can hopefully enjoy the dinner that Angela has made for us without awkward tension weaving its way through the room.

I could have predicted it, but there really was no reason. I just knew that Ben and Angela would both feel awful for Tanya when they found out the truth. Angela burst into tears when Tanya told her about walking in on Felix and Gianna, and then again when she told her about trying to be there for Felix at his father’s funeral. All of our faces turned red as Tanya retold all of the rumors that she had heard about herself and when she began to apologize for what Angela had to walk in on, Angela abruptly cut her off.

“I’m so sorry,” Angela wailed. She rose from her seat and dropped to the floor in front of Tanya. Grabbing one of Tanya’s hands between both of hers, she asked, “Will you ever be able to forgive me for being so judgmental?”

Tanya smiled her gentle smile and told her, “There was never anything to forgive. I’m sorry for making you cry, though.”

That makes Angela cry harder, “You’re so...*nice!*”

I laugh because, she really is nice-Angela’s just realized it. They both look at me and Tanya joins in my laughter, which eventually leads to Ben joining and finally, Angela.

Tanya sobers up a bit and tells them, “I really didn’t mean to make you cry, I am sorry.”

Angela stands up and puts her hands on her hips as she sends Tanya a mock glare. In typical Angela fashion, she says, “Laughter through tears is my favorite emotion!”

~*~

“*God!* I wish I’d been there,” Edward complained to me on the phone later that night.

I laugh, “Damn international calls.”

He sighs, “No joke. It was boring as hell, I’d much rather had been there to watch what happened.”

“So...”

He chuckles, “So? Hey-what are you doing this weekend? Mom was thinking about another barbeque...”

I gasp, “A barbeque, huh? I don’t know…”

“You don’t know?”

“Barbeques at the Cullen house usually lead to me meeting handsome men… and I’ve sworn off relationships for the moment.”

Edward growls, “There better not be any meeting of handsome men at my parent’s house…”

I roll my eyes, “Edward… you do realize that I was talking about you, don’t you?”

He doesn’t say anything for a minute, and then he chuckles, “I think my brain is fried- it really did take me a sec to realize what you meant.”

My brow furrows, “You’ve had a long day. I should let you go.”

“No!” His voice is quick and breathless. “No, I swear I’ll perk up in a minute.” When he speaks again, his voice is deep and husky, “I’m not ready to tell you goodnight.”

“But you’re tired-”

“I just haven’t been sleeping much. I’m okay, angel. Swear.”

A pout forms on my lips, “Why?”

“I think that spending that last night in Forks with you spoiled me. Nothing smells like you here, and it’s distracting me.”

I laugh, “My smell not being there distracts you? Really? It’s your smell, not the lack thereof that distracts me-”

Did I really just say that? That’s so embarrassing!

“Really? You like the way I smell, huh?”

“Um… I meant-”

“It’s okay, angel. I love the way you smell, too. I think I told you that once.”

And really, I can’t help it when my eyes roll back into my head. I’m thinking about the night that he told me how I smelled and how much he liked it. Everything we did that night and the next morning…

“I seem to remember that.” My voice is deep again.

You can hear his smirk when he talks, “I remember it perfectly.”

And then something occurs to me about the day after, and I want to know. If we hadn’t been interrupted… would we have had sex-sex? Would he have stopped himself from burying all the way inside of me? Would he have stopped after one thrust or two? I have to know. “Hey… if Angela hadn’t-”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

I can hear rustling on his end of the phone. “Does that bother you?”

The tone of his voice has me rubbing my legs together, unconsciously. “No.”

There’s more rustling on the line, I wonder what he’s doing. It almost sounds like… *sheets* moving. “Are you in bed?”

My breath catches when his deep voice answers, “Yes.”

“Oh.”

Oh!

“Are you… naked?” My voice is no higher than a whisper.

A deep, breathless chuckle answers before he does. “Mhm.”

“Oh.”

Edward, naked in his bed… talking to me on the phone… naked… rustling his sheets- *oh!*

“Are you…”

“Yes,” he groans.

My breath hitches and my hand flies to my mouth. Edward is *touching himself* while talking to me! *Oh my God!*

“Bella,” he whispers but it sounds like a moan. “Talk to me.”

My hand moves from my mouth and my eyes close as it lands on my right breast. I squeeze and breathlessly tell him, "I remember your mouth on me."

"Yes," he hisses. "Fuck, you taste good. Your nipples feel like...silk."

I can hear the rustling get louder and I move my hand lower, beneath my shorts and further. My middle finger finds my clit and I tell him, "Your tongue felt like silk on them. Your teeth..."

"Mm," he groans. "Yes, angel. Fucking most perfect, most pink, most *fucking*...mm...perfect..."

I gasp at the sound of his voice and my mind takes me to the next morning. I'm imagining him sliding into me. He was so slow and controlled and he felt *fucking amazing* inside of me. "Yes," I hiss. "Yes, Edward...you fit *fucking* perfect."

He groans again, this time louder than the last. "Fuck, angel...you're thinking about me inside of you? Oh, fuck...tell me you are..."

"Yes," I moan; pushing my finger harder and speeding up my movements even more. The thought of Edward sliding into me combined with the sound of his voice through the phone and the memory of his breath blowing in my ear, is running through my head. Edward not even all the way in...Edward *against me*... Edward..."You...inside...me..."

"Oh, fuck, Bella...are you touching yourself? Tell me you are...tell me you're touching yourself, angel..."

"Mhm," I moan to him. My finger has finally reached the right amount of pressure and friction and I *know* I'm gonna come.

"Oh, *God*," he groans. "That's so fucking hot, angel. Oh, fuck..."

My finger stills as my orgasm explodes through me. I just hold it there and relish the stars shooting behind my eyes and the warmth that has spread through my body and the buzz flowing through my head. My mouth makes some kind of indistinguishable noise and I hear Edward's answering noise on the other end of the phone. Then the sultry groan that comes right after that. I lie there, listening to his breathing even out and trying to make my own do the same.

After a few minutes, he chuckles. "Um..."

I blush, even knowing he can't see me. "Yeah..."

He quiets his chuckles. "Are you mad?"

His voice was a whisper. *Is he ashamed?* "Why would I be mad?"

He takes a deep breath, "I kinda felt like I pressured you into that..."

I giggle, "Uh-no. You *technically* just answered my questions." *Is he mad? Was that what I heard?* "Are you? Mad?"

"What? No. Fuck no!" He laughed, "I'd say I'm about as opposite of mad as one can get."

I sigh, "Men are so easy."

"Damn straight."

Laughter bubbles from me. "Did you plan that?"

Edward joins in my laughter. "I wish-I'm not that fucking smart."

We just lay there and listened to each other laugh for a little while longer, relishing in the sounds of the other. Eventually, he asked, "Was that okay? I mean, it wasn't...was it? I mean, friends don't do *that*..."

"Edward," I laughed, "I don't know. But, I'm gonna tell you-I don't really care. Ben said for us to grow into a relationship. And while I think it's pretty dumb that I'm 23 years old, and I have to get relationship advice from my best friends' husband who is a *therapist*...I mean, he obviously knows what he's talking about. And personally? I think that what we just did is..."

"Natural progression? Okay, little miss smarty-pants. I get it. So," he hesitates, "would you attending my parent's barbeque with me this weekend be a date or a friendly outing?"

Date?! Um...

"Um..."

"Friendly outing, then. When you can answer that question without having to think about it, then we'll call it a date."

~*~

"He asked you, right? 'Cause Mom said that you have to come anyway, but she said that Edward should ask you. If he hasn't..."

"Yeah, he did," I cut Angela off. She'd just walked in to work and had yet to go back to her office. She'd walked right up to my desk and started babbling about the barbeque, straight away. I've been short with everyone all morning long and I really don't want to be ugly to her, but her voice is just grating on my nerves right now. "I'll be there, don't worry."

She looks at me, concern written all over her face. "Bella? Is everything okay? You and my brother didn't have a fight, did you?"

I shake my head at her. “No, we didn’t have a fight. There’s just…”

“What?”

I look at her and ask, “Do you have a key to Edward’s condo?”

Her brows furrow and her lips form a tiny pout. “Um…yeah? Why?”

It’s something that has been bothering me since we’d *had our moment*, the other night on the phone. Edward had said that he couldn’t sleep. He said he couldn’t sleep because my smell wasn’t there. I wanted to remedy that, but I knew that he wouldn’t just invite me to spend the night. We weren’t ready for that, our slip aside, and we both knew it. There was some crazy, sexual tension rolling off of both of us, but we just weren’t there yet. That night on the phone, I meant what I said to him-I didn’t see a problem with what we had done. I really did see it as some kind of…*natural progression*, like Edward said. But I knew that if we were to surround ourselves with a bed, well we would go past that friendship marker in our lives. Hands were kept to ourselves on the phone. If he’d been standing in front of me though…

So, I’m enlisting Angela’s help. If she doesn’t think I’m completely crazy.

“I’d like you to let me borrow it.”

She bites her bottom lip and her eyes show her amusement. “Kay. Why?”

My eyes widen because, was it really that easy? “Because?”

Her grin is mischievous as she answers. “Kay. I don’t want to know, anyway. But! I’m telling Ben!”

The sing-song voice she used has me laughing. “Tell away, I’m not going there to do anything *naughty*.”

“Ugh,” she wrinkles her nose. “You know? I really *don’t* want to know. Here.” She hands me the key and then points at me. “The code is 1901. Don’t forget.”

I smile, brightly at her. “Thanks, Angela!”

She mutters something that sounds a lot like ‘can’t believe my brother is boning my best friend’ before turning on her heel and marching back toward the offices. I laugh as she turns the corner and knocks right into Edward’s friend, James. She scowls at him and he chuckles in return. After shoving him aside, she resumes stomping back. I shake my head at her and James stops in front of my desk.

I look at him and he raises his eyebrows, “Bella, how’ve you been?”

I smile at him, “Not bad. Yourself? How’s Victoria?”

His eyes crinkle as he smiles, “She’s wonderful. Me too, thanks for asking.”

I nod and smile at him again, “Tell her I said hello.”

“Will do,” he replies. He shoves his hands into his pockets and rocks back on his heels. “I feel really awkward telling you this, but…I feel kind of obligated.”

My brow furrows, “Yeah?”

He nods, “I’ve never seen Edward like this. Never, not even when he thought he was happy with Gianna.”

The smile that’s reserved just for Edward pops onto my face. “He makes me happy, too.”

“Tanya was right,” he mutters, shaking his head. “She said that smile tells all. About how you feel about Edward.”

A blush rises to my cheeks. I point a finger at my cheeks and shyly tell him, “Open book.”

James chuckles, “Only when you smile, Bella. Anyway,” his sigh is exaggerated. He rolls his eyes and smiles again, “I wanted to tell you that. And…you hurt him? Victoria hurts you. He’s like my brother. And she’s my wife, so if she has to hurt herself punching you…I’m going to be mad.”

I purse my lips together, trying to keep a serious look on my face. But, really? *That’s so cute!* Edward’s best friend giving me the big brother speech! I clear my throat to stop the giggle, “I will do my damndest to keep you from being mad.”

James smirks at me, “Smart girl. Anyway-I gotta go back to my office now. Everyone at this one is crazy…”

I laugh and wave at him as he leaves. And promptly pout, when I realize that I have three more hours before lunch…and I want to go to Edward’s condo. Like, *now*.

~*~

I really shouldn’t be surprised that Edward’s condo is as nice as it is. I mean, the word *condo* just kinda sounds nice. And most people associate a condo with being nicer than just any old house or apartment. Even with all of my preconceived notions about condos-I was still shocked when I walked inside of Edward’s.

Esme got a hold of this place...

The walls were decked in beige, flat paint-the only warmth in the room. Everywhere I turned there was black. Black furniture, black wood, dark, almost black-stained hardwood on the floors. The only exception was the walls, and the collection of silver, shiny figurines that adorned the tables. One whole side of the

condo itself was solid glass, tinted to keep anyone from seeing in but not so dark that you couldn't see the view. Downtown Jacksonville was staring right back at me, and I just stood there in awe looking at it from here. You could see it so clearly, you felt like you were there-except you couldn't hear a thing. There was no road traffic noise or noisy neighbors or *anything*. You could hear a pin drop from anywhere in this condo and it would be clear as day, but the population outside? Nothing from them.

The couches were all soft, almost velvety feeling leather. The room had an air of new to it, but the leather looked worn and almost old inside of it. The wood around the edges was the same black wood as the rest of the furniture, but there were no nicks to mar its surface. The same was noticeable on the tables around the room; the design was simple, clean, and boxy yet sleek as well. They were completely clear of any kind of misuse or wear. I felt overwhelmed.

I moved slowly through the room to his kitchen. Of course it was new. And perfect and beautiful and everything wonderful that was meant for a kitchen to be. The appliances were all new and dark toned stainless steel. The floors were the same dark hardwood as the living room area and the walls were the same beige. The cabinetry was black wood with glass fronts and you could see all of his china lined up neatly behind each of the cabinet doors. My hand ran over the smooth, beige, marble countertops and I think I gasped.

Shaking my head, I moved past the kitchen through the hallway to the first door. *Bingo!* Edward's bedroom.

The king size bed is obviously the main focal point and I can't do anything but stand there and stare at it, almost hyperventilating. The sheets are still down from Edward sleeping in it last night and I'm temporarily sidetracked by that image. My eyes roam over the black sheets and I'm moving forward. *This* is what I came for.

Sliding my shoes off, I slip into his bed. The sheets are so incredibly soft. I lay my head on his pillow and the smell of Edward penetrates my senses. I turn my head into the pillow and inhale deeply. I open my eyes and smile, turning over onto my back and swishing my head over his pillow. I pull the covers up and turn to the alarm clock on the bedside table. I set the alarm for forty-five minutes from now and snuggle in. I don't think I'll fall asleep but, I don't want to risk it.

I close my eyes and try to conjure up Edward's voice in my head. It's easier than I thought it might be, but then I realize that Edward's voice...really hasn't left my head. Not since that night at Angela's house. Maybe before that, but I was too deaf to hear it then. My head plays his voice on a loop; he tells me he loves me and he says my name and he whispers angel to me. My smile is out of control, all of my teeth are visible, and I'm sure. I'm suddenly very glad to be alone in Edward's condo...I wouldn't want anyone to see this smile.

I rustle my hair a little more on his pillow and close my eyes to Edward's voice. The next thing I know, Edward's alarm goes off and my eyes pop open from the very refreshing, very frustrating dream that I've been having about Edward and me in this bed.

I jump up, scrambling to put my shoes on-I've overslept the alarm by ten minutes. I shut it off and haul out of the condo, just barely remembering to enter the code again, in my rush. I make it back to work one minute late and Angela is waiting there for me, smirk firmly in place. I smiled, guiltily at her and walk past her to sit at my desk.

Handing her the key back, I tell her, "Thanks for that."

"Ew! You went during your *lunch break*? Gross!"

I roll my eyes at her, "I told you I wouldn't do anything *naughty*."

She leans forward. "Then what did you do?"

I smiled and shrugged. "I took a nap."

Her brows furrowed as she thought about what I'd said. She blushed and looked down, smiling as she says, "Will I need to tell him you were at his condo?"

I laughed, "If you're asking if your brother was there, the answer is no." I shrugged. "He said he wasn't sleeping well...he said he missed my smell. Not *that* smell, either. You sick, twisted pervert."

"Oh," she gasps. "*Oh!* Aw! That's so sweet!"

I blush and shrug and she turns to go back to her office, pleased with my response. I pull out my cell phone and text Edward:

Make sure you re-set your alarm.

He responds immediately.

Huh? Why?

I grin as I text back.

Your sheets are incredibly soft, btw.

I wait five full minutes for a response.

Please...Please...Tell me you were in between my sheets today...

My grin widens to the point that it almost hurts.

Sweet dreams, Edward.

26. Mr Brightside

This one is way later than normal- sorry for that! I was having a bad case of the 'I don't want to's' and just couldn't get myself to write. Anyhow- here it is, and on Friday, so at least I'm not like a day late or anything!

Thank you to everyone who is giving the story a chance, reviewing and adding me to their alerts- you all just make my day!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

And I just can't look its killing me,
And taking control,
Jealousy, turning saints into the sea,
Swimming through sick lullabies,
Choking on your alibis,
But it's just the price I pay,
Destiny is calling me,
Open up my eager eyes,
'Cause I'm Mr. Brightside.

-Mr. Brightside, The Killers

When I make it to bed that night, I contemplate giving Tanya or Angela a key to my apartment—so they can sneak it to Edward and maybe he'll come snuggle in my sheets for me. My bed is cold and it smells like me, not Edward. I know that I won't sleep well, at all...and I just know it's because Edward or his smell aren't in bed with me. Of course, I'd prefer Edward to his smell, but...

I lie down and try to close my eyes, thinking about my texts to him earlier. He'd been overly excited about the thought of me between his sheets, and the thought makes me smile. His bed was so comfortable, and my nap felt like a full night's sleep. I wanted more than anything to feel his body next to mine, and when I was in his bed, surrounded by his smell...it almost felt like he was there with me. His voice had filled my head—the sound was soothing, and I remember feeling shocked at how easy it had come to me.

My phone chirps on the night stand and I turn to grab it. My smile is already firmly in place as I open the new text message.

My pillow misses you.

I giggle as I respond:

I miss your pillow, too. It was so soft...

I close my eyes and try to imagine I'm back in Edward's bed. It's not any harder than it was to conjure his voice in my head, earlier. Except, the sheets don't feel right and the pillow is too firm. I frown and sigh, admitting defeat. My phone chirps again, and the frown is wiped clean from my face as Edward's smile takes its place.

Is it completely ridiculous that I'm jealous of my pillow?

I giggle, again. *Gah—such a girl.* Then I respond:

You should be jealous. I'm thinking of asking your pillow out on a date.

I only wait thirty seconds for him to reply this time.

Date? I thought you were sworn off relationships ATM?

I roll my eyes; leave it to Edward to take *that* out of my text.

I might make an exception for your pillow. Seriously? You're going to ask me that?

I sigh and move my head around on the pillow, trying to make myself more comfortable. My phone chirps again.

Sorry. Not pushing, swear. Just can't get you out of my head.

The smile on my face threatens to become embarrassing again.

You're not the only one. Sorry, too. Didn't mean to snap.

I close my eyes and settle on my pillow, once again. It's not nearly comfortable enough now that I've lay upon Edward's. Huffing, I snatch the pillow to the right of me, and prop it on top of the one I'm laying on. That makes it a *little* more comfortable, at least. I open my eyes as my phone chirps at me again.

How's Jacksonville?

My brow furrows. Huh? Quickly, I scroll back out to see who the message is from. I gasp as I read the name: *Jasper Whitlock*. My heart starts to pound—I didn't think he'd be getting in touch with me *this* quick! I scramble to come up with a reply and settle for:

Hot—much different than Washington. How's Forks?

There—that wasn't so hard. Right? My phone chirps again almost instantly after I send the message to Jasper. This time, I look at the name before opening it, and breathe a sigh of relief when it's Edward's name that appears.

You didn't snap, angel. So...how's your bed treating you?

A devious grin forms on my face. I text:

Too hard. Lonely. I like your bed better. How's your bed treating you?

A blush rises to my face as I consider Edward in his bed, right now, texting me. Another chirp sounds from my phone. Jasper, this time.

Eh—the same. It doesn't change here. You know that. How're you?

I sigh and close my eyes; my body is switching gears on me too fast. The response it gives to Edward is wholly different from the one Jasper receives. It's confusing.

I'm alright—happy to hear from you. :) I wondered if I would.

My phone chimes again, just as I'm hitting send. I take a deep breath and open the new message.

My bed smells good...but it's too empty. Come over?

I can feel my face flush. *Is he serious?* Before I can respond, another text comes in.

You seem surprised. What'd you expect?

My brow furrows and I type my reply:

Sorry, I guess I am a little surprised. I just...thought I wouldn't hear from you for awhile.

I let out a long, low breath as I prepare to respond to Edward. I scroll back through my text messages to find Edward's last to me, but when I open it, I see that I've already replied. I gasp as I realize that while I *thought* I responded to Jasper's text...somehow I mixed them up and the last reply was sent to Edward. My phone chimes again—twice, fast. I close my eyes and take a deep breath to prepare myself.

Edward's says: *Huh? Are you text-cheating on me?*

Then there's Jasper's text: *Sorry—that looked bad after I sent it...I didn't mean to sound...short?*

Hurriedly, I respond to Edward—after making sure that it was *actually* Edward this time:

Sorry—Jasper sent me a text. So...no, I'm not text-cheating on you. Is that even a real phrase? And...are you serious? You really shouldn't be offering your bed to me...

Then I quickly respond to Jasper:

You didn't sound short—honestly, I just didn't think I would hear from you for awhile. That's all. How've you been?

There—problem solved. I close my eyes again as I wait for their replies to reach me, and realize that I told Edward that Jasper was texting me. A sweat breaks out on my brow as I wonder what Edward is thinking right now. *Oh God!* A chime rings from my cell phone and I scramble to open it. A disappointed sigh leaves me when I see that it's from Jasper.

I'm good. And I told you that I wanted to talk to you, from time to time. You shouldn't be surprised. So...what are you doing?

My reply comes quickly to me:

Just getting ready to go to sleep—it's late here. So...can I pick up this conversation tomorrow maybe?

The chime sounds again, and I open the new text. It's from Edward this time:

Jasper, huh? How's that going? Why can't I offer my bed to you?

My breath leaves my body fast—I hadn't realized that I was holding it while awaiting Edward's answering text. I respond:

Yes, Jasper. It's...sufficiently awkward. I feel kinda bad—I just told him I'm about to go to sleep, but I don't think I'll be able to. And...because I'll be tempted to drive over there and burrow in your sheets again. That's why.

Another chime—Jasper, again:

Shit, Bell, I'm sorry. Of course tomorrow—is there a better time to text or call you? I really didn't think about the time difference.

I smile in response, at least in words he sounds as thoughtful as he's always been. I would venture a guess that the real test of whether we can maintain a friendship will fall to voice to voice—if he can handle that...if I can handle that. I text:

Hmm...your time—around 8? I go to bed around 11 usually. So unless you want to talk for a long time—8 or a little before would be good.

Edward hasn't texted me back, I furrow my brow as I check through my texts, making sure I didn't miss one from him. I haven't, so I gear up to send him

another, but my phone chimes before I can. Jasper, again:

That sounds great. I'll be talking to you tomorrow then. Night, Bell.

Quickly, I respond:

Okay, then—talk to you tomorrow. Night, Jasper. :)

Immediately after sending Jasper's reply, I pull up Edward's number, preparing to send him another text. I'm interrupted by a different chime this time—my phone is ringing. I look at the caller and my face breaks into a smile, Edward's smile; he's calling me.

I'm breathless when I answer, "Hello?"

A sexy chuckle sounds from his end of the phone. "Hello there, angel. Forgive me—I just...couldn't figure out why the hell we were texting each other. I'd much rather hear your voice."

We talk forever; the alarm clock reads two-thirty before we say our goodnights. There is no phone sex...there is no jealousy from his end about my texts to Jasper...there is no more talk of joining the other in their bed...there is only Edward and me, telling each other about our lives and what we want to do with them. This conversation is different than any other before it; there is no build-up to something more, no talk of the future of our relationship—it's only us, talking about mundane things that, for the most part, we've skimmed over thus far. It's amazing.

I fall asleep on my uncomfortable bed, more relaxed than I can ever remember being. Edward's smile stays on my face for the rest of the night, sleeping and all.

~*~

I'm tired at work the next day, but it's Friday so I don't complain. I'm tired from staying up with Edward talking most of the night, so I really don't *want* to complain. Angela comes to visit before lunch and asks if I want to join her, which I do. She asks me if Tanya might want to join us as well, and I smile as I call to ask. Tanya is flustered—I can tell, but she accepts the invitation. We decide to meet up with her at a bistro that is almost directly in between our offices. I tease Angela about her new best friend, to which she rolls her eyes and huffs before blushing and almost running back to her office.

The private line rings shortly after. This is a more regular occurrence these days, but I still don't know exactly how to answer it. So, I give my formal greeting.

Esme's gentle voice sounds in my ear. "Bella, dear. I haven't gotten a chance to sit and visit with you since we returned from Washington. Are you free for lunch?"

I sigh, as quietly as possible. "Unfortunately, no. I'd love to have lunch with you though. I just made plans with Angela and Tanya for today—but I'll be at the barbeque tomorrow! Maybe...I could come early? We would have time to talk?"

"That sounds lovely! You remember the way?"

I smile. "I can find it."

We say our goodbyes and Angela comes stomping up to my desk—precisely fifteen minutes after I've hung up the phone with her mother.

"What the hell!? You aren't riding with us?"

My brow furrows and my lips form a pout. *What?* "Huh?"

She rolls her eyes at me. "Mom said you're going to the barbeque early! Does that mean you aren't riding with us?"

Oh! "Oh! Uh...she wanted to visit with me—she wanted to go to lunch with me today, but I'd made plans with you and Tanya."

"Oh," Angela responds in a small, dejected voice. "She didn't tell me that. Just that you were going early. I figured you would ride with Edward if you were going early. I guess..."

"Angela...are you jealous?" Amusement is evident in my tone.

She huffs again, and rolls her eyes. Her response sounds like that of a petulant child. "No! *God!* Ugh! I just—"

Laughter bursts from me. "You *are* jealous!"

She actually stomps her foot. "I am *not!*"

My smile is big and toothy. "That's okay. I won't give you *too* hard of a time about it...in public."

She rolls her eyes and turns to stomp off, but not before I see the trace of a grin on her lips. I smile—the big, toothy kind is still on my face—as I watch her walk away from me. An image of Alice and me enters my head.

"Do you think Charlie will let us go?" Alice is staying over tonight. It used to be a regular occurrence, but since Jasper has moved to town...she's stayed less and less. Right now, we're sitting in the living room, pigging out on Cheeto's and watching The Gilmore Girls. "I mean, we have to go! It's supposed to be the biggest bonfire ever!"

Charlie has been called out to work, something that is unusual in our house. I'm used to Charlie being home at six every evening, and the two of us sitting

down to dinner before Charlie takes up residence in his recliner for the night and I retreat to my room. Tonight though, there's been an accident. It sounds as if it's a bad accident—Charlie's voice was stressed and thin while he was on the phone with the station. They've called all units to the scene, which further concretizes my conclusion that it's bad. I know that Charlie won't let us go to a bonfire—not tonight...not after something bad has happened. He'll want us to stay here, where he can keep an eye on us and make sure we're okay.

"I don't think so," I tell her and stuff another Cheeto in my mouth. "I'm pretty sure he'll want us home—the accident sounded bad."

Alice huffs and crosses her arms over her chest. Her bottom lip pulls out, and just like that—she's in full-on pout mode. "That's not fair!"

I chuckle, trying to lighten her mood. "It's a marathon tonight. It's not like we'll be bored."

"Uh...speak for yourself," she spits at me.

I turn to her, catching her look before she clears her face and turns away. There's pure contempt there; Alice looks like she hates me right then. "Hey," I say gently, "we can try to sneak out if you want. I just don't think Charlie will let us go with his permission."

I don't really want to do this; I hate lying and sneaking around behind my father's back. Alice and I haven't spent much time together lately though, and I miss her. I want to try to make her happy again, and I don't want her to look at me like she did just a moment ago. She squeals at my last statement and jumps from the couch, shutting the television off and dragging me behind her up the stairs. She's pulling clothes from my dresser and closet, crinkling her nose at almost my entire wardrobe. She finally settles on a pair of jeans that don't look quite as worn as the rest, and a shirt that's too tight—I think the last time I wore the shirt, I was in middle school.

She insists on flat-ironing my hair until it is pin-straight, and I admit to liking it. I draw the line with make-up, and Alice doesn't kick up too much of a fuss. We hear Charlie come in downstairs and change clothes quickly. I pull my hair up as Alice complains that I'll have a crease, but I convince her that Charlie will notice. She relents and we go back downstairs.

My father is sitting in his recliner, sprawled back—he looks asleep. He raises his head when he hears us though, and I gasp at his face. His eyes are red, blood-shot, and his whole face looks aged beyond his years. His clothes are wrinkled and stained, I realize the dark brown smudges are blood. I gasp again, and Charlie tries to smile at the two of us; the smile looks more like a grimace.

"What are you two up to?" he asks. Alice goes into a spiel of lies, and I let her. I sit there and stare at the faraway look in my father's eyes. The normal twinkle that is present when Alice talks to him is gone, and I know that he's haunted by what he's seen tonight. After a good fifteen minutes of Alice's relentless parade of untruths, she stops and makes an excuse to leave the room. I tell her to go ahead and I'll be there in a moment, and then I kneel in front of Charlie.

"You okay?"

He startles, unaware of my closeness. "Oh, uh...yeah. Sure, you go on ahead and hang out with Alice. She's not over too much these days."

I sigh, he's not gonna tell me what happened. "We were going to sneak out tonight. I don't know why I'm telling you that..."

I do know why, though. I know that Charlie won't sleep tonight, and he'll be checking my room constantly. I don't want him to worry about us. Alice will just have to deal because I'm not going to do that to my father; not tonight.

Charlie chuckles, but it sounds forced. "Thanks for telling me. I'll let you girls try to climb out of your window—don't let Alice see me watching. It'll take all the fun out of it for her."

My brow furrows. "You're going to let us?"

He nods. "Telling you not to go would defeat the purpose—you'd go anyway. I'm glad you told me. You girls going to the bonfire?"

I tell him yes and he tells me to have fun, but not too much fun. He tells me he'll see me tomorrow and then pulls me in for a hug—something Charlie rarely does. He whispers into my hair to be careful and I leave the room in a daze. Alice is sitting on my bed when I return, polishing her toenails. She asks what time he'll go to bed so we can leave, and I tell her we can go whenever—Charlie is probably passed out in his chair. It's a lie, but Alice doesn't care. She squeals quietly and calls Jasper, telling him to pick us up down the street in thirty minutes. Then she makes a fuss about my hair again, her toes now forgotten in her quest to 'pretty me up.' I roll my eyes but let her have her way, and then we're sneaking out the window. I look back as we make it to the ground, in time to see the curtain flutter, indicating that Charlie has seen us leave. I feel guilty, leaving him there by himself after what he's been through tonight...but I know that this is just Charlie's way.

We meet Jasper down the street, and I avert my eyes as they give their customary 'greet and make-out' to each other. The drive to First Beach goes by quickly, and Leah finds me immediately upon our arrival. She shoves a red, plastic cup in my hand, and tells me to drink it fast—I do. Another cup is in my hands as soon as I'm done and an hour later, I'm thoroughly drunk. Alice and Jasper have disappeared, but I don't care—Embry Call is flirting with me and I'm flirting back. I never really noticed how nice-looking he was.

Leah laughs and Jacob scowls as Embry leans in to whisper in my ear, "Want to go somewhere private?"

His voice is sloppy and slurred, but I nod anyway. He leads me down the beach, away from the bonfire and its colder here. The alcohol in my system warms me though, as do Embry's hands under my shirt. My jeans are off and I'm laying back on the sand, eyes closed and a smile on my lips. I feel him enter me; a pain startles me out of my daze. I realize I'm no longer a virgin, and Embry Call is my first. Sex is painful and I don't like it, I wish he would hurry up and finish. He does—remarkably fast and I stumble as I try to re-dress myself. He laughs at me as he holds me steady so I can put one leg, then the other back in my jeans. I don't bother to put my shoes back on—I just hold them in one hand as Embry takes the other, and we walk back down the beach together.

Leah calls me a hooker and I laugh at her. She eyes Jacob, chatting up another young girl who I've never seen before. I tell her to buck up, and go talk to him. She rolls her eyes at me, and drags me back to the liquor barrel. We get sloppy drunk together, and by the time that Alice and Jasper return...I'm beyond help. Leah laughs as she tells the two that I'm no longer a virgin, and I blush as she tells them that Embry Call 'got my cherry.' I want to crawl in a hole and

die—I don't care that Alice knows, but for Jasper to know...how embarrassing. Alice squeals and plops beside me, eyeing me as she asks how I feel. I shrug and watch as Jasper sits down, much more gracefully than Alice did. He looks lost, somehow, and he asks us, quietly, if we're ready to go home.

Alice rolls her eyes at him, and when she turns back to me...the look of contempt is on her face again. Alice hops up and bends over, whispering something in Jasper's ear before turning away from all of us and stomping off.

I shake my head, trying to clear that particular memory from it. I wonder how I didn't realize what that look meant before. Alice knew for much longer than I'd realized that I loved Jasper, and she apparently had some inkling of his feelings for me—however undefined they were at the time. The jealousy and hatred on her face that night was obvious; I wonder how long she felt that way toward me. I can't recall a time before that night, noticing looks like that from her... but quickly realize I've just now realized what the look was, and why she was giving it to me. I want to think further on this, but Angela is coming back—it's time for lunch.

We meet Tanya at the bistro as planned, and Angela immediately launches into questions about how Tanya is *so good* at the business. Tanya shrugs it all off, blushing as she tells Angela that Edward taught her all that she knows. I feel a flash of jealousy at her statement, realizing that she knows him better than I probably ever will. Taken aback by my reaction, I lean down to study the menu, as it affords me the comfort of my veil of hair.

I can only recall being jealous of Tanya before I met her. I realize that I haven't given much thought to how much time she and Edward spend together, and it makes me even more jealous. I don't like feeling this way, but I can't get the thought out of my head—Tanya and Edward have slept together. I realize that I'm being absolutely ridiculous...Edward has told me that he didn't and doesn't feel anything like that for Tanya. Still, they know each other in a way Edward and I don't.

"So, Bella, Esme says that you're going to the barbeque early? Does that mean you won't be riding with Edward and me?" Tanya's voice is just as gentle as always, and I feel guilty for being jealous of her. Then I realize what she's said. *She and Edward are riding together? Why? They aren't playing a role anymore...must they spend all this time together?*

"Oh...no. I guess I won't. I didn't know that you were riding together—Edward must've forgotten to tell me." I know I sound short, but I can't help it. I'm ridiculously jealous of her now, and I can't get the thought of Tanya bent over Edward's desk as he pounds into her from behind out of my head.

Bella...you don't even know if that's how they were positioned. You're being absurd.

I know that I'm being absurd, but I can't help it. Tanya's voice is confused as she tells me, "I think...he just assumed that you would know? That I was coming? He said—"

"Like I said, he must've forgotten to mention it. I didn't know, but that's great!" Forced cheerfulness and me are something that never went together well. The lie is clear in my voice, and I'm once again shocked at myself.

"Oh, well since Bella is taking her car and going early...maybe me and Ben could ride with you two? It would be nice to spend more time with you." Angela sounds happy about that, and now I'm pissed at myself for encouraging Tanya to tell her the truth. *Now it's like a double date—how nice.* "I mean, if you and Edward don't mind."

Tanya and Edward—not Bella and Edward. Angela is even talking about them like they're a freaking couple!

I don't participate in the conversation past that. I can't; Angela is treating Tanya like she's the fucking queen of the castle or something. It's really pissing me off, and I just know if I say anything...they'll hear the disdain and sarcastic tone of my voice. They don't even notice I'm sitting there for the rest of lunch—just chat with each other like they're the best of fucking friends.

I wonder why I ever liked Tanya in the first place.

~*~

For the first time since he and I have started talking to each other, I don't answer the phone when Edward calls. I'm being ridiculous, still, and I know it. I can't help but feel mad at him though, for not telling me that he had planned to take Tanya with him to the barbeque. I haven't talked to him since talking to Esme and making plans with her to go early, so I opt to text him.

Going to bed early. Esme asked if I would come early to the barbeque, so don't bother to pick me up. Night.

It's only nine o'clock, and I know he'll question me going to bed early...but I'm hoping that he won't call again. Tomorrow, I can chalk it up to being tired from staying up late talking to him the night before. My phone rings, it's Edward and I don't want to talk to him. I silence the call and promptly pout. Like I said, I know I'm being ridiculous...but for the life of me, I still can't get the image of him and Tanya out of my head. My phone chimes, signaling a voice mail. I huff and roll my eyes—pissed that he didn't call again, and angry at myself for my mixed emotions. I pull the phone to my ear and listen to his voicemail.

"Hey, angel. I just wanted to tell you I got your text—I'm sorry for keeping you up so late last night. I'll be more careful about watching the time from now on, I don't want you wearing out. Mom called me earlier to tell me that she'd asked you out to lunch, but that you were going out with Tanya and Angela, and that you were going earlier to the barbeque tomorrow to visit with her. She's ecstatic, angel—she really loves you. So...if you want...I can come and pick you up and drop you off early, that way you can visit with her. I was going to bring Tanya, too—I think I forgot to tell you that. I'm sorry—Tanya said that you seemed a little short at lunch, and I know it's my fault. Anyway, my offer stands. I wanted you and me to go do something afterward, but if you're too tired, I understand. Just call me tomorrow to let me know. I miss you. Goodnight, Bella."

I huff as I delete the message. Tanya just couldn't keep her big mouth closed, could she? Now Edward thinks I'm mad at him, which I am, but it wasn't her place to go telling my business. Just like—

Don't you dare, Bella Swan! She is nothing like Alice, and you're being ridiculous.

I roll my eyes at myself and huff again. I *know* that she's nothing like Alice, but the jealousy I experienced toward her earlier is clouding my judgment. Add to

that, the memory of the bonfire I'd had earlier; and...well I feel justified in my thoughts. That's what matters. My phone rings again, pissing me off more.

"I told you I'm going to bed," I snap. Really, I told him I was going to bed—I think a little snippiness should be allowed.

"Uh...you told me you go to bed around eleven. Did I misread? Or get the times mixed up?" Jasper asks from the other end of the phone.

I sigh, embarrassed at myself. "No, sorry. I didn't realize the time. You didn't misread."

He chuckles. "Who were you snapping at then?"

Uh...

I don't know what to say. Honesty would be best, just in case Jasper is still angling for anything more than friendship. I don't think that's the case, but best to stick with what I feel is best. "Edward. I thought you were Edward, I didn't look at the number."

"Oh," he says quietly, and I know that I've hurt him. Again. "Trouble in paradise?"

"No," I huff. "He just...I just...I don't think I can talk to you about this. Change the subject, please."

Jasper sighs, "Bell, you *can* talk to me about him. I want us to be friends again. If you're constantly tip-toeing around the subject of Edward...then what kind of friendship will we have?"

I sigh; he's right. "Okay..."

"Tell me," he urges. "Maybe I can help."

I take a deep breath and then spill everything. The feelings I had at lunch, how new they were to me. Of course I admitted to being jealous of Alice, but couldn't recall feeling this way about Tanya, save once. I told him how I avoided Edward's calls tonight, and how childish I realized I was being. I couldn't help it though—I told him about Tanya and Edward and office sex and not being able to banish the image from my head. He listened, quietly throughout my rant, asking what spawned the feeling. I told him of the recollection of the bonfire I'd experienced earlier, and he sighed.

"You can't let the past affect you like that. It's unfair to Edward and it's unfair to you, too. Alice was a jealous bitch, she's jaded from the way she acted and hung on to what wasn't there. She knew before the two of us caught on and look what it's made her."

"But maybe...Edward hasn't realized that he cares for Tanya like that. Maybe he will and then—"

"You gotta stop. You can't keep thinking like that. You'll ruin your relationship with him before it even starts," Jasper interrupts. He carries on, "You love him, Bell. You know that. You're gonna have to let go of that shit and give Tanya another chance. And he loves you too—he flew across the country for you because you asked him to. You can't do this...you'll lose him if you do."

The line goes quiet as I absorb Jasper's words. He's talking from experience, I know this. His hushed tone and wise advice reek of his relationship with Alice. "What did she say to you that night?"

His voice is confused as he asks, "Who?"

I roll my eyes. "Alice. The night of the bonfire—before she stomped off, she said something to you. What did she say?"

"Oh, uh...I don't remember."

He's lying, he always stumbles on his words when he lies. "It was something bad about me, and you don't want to tell me. Wasn't it?"

"No," he sighs. He hesitates before he says, "She asked me why I didn't just do it myself. She said I looked so sad about you losing your virginity that I might as well as done it myself. She was being a bitch."

Huh, so I was right about the look. I was also right about Alice knowing for as long as she did—about both myself and Jasper's feelings. *Bitch*. I wonder how we ever were friends. Jasper and I talk for awhile longer, it's just idle chit-chat—we're trying to feel out our friendship. It's all around not a bad conversation, and I'm happy that he called. It feels like the old days for a bit, and I realize that I needed that...that link to my past. I'm grateful to him for being as big of a person as he is—I'm unsure if I could have acted the way that he is if it was he that ended the relationship and not me. We say goodnight after about an hour, and I'm left staring at my phone, contemplating calling Edward back. In the end, I decide to go ahead—it's not so late, he might still be up and then we could maybe talk.

His phone rings three times before he picks up, and there is so much noise that I wonder if I'll be able to hear him. It sounds as if he's at a restaurant or a bar, so many voices talking at once. I only hear one clear voice though.

Tanya has answered Edward's phone.

27. Happy

I'm shocked that I didn't get any more comments on Jasper's apparent 'reasonable behavior' last chapter! Only one of you was shaking their head (and most likely fist) at the fact he was acting mature! That really is shocking, since he's been such a big baby for most of the story! Regardless, I loved hearing what everyone thought. Good or bad? I love hearing from you guys. And if I haven't responded to one of your reviews, I apologize. Recently, this story has been accepted by Project Team Beta, and I've been revising every chapter as I send them through to them, so I've been kinda busy. If any of you are looking for a beta- I absolutely suggest checking them out. They've been incredibly helpful (especially the last two betas that worked with me and I really want to thank them, but have yet to ask if I can thank them individually or if I have to thank the group as a whole, so I won't.) But...if you have't checked out *Relative Wind*, by Mac214- you should. *cough* Just to clarify- only chapters 1-3 of Through Glass have been revised. So, any mistakes you find after those chapters are still my own, and only my own.

Thank you to everyone leaving me such nice words- you make me smile, every day!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

So what if it hurts me?
So what if I break down?
So what if this world just throws me off the edge...
My feet run out ground.
I gotta find my place,
I wanna hear my sound,
Don't care about all the pain in front of me,
'Cause I'm just trying to be happy.

-Happy, Leona Lewis

Tanya has answered Edward's phone.

"Bella! Hold on a minute—Edward's in the bathroom! He'll be right back," Tanya yells at me from Edward's phone. *I want to throttle her right now.*

"Where are you two?" I'm barely able to conceal how upset I am, I'm almost positive she can hear it. "It sounds like you're at a bar. Edward didn't say anything to me—"

"Oh! Here he is! One sec," she interrupts me. I hear her yell at Edward that it's me on the phone, and I take a deep breath to prepare myself for what he's going to say.

"Bella? I thought you were going to bed," he yells through the phone. "I wish I would've known—"

"Well, I didn't want to interrupt your plans," I sniff at him. Why didn't he tell me that he was going to a bar with Tanya tonight? "Sounds like you two are having fun."

"Hold on, angel. I can't hear you," he yells. I hear him yell at Tanya, telling her he's going to step outside so he can hear me better. I hear her yell back her okay, and she calls him *Eddie*. What the hell? She's never called him Eddie before. He hates that name.

My anger grows the longer he leaves me waiting on the phone for him. I hear him stopped at least four times, by various female voices that know his name and are obviously flirting with him. That doesn't help my anger at all, and I'm about two seconds from hanging up and forgetting I ever knew Edward Cullen.

"Okay, sorry about that. I couldn't hear for shit in there," he tells me. He sounds breathless and happy to hear from me. I feel a moment of guilt before Tanya's voice calling him Eddie enters my consciousness again. Then I'm just mad all over.

"You didn't tell me you two were going out tonight," I snap at him.

His answer is immediate, "I was going to—Tanya and I have been coming to this bar on Fridays for awhile now. I wanted to ask—"

"Angela's party was on a Friday. You didn't go that night."

His voice is quiet when he replies, "I called off the night with Tanya because I knew that you were going to be at my sister's. I'm sorry—"

"That's fine. I'll let you go. Wouldn't want to interrupt you and Tanya, *Eddie*."

He sighs; the sound is heavy and frustrated. "I've upset you. I seem to be very good at that—"

"It's fine. I won't keep you—"

"*Bella*, stop trying to get me off the phone! You're mad. I don't know why. I need you to talk to me—"

I cut him off; I'm too upset to talk to him right now. "I told you I'm fine! I'll talk to you tomorrow. Go. Have fun."

Then I hang up before he can respond. I'm so upset; I can't see straight right now. My phone rings again; it's Edward, and for the third time that night...I silence his call. A voicemail notification chimes and I'm pissed again that he would just leave a voicemail, and not keep calling. Why can't I make up my mind about what I want when it comes to Edward? It's frustrating and maddening and I've never been an irrational person, but now—that's exactly what I'm being. Knowing it doesn't make it stop though, and I begin to cry. I stare at my phone and will him to call me back. He doesn't.

I cry myself to sleep.

~*~

I wake up with a headache, and I know it's from crying the night before. I couldn't help the tears—as mad as I was, it was almost natural for me to cry. I'm grumpy, and I contemplate calling Esme to tell her that I'm not feeling well enough to attend. I know she'll worry unnecessarily, and I can't do that to her—no matter how mad at her son I am.

So, I shower and get dressed, and decide to head on over—Esme didn't specify when I should come, and I figure now is as good a time as any. If I don't go now...I'll sit and wallow some more, and probably get angry all over again. Yesterday, I Googled the directions at work, so I find my way pretty easily. Her house takes my breath away just like it did last time, and I'm smiling as Esme opens the door. She's smiling too; she looks happy to see me.

"Bella dear, I'm so happy you came early," she says as she pulls me in for a tight hug. I close my eyes and allow the comfort of her arms to envelope me. When we pull away from each other she holds my head in both of her hands, and a frown mars her beautiful face. "You've been crying. What's happened?"

I sigh and shake my head at her. "Nothing, I'm fine. Just didn't get much sleep, I guess."

Her brow furrows. "Edward told me you went to bed early, last night. Tell me what's bothering you, dear."

She pulls me to sit on one of the plush sofas in her living room and grasps both of my hands with her own. She rubs soothing circles on the backs of my hands with her thumbs, and before long I'm feeling a bit better. She waits for me to speak; only letting me know she's there to lend an ear.

I sigh, "I'm jealous of Tanya."

Her frown deepens. "May I ask why?"

"I just...can't help but realize how much better she knows Edward than I do. And," I take a deep breath and let it out slowly before continuing, "I can't get the image of the two of them having sex out of my head."

Esme startles; her hands grab tighter at mine for a second. "They've...slept together?"

I furrow my brow. "Edward said you and Angela walked in on the two of them."

Esme gasps, "Oh! Oh! *That!* I thought...well, I thought you meant perhaps they'd done so...again."

Well, I hadn't; Edward had sworn to me they hadn't, but now.... "Um...I don't think they have?"

"I'm sure they haven't, dear," Esme reassures me. "Something else must have happened to upset you this much...."

She trails off her sentence, and I begin to cry as I go through the phone call with Edward last night. I tell her about Tanya calling Edward, Eddie, and how I've never heard her call him that before. I tell her about the various women that were flirting with him as he was going outside to hear me better, and I tell her about him leaving a voice mail...and him not calling again after that. I tell her that I cried myself to sleep over it, how mad I'd been and still am. When I finished, she reached behind her and handed me a Kleenex.

She tells me, "I don't understand why you're all of a sudden jealous of Tanya. I'm not attacking you, so please just listen." She looks at me, waiting for me to nod, so I do. "I would have thought your jealousy for her would have already been there, and you would be justified in it. Only because they have a past together, not because they're in danger of having a future. They will always be friends, and for that—you need to prepare yourself. That is, if you want to pursue a relationship with my son."

I nod, looking down as I tell her, "Of course I do. I just—"

"Edward will *always* have women vying for his attention. You will *always* have to put up with that. Cullen men," she sighs, shaking her head. "I will tell you this: my son loves you. He's loved you from the moment he first saw you, and he won't give up on you. He doesn't care about Tanya the same way he cares about you, and he never will. I'm not *exactly* sure of Tanya's feelings, but I don't think she harbors romantic feelings for him. She's more of a...buddy? They are each others' best friend, and you need to realize he deserves that—no matter what form it takes. You have Angela—"

"But now Angela knows the truth behind Tanya, and they like...*adore* each other! I feel like—"

"Angela is making up for lost time. *You* are her best friend, Bella. Why do you think she gets jealous about you and Edward spending so much time together? She doesn't want to lose you any more than you want to lose her. Now, stop thinking nonsense about your relationship with her, it's solid. Focus—one thing at a time, or you're going to stress yourself out beyond belief. You need to talk to Edward about all you have talked to me about. And...realize—this? Is exactly why Ben suggested a 'friendship' first."

I close my eyes as more tears push their way from my eyes, and Esme pulls me in for another hug. I know she's right; just like I know how irrational I'm being. She lets me cry until my tears dry up, and then she tells me to run and wash my face and meet her in the kitchen. I go to the bathroom I met Edward in, and cry some more. Memories of that day and his eyes assault me, and I'm shocked at how strongly it affects me now. Before re-entering this bathroom, I'd been more concerned about Jasper and my fight on that day; now I can't get the image of Edward smiling at me for the first time to go away. I realize all he's done for me, all he's done to show me his feelings for me; I'm being a dumbass.

It doesn't help the situation when I exit the bathroom, and go to join Esme in the kitchen, to find Edward and Tanya standing there—arms looped around each other. I scowl before I can help myself, and turn to go cry in the bathroom some more—I make sure to lock the door this time. I sob and sob, wondering how I'll ever be enough for him when his best friend looks like a fucking model and she's obviously perfect for him. I remember yesterday at lunch, and how well Angela and Tanya got along with each other. No matter what Esme said—she and Tanya had gotten along really well, and even I could see Tanya being a better friend for Angela than I am.

I can't stop my tears; every time I think I'm done, another image of Tanya with someone I love flashes before my eyes and the sobs start all over again. I don't have any clue how long I've been in this bathroom crying, but I know for certain—I can't endure this barbeque. No more, not today. My phone chimes with a text message, and I check the sender. *Jasper*:

Hey Bell, feeling any better today?

I cry some more, realizing I've hurt Jasper just as I'm hurting right now. I'm such a terrible fucking person. First, I came between Alice and Jasper, and now I'm coming between Tanya and Edward. I should just go now, and I'll answer Jasper when I get home. He'll only text back though, so I send him a quick response:

Can I call you when I get home?

He answers just as quickly:

Of course, is everything okay?

I sigh, I need to answer him or he'll worry. I text him:

IDK? I just need to talk to someone.

His answer reads:

I'll be here.

I take a deep breath, and prepare myself to sneak out, hopefully undetected. If someone sees me, they'll ask questions...if they ask questions, I'll cry more. I want to wait until I'm home to cry again. I unlock the door, and quietly open it. There, standing back against the wall opposite me is Edward. He raises his eyebrows at me and pushes off the wall, striding forward and forcing me back into the bathroom. He locks the door behind him before turning to me with sad eyes.

"You've been crying." It's an observation, not a question. I sigh and hold up a finger to him, pulling my phone out and texting Jasper back to tell him I'll be a little longer. Then I turn my phone off, and prepare myself for heartbreak.

"I can't stay—I'm not feeling well." I can't look at him as I speak; he's still as gorgeous as ever, but the sad look he's giving me is too much.

"Bullshit," he spits out at me. I whirl around at the angry tone he uses—Edward has never lost his temper with me. "I made you mad, and I want to know what I've done."

I shake my head at him. "N-no, you didn't. I'm just—"

"Running." *What? No, I'm not!* "You're running from me, again."

I sigh, "Edward—"

"Why? I don't have any clue what I've done? Talk to me."

I close my eyes; more tears have formed in them, and I'm on the verge of sobbing again. "I...*can't*. I have to go—"

"If you won't talk to me, will you talk to someone else? Let them calm you down, and then maybe we can talk? I don't know what I've done, and it's killing me, angel."

I open my eyes to see the anguish on his face; I'm hurting him. My voice is no louder than a whisper as I ask, "Why do you want me?"

His brow furrows as he studies every feature on my face. "I love you—you know that, don't you?"

"Why?"

His mouth opens, but a knock sounds at the door before he can respond. Tanya's voice drifts through the door. "Edward? Esme is looking for you; she said something about you needing to fire up the grill?"

I huff, angry at her interruption, but mostly because it's *Tanya* that is interrupting. Edward catches it, of course, and a frown appears on his lips. He answers her, even though I'm standing *right fucking here*. "Yeah, Tanya—tell her I'll be a minute."

She giggles. "Need some private time, huh? You know, you could—"

He turns from me abruptly, and opens the door to whisper something I can't hear to her. I hear her tell him okay, and she calls him *Eddie* again before she retreats. I'm mad now.

"Sorry about that—"

"It's no problem, *Eddie*. Why don't you go see what she needs—I wouldn't want to keep you."

His eyes harden, and his jaw clenches. "You're jealous of Tanya? That's what this is? What the fuck, Bella?"

"Don't 'what the fuck' me, *Eddie*. I'm just calling it like I see it." I incline my head, motioning to the door. "You should go—don't want to keep her waiting."

"After all you know about me and Tanya, you're going to be jealous? I've told you—"

“But you *didn't* tell me about your Friday night get-togethers. And you didn't tell me she was riding with us here, today—I thought it was you and me going together.” He opens his mouth, but I keep right on going, not letting him get a word in. “And you didn't tell me that you let her call you Eddie. And I'm sick and fucking tired of her knowing all this shit about you I *don't*! It's obvious—you two were fucking *made* for each other and I'm just—”

His lips close on mine then. I struggle against him, but it doesn't do any good—he's got an iron grip on my arms, and he's holding me firmly against him. Against my will...my lips began to move with his, and my hands clench and unclench in an attempt to touch his body. My tongue slides across his lower lip and he opens his mouth to me, sliding his tongue with my own. I breathe him in, through my mouth and my nose, and feel dizzy at his scent. The kiss stops just as abruptly as it began.

He's panting as he tells me, “That's why I want you—I know you feel it, too. I called you early last night to ask you to go out with me and Tanya, you didn't answer. I asked you if today would be a *date*, you couldn't answer—I thought if Tanya came with us, maybe it would ease you. She calls me Eddie because I can't get her to stop, and now it's a form of endearment—from her only, that I don't mind. She knows things about me because she's my *best friend*. And we aren't made for each other, obviously, or I wouldn't be in here, begging you to talk to me—I would be out there following her around instead. What do I have to do? Fucking tell me—I'll do it.”

Well...don't I feel like a piece of shit?

I whimper, “You didn't even call me back last night.” That's a hell of a weak argument, but I don't have a case to stand on anymore—and he knows it.

He looks at me, incredulous. “You're fucking joking, right? I can't fucking win!”

His voice is loud, frustrated. I open my mouth even though I have no idea what to say, but he keeps on yelling at me. “Jesus, Bella! *You* hung up on *me*! And when I tried to call you back—once—you didn't answer. I don't want to fucking smother you—I thought I was doing the *right* thing!”

“Edward—”

“So tell me what you want! Because I obviously don't know—I just seem to piss you off at every turn. I told you that I wouldn't give up...I told you you're *it* for me...I told you *I love you*, none of that is enough. So tell me what I'm supposed to do. Because you're pulling away from me, again. And I'm just...fucking...*lost*.”

“I don't fucking know, okay?! I want to *be* with you, but I can't! I don't want us to have to go through this whole ‘friendship’ deal before we can be together, but we have to! I hate that I don't know you like she does, but I don't! I *despise* that she gets to call you something that no one else does, but she does! I want to be able to hold your hand and put my arm around you and kiss you whenever and sleep over with you and eat every meal together and *never say goodbye*, but I can't do any of that! I'm sick of this! Why does it have to be so fucking hard?!”

“Stop, angel. Shh.” Edward catches me as I fall forward, my knees just sort of...gave out on me while I was yelling at him, and I leaned forward to brace myself against the sink and missed. He leads us to the bathtub and sits me on the ledge, kneeling before me with his hands cupping my face. *This looks familiar*. “Okay. That's what I needed to hear. Angel? I want all of those things, too. With you. I wish you wouldn't doubt that. Maybe...we shouldn't wait, maybe if we go on a date—”

“No,” I harshly interrupt him. “Esme is right. This is exactly the reason Ben said we need to be friends for awhile.”

“You talked to my mom?”

I nod. “When I came today—she could tell I had been crying. It all sorta...spilled out to her.”

“So...what happened? Because you *weren't* jealous of Tanya. At all. This is all so sudden.”

I sigh and look into his eyes; there's still sadness there, but I can see the hope in them now as well. “It was at lunch yesterday. Angela was asking her questions about work, and she said something about you teaching her all that she knows...but she *blushed*, and she looked...coy? I don't know, I just...took it the wrong way. Then she said she was riding with you today, and...I guess...I blew it all out of proportion, didn't I?”

He smiles gently at me, and rubs his thumbs over my cheeks. “Yes. You did. That's okay, though.... At least I know, now. I assume this goes without saying, but...you *really* don't have any reason to be jealous of Tanya. She is my best friend, but nothing more.”

I frown. “What did she mean? It sounded like she was flirting with you through the door.”

Edward barks a laugh. “She was *going* to say, that I should go find you. I'm a little...frustrated?”

His eyebrows rise as he looks at me, waiting for me to understand. I do, though it takes me a moment to realize. “*Oh!*”

“Yeah...”

“So...”

“Listen, I think you should sit down and have a talk with Tanya about all of this. However, I can tell you this: she's incredibly shy—that blush? Angela was paying her a compliment—Tanya doesn't know how to take those. The ride and the bar were my fault, not hers. I should have told you about asking her to ride with us, and I should have kept calling you to try and get you to come to the bar with us. *I'm* sorry.”

I sniffle, feeling absolutely awful for acting the way I am, and had. “You don't have to apologize, but I do.... I just...I...” I look down, ashamed at myself for worrying him so. My voice is a whisper again when I speak next. “I love you, Edward. I'm sorry for being so...irrational? Stupid is probably the right word —”

“Shh, angel.”

"No! Really, I *was* acting stupid. I had no reason to—I don't know what came over me—"

"I punched my wall the night before last when you told me Jasper was texting you."

I look up at him and blink. He holds up his hand so I can see the cut knuckles and bruises, and I grasp it lightly, fingering the cuts with the gentlest of touches. "Why?"

"Because I've had to watch him kiss you one too many times...and I've had to watch him hold you one too many times...and I've had to listen to him tell you he loves you...and you tell him back...and because...I'm still afraid one day...he's going to say the right thing, and it's going to be all it takes to win you back."

"Edward—"

"So, you see? You're not the only one who acts and thinks irrationally, and you're right—or Mom's right...I don't know. We need to be friends for awhile or, knowing us, we'll sabotage our own relationship before it starts."

"You didn't sound jealous though. When you called later—"

"An ice pack and three fingers of scotch gave me some perspective."

"Oh," I say quietly, and let his hand go. I look up into his eyes again, and see what *should* be there: love. A smile breaks across my face without my permission, and he mirrors me with one of his own. I blush at the intensity of his gaze and his smile widens at the rosy hue of my cheeks.

"You okay now, angel?"

I nod, and close my eyes at the too-familiar term of endearment. "I'm ready to go help Esme...and you have a grill to fire up."

He chuckles and winks. "And for the record—Ben calls me Eddie as well...not that it doesn't annoy me or anything...."

I laugh at that, because it's true, and I know the name annoys him. When we exit the bathroom, we run smack dab into Ben who tells us Esme is in a 'tiff,' and she needs us. On the way to the kitchen to join Esme, Ben grabs my arm and holds me back, telling Edward to go on and he'll send me along in a moment. Edward sends me a long look before nodding and leaning forward, to press a soft kiss against my forehead. I watch him as he walks away, amazed that this man wants me.

"You've been crying." What's with everyone asking questions without asking questions today?

"Yeah, but we worked it out."

Ben raises an eyebrow at me. "Hold up—you and Edward talked through a problem? On your own?"

I roll my eyes at him. "Shut-up. We *are* adults, ya know."

Ben laughs. "Yeah...you two have shown excellent *adult* capabilities in the past."

I huff, and shove against his shoulder. "Shut-up." Then I stick my tongue out at him, just to show how non-childish I am.

He throws an arm around my shoulders. "Seriously, you okay?"

I smile at him and shrug. "I'm...fine—and no. I don't want to talk about it, not right now. Take off your therapist pants and have fun with me today. I think that's exactly what I need."

He nods. "At least give me a clue?"

"I was irrationally jealous of Tanya. I can't say for certain if I've been talked out of my stupidity, but I know that my jealousy is unfounded. So...I'm going to *try* not to let it bother me."

His hand squeezes my shoulder. "That's good—that you're going to try. But...if you need a breather, or just to talk..."

He trails off there, but he needn't finish. I know what he's trying to say; he's offering me his support and his friendship, and for that I'm grateful. I nod to let him know I understand, and he leads me the rest of the way to Esme. She's the first thing I notice when I walk into the kitchen; her normally well-kempt appearance is lost—there's flour in her messy hair, and stains on her normally pristine clothes. She's running around the kitchen in apparent distress, picking up things from the counter only to search, wildly, for what she was going to use it on. The kitchen is a shocker as well; granted, I've only been here once, but it was spotless and polished when I was here before. Now, it looks almost as if a war took place—puddles of unidentifiable liquid spotted the counters, congealed flour was caked in with them and on the floor as well, rinds from oranges and lemons lay beside the trash can, and the mixer is slinging some kind of dough all over the place.

I gasp, "Esme? What happened?"

Her head whips around, and her eyes zero in on my own. "Oh thank God. I need you. Can you finish up the dough while I clean some of this up?"

I swiftly make my way to her, and grab her shoulders to make sure I have her full attention. "No. You go...hose off or something. And change your clothes. Ben?" He walks into my line of sight and raises an eyebrow at me. "Can you go get Angela and Tanya? I'm going to need their help."

Ben nods and scurries off to do my bidding. I stare at Esme, who is still looking around the kitchen like a crazed woman. "Go on. We three can handle this. I promise."

Her head whips back to me, and after a moment she nods. “Okay. Okay. Yes, you’re right...you can handle this. I’m going to go...put myself back together.”

I smile at her. “Damn right, I can handle this. Go on now, woman.”

She laughs, even though it’s still shaky, and makes her way from the room. “Esme?”

She whirls back around to face me. “Leave the wooden spoon?”

Her brow furrows, so I pointedly glance at the spoon in question, still gripped in her hands. She looks down, and promptly bursts into loud, infectious laughter. She walks back to the island, sets the spoon down, and nods once before turning on her heel and leaving the room. I shake my head at her retreating figure, and then proceed to put the kitchen back together. Ten minutes after I start, Angela walks in.

“There you are! Ben said you needed me, but he didn’t tell me where you were! I’ve been everywhere looking for you.... What in the *hell* happened in here?!”

I laugh as I tell her, “Don’t look at me. It was like this when I walked in—you should have seen your mother. I just sent her to clean up. So...scrub the counters for me? I’ll get the floor when I finish this pie.”

She nods, walking forward immediately to grab a sponge and paper towels. “Usually, Mom is really composed—I wonder what happened to make her freak out. ‘Cause the kitchen doesn’t *ever* look like this unless she freaks out about something.”

Oh, hell. I hope Esme hasn’t freaked out over what she and I spoke about. That’s just what I need—a guilty conscience on top of my apparent jealous nature. “I don’t know. We talked about some pretty heavy things earlier, but she seemed fine to me.”

She gasps, “That’s right! I forgot you were coming early! I didn’t see you...how long have you been here?”

I look down, unable to meet her eyes. Making the pie is an excellent cover. “Um...a few hours ago? I’m not sure exactly.”

“But...well...huh. What’d you talk about?”

I put the last of the berries in the pie, and turn around to face her. “Can we...talk about this some other time? I’m sure Ben will tell you—don’t get mad because he doesn’t know everything. I fully intend to give you the entire story, but...not right now? I just want to enjoy the day from here on out.”

She pouts her lips, but nods anyway. “That’s fair. Just...it’s not me, is it? I didn’t upset you, did I?”

Her bottom lip is quivering—she looks about ready to cry. I rush to her, pulling her into a tight hug. I whisper, “Hell no. Don’t even think that.”

I feel the breath leave her body, and she nods against my shoulder. “Good. ‘Cause you know I love ya more than my luggage.”

I smack her shoulder but laugh, and she laughs as well. *Damn Steel Magnolias.* “Do you ever run out of Clairee quotes?”

She gasps, and holds a hand to her chest. “Sacrilege, you say! One can *never* run out of Clairee quotes. There is *always* one to use in any situation.”

I pretty much agree with her, but I’m not *quite* as knowledgeable in all things *Steel Magnolias*. I put the pie in the oven and proceed to help Angela with clean-up duty, when Esme flies back in the kitchen. We both stop and stare at her—she’s put back together, clean and pristine again, but the wild look is still in her eyes.

“Mom—”

“Have either of you seen Tanya?”

We look to each other and shake our heads. Tanya hasn’t shown up in the kitchen, and Ben hasn’t come back to tell me he couldn’t find her. I open my mouth to tell Esme this, but she begins speaking again before I can. “I didn’t know...didn’t invite them...they just called—”

“Mom! What the hell are you talking about?”

Esme doesn’t need to answer though, as Felix and Gianna stroll in at that moment. We three gape at the couple, and I realize *they* are what have Esme so upset. Tanya has avoided being anywhere these two are until now, but she can’t avoid them anymore. This is also the first time Angela and Ben have been around them since finding out the truth from Tanya.

I sigh. It’s going to be a hell of a long day.

28. Fake It

OMG! I'm on time! Woot! That's surprising, actually. I was grouchy all day long! I haven't the slightest clue as to why.

Robin! Your line is in there darlin', 'cause I love you so much! Everyone who is giving this story a chance- thank you all! Those who are kind enough to leave me reviews- good or bad, 'cause I love 'em all- thank you for taking the time to let me know whatcha think!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

You should know that the lies won't hide your flaws,
No sense in hiding all of yours,
You gave up on your dreams along the way, yeah.

Good God, you're comin' up with reasons,
Good God, you're draggin' it out,
And good God, it's the changing of the seasons,
I feel so raped, so follow me down and just...

Fake it, if you're out of direction,
Fake it, if you don't belong, yeah,
Fake it, if you feel like affection,
Whoa, you're such a fuckin' hypocrite.

-Fake It, Seether

"What the hell are you two—" Angela begins, before I promptly send an elbow flying into her ribcage. She lets out a loud, very unladylike grunt, and turns her head to glare at me. I raise my eyebrows at her, trying to make her understand we don't know how their visit is to be received. She rolls her eyes at me, rubbing her hand over the spot I had planted my elbow, and huffs before turning around to continue her cleaning duties.

"Felix, Gianna." Esme curtly nods at the couple, and then turns to me. "Bella? Would you be so kind as to go inform every one of our two new guests? They'll need to put more chicken on, dear."

"Sure," I mumble, avoiding eye contact with Felix and Gianna. The two give me the creeps, and I'm not looking forward to spending the day with them. The chance to leave the room is one I *should* have jumped at, but I know I'm going to tell everyone who is here and that's something I'm not looking forward to. I make my way slowly out of the kitchen, not missing Angela's glare which is alternating between me and the couple of assholes standing, gaping at the mess in the kitchen.

I hear Gianna's pretentious, obnoxious voice as I exit, "Oh, Esme! You should have told me you needed help! I would have come earlier..." I walk a bit faster at that, and miss whatever she says after. Gianna is one of the most fake people I've ever met, and I haven't the slightest clue as to what she's trying to pull by being so nice to Esme. Esme has *never* hidden her distaste for the woman, I knew before Edward ever told me their history. I wonder why they're even here, why they would bother to come around people who obviously dislike them.

Shaking my head to try to forget about the two, I make my way through the den area and out into the back yard. I see the grill smoking, but there isn't anyone around it. I haven't any idea where Edward, Tanya, and Ben are, but know I need to find them, and fast. A thought pops into my head about Tanya...she never showed up in the kitchen earlier, and when Ben stopped Edward and I, he told us then Esme was in a 'tiff.' Tanya must know Felix and Gianna are here, and that's the reason she never came to the kitchen to help Angela and me. An image of her crying on Edward's shoulder flashes through my head, and the flames of jealousy are burning bright again.

He's done this for her before. He's helped her with Felix and Gianna before, but it doesn't seem to affect Edward—being around his ex—as it does Tanya. He told me she still has feelings for Felix though, she still thinks she loves him, and that's why it affects her the way it does. Still...I don't want to have to *see* it. I don't want to have to see Edward acting as the loving fiancé of Tanya, see him comfort her in light of the situation at hand. I realize this makes me a hypocrite; he had to watch me do just that for Jasper. They acted as a couple then for my benefit. So, why is this so hard for me to deal with now? The answer comes to me quickly—because I'm an irrational, selfish, jealous *bitch*, and I want Edward Cullen for myself. I don't want to share him with his *best friend*.

Ben's calm voice reaches my ears though I can't understand what he's saying. I turn in the direction of his voice, and am shocked when the trio comes into view. It's not Edward she's leaning, crying on, but Ben. He's speaking gently to her, much like he speaks to me when I'm panicking. Her body is shaking, and at that moment I can't be angry with her. I'm not jealous of her, instead I'm incredibly sad for her. This is something I wouldn't wish upon anyone because I've experienced Gianna firsthand, and I know how nasty she can be. To have to deal with her nastiness, and see her wrapped around the man you claim to love...well I wouldn't know what to do.

My eyes fly to Edward. He's sitting helplessly to the side, his face twisted in anguish and I want to go to him, to comfort him. I don't really want to interrupt their calming circle though, but at the same time, know I need to inform them of the couple's arrival.

I clear my throat, and all three heads whip to me. Quietly, I say, "They're here."

Ben nods, pulling Tanya's head away from his shoulders to tell her, "Just pretend like they're not even here. If you act, even for one minute, like she's bothering you, it will only provoke her more. Okay?"

Tanya nods, running a tissue under her eyes. "I know you're right. I just..."

She trails off, and no one says anything else for a moment. Edward's eyes are trained on me; I can feel his gaze, but can't tear my eyes from Tanya. I really,

truly feel awful for her. Before I even realize what I'm doing, I'm kneeling in front of her on both knees. I tell her, "We can go, Tanya. I have my car here. We can go get a drink or something to eat—whatever, I don't care. Just tell me and we'll get out of here, okay?"

Her eyes show her shock at my statement, I'm guessing Edward talked with her about my jealousy issues. I can't be bothered to be jealous about her right now; she talked me down at my father's house, she was there for me when I needed her, and I need to suck it up and be there for her now. She takes a stuttering breath before telling me, "Thank you." She shakes her head. "I need to do this, I think. I'm just...not looking forward to the comments she's going to sling at me about Edward breaking our engagement."

"What?!" Her eyes widen at my outburst, but it can't be helped. "You're going to tell them? *Why?*"

Her brow furrows as she takes in my shocked appearance. "Because..." She glances to Edward before turning back to me and stating, "Because it's time. Because I wouldn't make Edward carry on this façade with me, not when you're here, and he's so happy with you. You really think I would do that?"

I blow out puff of breath before responding, "I just...assumed—"

"Well, stop assuming." I take her harsh tone for what it is—a reminder of my assumptions about her yesterday and today, and affirmation of how irrational I am. "Besides, there's not much else Gianna could say to me that would surprise me. She'll say what she wants, no matter what the truth of the matter is. There's nothing any of us can do about that. It's better this way."

I nod, understanding exactly what she means. She's ready to leave this part of her life behind, ready to move forward with no lies or secrets to keep her from doing so. She's giving the reigns of Edward to me, much more gracefully than I ever could. She's telling me to take care of him, telling me to let her be, telling me I'm wrong about her. Though...to be honest, I really didn't expect for the truth of Tanya and Edward to be announced today—in full or in part. It goes to show how big of a bitch I actually am, that I would assume such a thing about Tanya, who has shown me nothing but compassion. "Offer stands, just so you know. Say the word and you and I are drinking margaritas on the beach."

She laughs lightly and nods before standing. "Let's get this over with. Esme will have all our heads if we don't get the chicken started soon anyway." Her coloring is better now, and the puffiness under her eyes has lessened. She carries a determined look on her face and in her posture, as well. She makes to walk past me, but pauses to my side, grasping my hand with her own. Quietly, so as only I can hear, she tells me, "We need to talk, I know. We will. Just...thank you." Then she keeps on walking, Ben close on her heels. I'm reminded of the day Angela and Ben took me to La Popular the first time, Ben had followed me the same way, as if he was afraid I would bolt at the first opportunity.

A hand touches my elbow and I turn my head, meeting Edward's troubled gaze head on. "Thank you, angel."

My brow furrows. *What on earth is he thanking me for?* He answers my confused look immediately. "For being so understanding about the situation at hand. You could have handled that a number of different ways, and you took the high road. I'm thankful for that."

"Edward—" He cuts off my train of thought by pressing his lips to my forehead again. I close my eyes against the feel of his silky lips touching my skin.

He leaves his lips pressed against me while he murmurs, "You okay?"

My response is a whisper, barely audible. "Yes...I think so."

He pulls back, grasping my hand in his. "You're probably going to suffer some of Gianna's comments today as well. I'm not sure you're prepared—"

I scoff, "Let her talk. I've dealt with the likes of Alice. Before that, I dealt with Rosalie. You've never seen Rosalie McCarty née Whitlock when she unleashes her claws—trust me. Gianna will be a cake walk compared to her."

He looks doubtful. I contemplate retelling the various stories of Rose's less colorful side to him, but decide the best way to show him is to just meet Gianna head on. I tell him, "Please? Just trust me?"

Reluctantly, he nods his head and tightens his grip on my hand. "That offer you made Tanya goes for you, too. Shit gets to be too much, just tell me and we're out of here."

I smile at him and nod my head. "Deal."

~*~

Carlisle made it home just in time to eat with everyone. I'm very glad for that, as Esme looks about ready to pull her hair out. She's normally so calm, collected, and *friendly*...but she's slipping today. On more than one occasion Edward has taken her aside, everyone can see them speak heatedly to one another, and when they come back Esme is more her normal self. She constantly slips though, and it's actually quite amusing. At least, it is to me.

Felix asks the question; as he looks at Edward, Tanya, and I, about the lack of affection between the former couple. I try not to grimace at the suggestive grin he throws Tanya as he asks, and I wonder what she thinks of the subtle wink he throws at her. It's the look on Gianna's face that makes me want to punch them both though, when Edward announces his and Tanya's decision to end their engagement. He's still grasping my hand in his as he delivers the news, and I, in turn, am grasping Tanya's. Gianna looks from my hand in Edward's, to Tanya's hand in mine, and her smile turns downright ugly. Angela is shooting steam from her ears, and I'm grateful to Carlisle for speaking up at this moment.

Carlisle leads the conversation away from Tanya and Edward's broken engagement by addressing me. "So, Bella. Esme tells me your father is an avid fisherman?"

I take the bait, and launch into a long-winded retelling of growing up with Charlie. I'm pretty sure I shock everyone at the table when I instruct them on the proper way to gut a fish. This amuses me, as there are beaches in Florida, and ample opportunity to fish here. It would seem I'm becoming involved with a family who has no interest in catching their own meals, and I laugh as I tell them exactly that.

“Well, it’s nice to know that Edward has found such a...*well-rounded* companion. Isn’t it, Tanya?” Gianna’s remark bites through Tanya, the distress shows on her face. The jab wasn’t lost on me either. I realize being brought up by my father has exposed me to some of the more...*colorful* aspects of life, but it doesn’t change the fact that my father did the best he could with what he had. Her comment successfully pisses me off. She’s pleased with herself, anyone looking at the vicious smile on her face can see. “So, Bella. What do you do? Besides gutting fish, that is.”

“I work at Cul de Sac. I’m a receptionist.”

Gianna laughs at this; it’s a mean-sounding kind of laugh, and I brace myself for whatever she’s about to say. “Isn’t that nice? So, Edward.... Do you find all of your girlfriends’ jobs at your company?”

Angela is the one to answer; she even throws in a roll of her eyes to show her agitation. “Bella was already working there. They met at the last barbeque?”

I smile in thanks toward Angela, and she smirks in return. Both of our faces form a grimace at Gianna’s next comment, however. “Oh, that’s right. You were here with someone else. What was his name?”

Edward stiffens beside me, and I grasp his hand under the table. “His name is Jasper.”

Gianna chuckles as she says, “Yes, that’s right. He was quite the looker. Whatever happened to him?”

I swear to God above, I can’t control my mouth. “Why? You want to hook up with him? He’s not really into married women. Not even his own wife.”

I close my eyes immediately after voicing the comment. *What the hell, Bella?! Don’t egg her on!* Instead of the biting remark I’m expecting to come from Gianna...I hear a clap, and then another, and open my eyes to see Ben with his hands poised in front of him, preparing to clap again. I furrow my eyebrows at his goofy smile, and he immediately quiets down when he realizes I’m not the only one looking at him like he’s gone mad. His hands retreat under the table, prompting Gianna to speak up again.

“Oh, my! A married man,” she gasps. Her tone is bordering on condescending as she says, “Well, I never.... Edward, did you know about this?”

He rolls his eyes but refrains from engaging her in conversation. This doesn’t deter her though, she continues right on insulting my past. “How’d that work out for you, Bella? Oh! What am I saying? Obviously, not well—you decided to take Edward from poor, little Tanya instead—”

“Look here, you—” Angela starts but Ben stops her, laying a hand on her arm and shaking his head. Angela huffs and mutters, “This is it, I’ve found it, I’m in hell.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her petulance, in addition to her never-ending stock of quotes from her favorite movie. Tanya speaks up, bringing me out of my amused musings about Angela. Her tone is gentle yet firm, demanding the attention of everyone at the table. She reminds me of Esme in this moment. “Gianna, we both know the truth. Don’t try to make yourself sound like something you aren’t. I want this to stop. Now.”

Gianna has the audacity to look shocked. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just saying—”

“You’re trying to accuse Bella of something she hasn’t done. Stealing away my man? That’s all you.”

A flash of pride for Tanya ripples through me, and I grasp her hand tighter, trying to give her whatever strength she might take from me. Gianna scoffs and bites back with, “That’s nice, Tanya. Trying to make me into a villain. *Everyone* knows all about you though, honey. So take your self-righteous, undignified ass—”

“I’m undignified? *I’m* undignified?” Tanya barks out a bitter laugh. “You want to talk *undignified*? How about coming home to find the man you *love* having sex with another woman? What do you call that?”

Gianna huffs, and tries to cover her ass. “You mean...” She gasps, “You walked in on Bella and Edward?! How could you do that, Edward? I thought—”

“Oh, please,” Tanya scoffs. “Everyone here knows the story, Gianna. They all know about Edward and I walking in on the two of you. Don’t try—”

“How *dare* you! How *fucking dare* you spread lies about me—”

Angela doesn’t give Tanya a chance to reply, as she cuts off whatever Gianna was about to say. “Whoa, there! I’m sorry, but you’ve got some kind of nerve! After all the rumors you started about Tanya—”

“Least I had my facts straight,” Gianna sniffs.

“Facts!” Tanya scoffs at Gianna’s *blatant* lie. “Facts? What of anything you said was a fact? Because my doctor will tell you—I’ve never had a baby, I’ve never miscarried, I’ve never had an abortion, I’ve never *even* been pregnant to begin with!”

“I never said you were *actually* pregnant. I said you told *Edward* you were pregnant. Oh! Is that not true?” Gianna pouts her lips. I’m sure she thinks this makes her look innocent, when it actually just makes her look ridiculous.

“That’s true, actually. I’ll give you that much. Now, you tell me—*why* would you tell people that? What gave you the impression I *ever* told Edward such a thing?”

Gianna stumbles over her words for a few seconds; I’m sure trying to find the response to take the heat back off of herself. “W-well you said—”

Tanya shakes her head. “No, I didn’t. I haven’t spoken a *word* to you since I walked in on you and F-Felix.” Tanya blushes as she stutters his name, and I cast a glance at him. His eyes are trained on her, and they’re softer than I’ve ever seen them. A hint of a smile is playing on his lips. I want to slap it off his face. He doesn’t deserve to look at her, especially not while he sits aside and lets his *wife* berate her.

Gianna, however, must have been completely unaware of her husband's lingering gaze at Tanya. She spouted another lie, flawlessly, obviously recovered from her shock. "I don't think I appreciate what you're insinuating about me."

"I'm not *insinuating*—"

Edward cuts her off, speaking up for the first time since announcing the engagement's end. "Don't Gianna. I've told everyone the truth. Everyone at this table knows what Tanya and I heard and what she saw that night. She's not insinuating anything, she's telling the truth."

Gianna purrs as she replies, obviously ecstatic over Edward's acknowledgment of her. "Edward...I'm not sure—"

"Oh, please," Angela scoffs, rolling her eyes. "You know exactly what he's talking about. And don't talk to my brother like that! You sound like a...a...a harlot!"

I bite my lip to control the laugh that is bubbling to the surface. *Harlot? Really, Angela?* Gianna, on the other hand, just rolls her eyes. "I don't remember anyone asking your opinion of me."

"Angela—" Ben warns her, but she doesn't hear him. Her face is as red as mine usually is, and the steam is *almost* visible from her ears.

"I don't remember anyone asking you *here*, today. Yet, here you sit. Did you just come to annoy me? 'Cause you're doing a good job!"

"Angela—" Ben tries again, and again, he's ignored.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you came because you have some 'Edward and Tanya' radar, and it's your life's enjoyment to bring them discomfort."

Gianna rolls her eyes and scoffs, but doesn't respond shy of that. Ben, once again says, "Angela—"

Only for her to, once again, ignore him. "And by the way, you say one more thing about Bella, and you're likely to get my fist shoved down your throat. She's my best friend!"

I look down, to hide the smile that crosses my face at her comment, but my defenses immediately kick in when Gianna bites back. "Some kind of best friend. Better watch Ben around her, she seems to like them married."

"Hey now—" Ben says, but Angela, once again doesn't let him continue.

"Ben! Don't indulge her fantasies by taking up for yourself, or Bella. She's obviously delusional—"

"You don't know a thing about me, *Angela*. You should shut-up while you're ahead."

Angela opens her mouth to reply, once again, but is cut off this time before she gets a word out. It isn't her husband, this time though. "You're making a fool out of yourself, Gianna. *You* should stop while *you're* ahead," Esme says. Her voice is not the usual, gentle tone, but hard and cold. Gianna's eyes fly to her as she opens her mouth, presumably to spew more untruths, but Esme shakes her head and speaks again. "I've allowed you over, countless times, because my son has asked this of me. To keep my mouth shut about what happened in the past between you and him, and Tanya and Felix. However...today he informed me of his decision to spare me the uncomfortable atmosphere which takes over *my* house when you are inside of it. He told me he has no intention of having anything to do with you or Felix, ever again. I'm telling you—neither do I. He's allowed me to finally, *finally*, treat you in the manner I wish—which is to not have to treat you any way, at all. I don't want to deal with your or your lies. Not any longer. You will leave my house, and you will not return."

"Esme—"

"*Do not interrupt me.*" My head whips toward Esme, the cold tone she uses slices through me, and I'm sure, everyone else at the table. "I have endured your presence for as long as I'm willing. Leave. Now."

Gianna pouts her lips again, and turns to Felix. "Are you going to let her talk to me like that?"

It's my voice that answers her, as I'm not in control of my mouth. Again. "I don't really think he has a say in what Esme says to you or how she says it. This is *her* house, and she asked you to leave."

She whips her head to me, spitting, "You don't talk to me! You don't know *anything* about me! You're not even family! And don't think he'll marry you, either!"

"I know enough about you to know I'm nothing like you. And I don't ever want to be. You're an ugly person with a pretty face, but everyone sees through you—"

"Bella—" Tanya grabs hold of my arm, trying to stop me. I don't let it deter me.

"What you did was wrong; you should both be ashamed of yourselves. But, I know you aren't. You're too busy making each other miserable to bother with an emotion as complex as *shame*, and you jump at the chance to inflict your unhappiness on others. One day, you'll grow tired of how awful your lives have become, and you'll find yourselves all alone. No one around to bear the weight of your sins but yourselves, and then, and only then, will you remember this day. And I hope you are ashamed of the manner in which you have conducted yourselves, then. This could have gone so different—you could have admitted what you'd done wrong, and possibly asked for forgiveness, now that you're forced to face it. But you didn't, you tried to lie your way out of your lies and everything has backfired on you. What will you do now?"

Everyone is quiet—probably frozen in shock and amusement at my, extremely-not-my-place-but-I-said-it-anyway, outburst. I can't tear my eyes from Gianna's seething glare though. She reminds me of Rosalie in this moment, before I really knew Rose, that is. She reminds me of the Rose that would insult me for her own enjoyment, and go out of her way to make me feel awkward. I briefly wonder how much Rose would enjoy this showdown, of sorts. I firmly believe Gianna wouldn't *stand a chance* against Rose, and I wish Rose was here to put her in her place.

Angela, ever the sweetheart, breaks the tension. She speaks in her exaggerated, Southern accent, quoting her favorite movie again. “I think we should pray!”

A smile cracks on my face—I won’t let Gianna ruin this day, not any more than she has already. “Oh, I’d rather eat dirt!”

Angela bites her lip, contemplating her response. Her eyes light up, and I know she’s found it. “I am just about at the end of my rope with you!”

She cuts her eyes to Gianna as she says it, and the message is clear—she wants them gone. I respond appropriately, “Well then, why don’t you tie a noose and slip it ‘round your head?”

She laughs, the sound is full of joy, and then she nods, once at me. “Very good, Annelle, spoken like a true smart-ass!”

Tanya gasps beside me before bursting into giggles. She claps her hands together as she says, “Oh my goodness! I love that part!”

That was all it took, apparently. Gianna realizes she isn’t going to provoke Tanya, not anymore, and most certainly not anymore, today. She huffs, and then huffs again when not one soul turns to her at the sound. She stands and mumbles something at Felix, who rolls his eyes and shrugs in response.

Carlisle, who has remained quiet throughout, clears his throat, and everyone turns to look at him. “Well, Gianna. I’d say you’ve succeeded in humiliating everyone at the table, yourself included. Now, I do believe my wife asked you to leave. While I would never presume to overstep my wife’s commands, I will further her request. She asked you to leave. I’m telling you to leave. I’m also telling you to never come back. I believe you know the way. Felix, son, show your wife out, and don’t come back until you’re ready to issue the proper apologies to the appropriate parties.”

I think my mouth, along with the mouths of everyone at the table, Esme excluded, hits the ground at Carlisle’s short speech. He struck me as such a gentle-hearted person, and I guess he is, but the couple sitting at the end of the table have pushed his kindness to the limit. Felix nods, rising from his spot to stand beside Gianna. He grabs her by the elbow as he tells us all goodbye. That’s it, just goodbye. Not an ‘I’m sorry,’ or a ‘please forgive my wife’s rudeness.’ Only goodbye. I wonder if any of us will ever hear from him again. I realize he’s family, but he made a decision a long time ago, to wrong a member of his family. This is his consequence.

We sit in silence, listening as Gianna screeches the entire way to the car, and then we listen as they speed down the gravel toward the highway. When we can’t hear them any longer, everyone just sorta...looks at everyone else.

It’s Angela who breaks the silence, yet again. “I don’t like her. I don’t trust anyone who does their own hair.” I roll my eyes at her, but crack a smile. Esme and Tanya chuckle, while Carlisle turns a loving gaze toward his daughter. Edward sighs—he’s annoyed still, but I *just know* he wants to laugh at his sister’s silliness.

Ben turns to her, and says, “You do realize she probably doesn’t do her own hair, right?”

Angela rolls her eyes at him. “I don’t care! I was just expressing my distaste for the woman in my favorite way—by quoting my favorite movie. Edward pass the slaw, will you?”

~*~

The rest of the afternoon is wonderful, almost dreamlike in its lack of drama. Tanya and I talk briefly, and set up a time tomorrow to meet for coffee so we can *really* talk. Angela pouts at being excluded, and I promise to come over after, reluctantly agreeing to watch *Steel Magnolias*. Again. Ben pulls me to the side as everyone is getting ready to leave, asking if he and Angela can drive Tanya in my car. He tells me Edward really wants to do something, alone, with me this evening, and the car situation is remedied like this. I agree with Ben, and hand over my keys as we make plans for later—so I can get my car back from him.

I hug Esme and Carlisle goodbye, promising to come back soon, and walk out the front door in time to see Angela and Edward hugging each other goodbye. Tanya is already seated in the back of my car, and Ben is in the driver’s seat, so I walk that way. I knock once on each window, waving at the two and make my way to Angela for a hug. She makes me promise, again, to come over tomorrow after my coffee date with Tanya, and I roll my eyes but tell her what she wants to hear. Edward pouts, telling Angela that she and Tanya are monopolizing too much of my weekend time. I smile goofily at his childishness, but really at the fact he wants to spend so much time with me.

Edward and I stand side by side as we watch my car drive off, and when we can no longer see its tail lights, we turn to one another. He reaches a hand forward, running one single finger over the palm of my right hand before slipping the rest of his digits into my grasp. Our fingers link together, and he smiles that crooked grin at me.

“So...”

“So?”

He cocks his head to the side and squints one eye as he asks, “How do you feel about ice cream?”

I’m distracted by the way his tongue darts out to wet first his top lip, then his bottom before he pulls it back inside of his mouth. His teeth catch on his bottom lip, and I wish it were between my own. “Bella?”

Oh, right, he asked me something. Uh...um...yeah, no. Don’t remember what he said.

“Yeah?”

He chuckles as he repeats the question, and now I’m distracted by the way his throat bobs as he swallows. He seems a little...nervous? “Ice cream?”

“Huh?”

He looks more confident at my lack of response, and I know it’s because he’s realized how incapable of speech I am when in his presence. He speaks slowly

this time, as if I won't understand the question. Again. "Would you like to go for some ice cream?"

"Oh! Um...like a date?" It's quite annoying, actually, the way my voice squeaks on the word 'date.'

"No. Friends go for ice cream, too. Doesn't have to be a date."

"Oh," I murmur, processing what he's just said. He's right—friends *do* go for ice cream, but it does seem rather date-like. Then I remember we've already had phone sex, as *friends*, and ice cream sounds so much more innocent than that. "Okay."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

His smile is *blinding*, and beautiful as he simply replies, "Okay."

29. Vindicated

So, this is early! That's because I was a dumbass and got my days mixed up again, and the last chapter came out on Thursday, instead of Friday! Gah! I'll get it right, one day... Anyhow, yep, I'm feeling guilty about that, so here's this one early...I hope you all don't mind!

Thank you everyone, who's giving the story a chance and those leaving reviews- love you guys! They really do make my day! So uh...this chapter deviates...only one aspect...from the original outline, I'll let you all guess as to which part, but Beausoir knows, for sure, what I'm talking about. And I blame her completely, because I really liked the idea, and so I had to go with it! Love ya darlin'!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Hope dangles on a string,
Like slow spinning redemption,
Winding in and winding out,
The shine of it has caught my eye,
And roped me in, so mesmerizing, so hypnotizing,
I am captivated,

I am vindicated,
I am selfish, I am wrong, I am right,
I swear I'm right, I swear I knew it all along,
And I am flawed, but I am cleaning up so well,
I am seeing in me now the things you swore you saw yourself.

-Vindicated, Dashboard Confessional

I spend the rest of the day with Edward, which only serves to remind me how stupid I am for ever being jealous of Tanya. It's awkward, but incredible at the same time. He takes me for ice cream, as he promised, and then we decide to go see a movie. It's surreal, almost, and it feels like a date. Ben's words ring through my head though, reminding me that some things are acceptable for friends *and* for those in a relationship to do. This day falls into both categories, and I'm the happiest I've been in forever, even knowing I won't get a kiss goodnight, and that Edward will be leaving me, and not staying, at the end of the night.

We end our outing at a bar, where Angela, Ben, and Tanya have been hanging out all night. Angela squeals when she sees me and Ben smiles at the sight of Edward and me...and the constant, acceptable amount of space we allow one another. Tanya is sporting a small smile for the two of us two, even though I know it's a little harder for her, considering my state of mind regarding her yesterday and earlier today. I don't stay for long, and Tanya begs me for a ride when I do announce I'm leaving. Of course, I tell her she can ride with me. Angela grabs me before I can leave, reminding me in her semi-drunken voice, that I'm required to be at her house tomorrow. I smile while telling her I haven't forgotten, and then hug her and Ben goodbye.

Edward walks the two of us to my car, and promises Tanya to make sure Angela and Ben get home safe as he helps her into the passenger side. I stand and wait for him to come to tell me goodbye—he doesn't disappoint. The quiet grin he's sporting betrays his excitement as he stalks around the car to me, I'm pretty sure my grin matches his. It's my blush that betrays me, my cheeks flame at the sight of his eyes, dark and sparkling—they are focused completely on me.

His hand grabs for mine when he reaches me, threading our fingers together and squeezing. I lean back against the car and look down at our joined hands in amazement; I'll never get over the feel of his skin on mine, or the way my hand fits, perfectly, inside of his grasp. My grin widens, almost embarrassingly—I'm reminded of the nap I took in Edward's bed, and I'm too afraid to look at him with this smile on my face. I'm sure I look ridiculous.

"Angel?"

I look up at him through my eyelashes, taken aback once more by the man before me. *This man wants me....* "Hmm...?"

"Tomorrow..."

My face tilts up toward him as the one word trails off, to find him looking unsure of himself. I squeeze his hand tighter, drawing his attention to me. "Edward?"

He huffs a quick breath and asks, "After you go to my sister's...um...do you...? Would you...?" He shakes his head, breathing in quickly. "Do you think you might want to come over? Maybe we could have dinner? Not like a—"

"I'd love to."

The smile gracing his lips because of my words makes my heart beat faster than normal, and my palms feel moist, sweaty. I haven't suffered from sweaty palms since high school; it's actually more than a little embarrassing. He sighs as he says, "Great! That's great! So, um...seven? Or is that too late? I just thought—"

I squeeze his hand tighter and tell him, "Seven sounds perfect. I'll make sure Angela puts the movie on early, so I can make it on time...or sooner...maybe...?"

His head is bobbing up and down at a rapid pace. "The sooner, the better."

"Okay."

"Okay," he breathes.

His head nears to mine, and my eyes close. I feel his lips press against my forehead, again, and force myself to breathe. The silkiness of his lips against my skin is quite breathtaking, far more so than any other part of his skin against me. I feel faint whenever his lips are on me, no matter where they've landed, and have to fight to stay upright. *The things this man does to me...*

The puckered set of his lips loosen, and they move from my forehead; he drags them to the right, over my temple, and farther still. A current of electricity is left behind; everywhere his lips touch upon my skin lights up, until he reaches my ear. He skims the shell of my ear, his breath setting off sparks all throughout my body. He whispers, "I can't fucking wait." Then he presses a long, wet, open-mouthed kiss below my ear before pulling away from me completely.

I'm completely in a daze at this point, but hear the sound of a door opening, and then his hands are leading me to my seat. He murmurs goodbye to Tanya, presses one more kiss to my forehead, and retreats from the car, closing the door behind him. I'm vaguely aware of starting my car and putting it in drive, and suddenly my car is moving, and Tanya is giggling.

Shaking my head and casting a glance in her direction, I ask, "What's so funny?"

My question makes her laugh harder, and I end up waiting a full five minutes before she can speak. I find myself laughing with her; she's doubled over clutching her sides, there are tears streaming from her eyes—which are scrunched tight, and her mouth is wide open as she lets out a continuous parade of laughs while trying to draw in gasps of breath, almost choking in the process.

Finally, she's able to draw in a breath and even though she's still laughing, she manages to say, "You! You're what's funny!"

I furrow my brows. "O-kay...?"

She shakes her head and clears her throat, still trying to calm down from her attack of the giggles. "Oh! No! Shit! I didn't mean—fuck! I mean...shit! You really gotta ask?!"

"Uh...."

"You and Edward! That's what I mean!"

"Um...."

She rolls her eyes and huffs, "Are you blind?"

"No?"

"Why are you two doing this whole...stupid...fucking...? You two should be together! People meet all the time, and don't know one another before they're in a relationship! You two should not be wasting your time being friends!"

"Uh...."

"Bella! You were pretty much a goner when you *fell* into your car! And Edward was no damn better! You two should be together *together*!"

"Um...Tanya—"

"Pull over!" she suddenly screams, and I do because I'm afraid she might throw up. She's had a lot to drink tonight, at least, I think she has by the way she's slurring her words and speaking louder than normal. She bolts from the car as soon as we stop, but instead of throwing up, she runs into the store, two stores back from where I've stopped. I look closer and realize it's a liquor store. *Oh God.*

I sit in the car, impatiently waiting on her and berating myself for not paying better attention to my surroundings. The passenger door opens and she falls, quite literally, back into the car, startling me. She's giggling as she pulls a brown bag firmly against her.

"Take us to my place! We need a girl night! And I'm," she pauses to pull a clear bottle out of the brown bag; I recognize the bottle from college—Grey Goose vodka, "teaching you how to drink! And not that nasty, tequila shit Edward drinks! Oh! Turn your phone on—he called, freaking the fuck out 'cause he couldn't get you to answer it!"

I shake my head at her as she gives me directions to her apartment, and pull my phone from my pocket to turn it back on. I freeze, suddenly remembering—I never called Jasper back. He's probably worried sick.... First though, I need to call Edward. He's relieved to hear my voice, and I tell him I'm on my way to Tanya's, apparently for a girl night. He snickers and tells me he won't bother me, and then begs me not to drunk dial him as he won't be able to turn me down—he's drunk, too. I giggle as I tell him goodbye, and hear Tanya sigh beside me.

"What?"

"You two are so goddamn cute. I wish you would hurry up and get your shit together."

"Tanya—" I start but my phone rings, cutting me off. I sigh and make to answer it, but Tanya rips it from my grasp.

"Helloooooo!!"

Oh God.

"Oh...uh...who's this?"

What the...?

"Oh! Hi, Jasper! This is Tanya! Bella's driving me home, right now! Did you know that she sucks at driving and talking at the same time? Like seriously, she

just can't do it!"

Oh my God! She's not gonna—

"Nope! We're having a girl night! She needs it—can you believe she was jealous of *me*? That's like...ridiculous! Isn't it?"

What the hell?!

"Aww! You're so sweet! I love your accent—where are you from?"

Are they...flirting?

"Oh...I've been there! I love that your accent hasn't faded.... I'm from Georgia, and mine's just about gone...unless...you know...." She giggles, and when she talks again, there's a distinct, Southern accent in place. "Unless I *want* people to hear it...."

Oh my...! Oh my God! They're fucking flirting!

I shake my head and tune her voice out; it's become low, lilting, and sensual—I really don't want to hear. It's not that I'm jealous, I can say with absolute certainty that I'm not, but it seems a little wrong to be eavesdropping on such a...private conversation. I'm actually...relieved, and admittedly amused—I was a little worried Jasper might have had ulterior motives in calling me and trying so hard to secure a friendship with me. I really don't want to think badly of him like that, but I can't help it. I was also a little worried about how our break-up might affect his love life, but it doesn't sound as if he's having any trouble finding his game, again. From the sound of Tanya's voice, he's actually at the top of his game, and he's working her perfectly—she's practically purring on the phone. That's the amusing part.

I make it to her apartment easily, and when I turn into the parking area, she slaps me and points to her car, telling me to pull in next to it. I do as I hear her purr a goodnight to Jasper, and then she hands the phone to me. She tells me the number of her apartment and that she'll be waiting for me, and exits the car.

I sigh and pull the phone to my ear. "Well, well...."

"Bell—"

"Nu uh, don't try to cover up what you were doing! You were flirting with her, Jasper Whitlock!" I really hope he can hear the teasing tone of my voice because I don't want him thinking I'm actually mad.

"Bell...you're...you're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"I just thought, well, it doesn't matter. So...she's single, yeah?"

I laugh as I tell him, "As single as they come. You want me to talk you up to her? She is a little drunk, right now. She might not remember...."

"Nah. I'll be out there next month—to do that job Angela set up with me.... Maybe...I can...see her...? When I'm there?"

I smile at his unsure tone; he must've really liked what he heard. "I think I could probably swing that. I forgot you were coming for that. That would probably be perfect. Still...do you...maybe want her number?"

He lets out a relieved chuckle at my offer and accepts, and we talk for a few more minutes. I apologize to him for keeping him waiting all day with no word. He understands and tells me he's really glad everything got worked out. He thanks me, again, for Tanya's number and we tell each other goodnight. I make my way upstairs to Tanya's apartment; I don't bother knocking as there is music playing, extremely loudly, inside of her apartment. I find her in her bra and panties, drink in hand, jumping around her living room to *Hollaback Girl*. I refrain from rolling my eyes as I grab the drink on the table she's pointed at, and let her strip me to my bra and panties, as well.

That's how we spend the night—half-naked and toasted on vodka, dancing around her living room to various music choices. We're all giggles and smiles and loud voices, and she asks if I'm okay with her calling Jasper, sometime. I roll my eyes as I tell her that I've already given him her number, and she squeals and makes me dish everything I know about Jasper Whitlock, which is a lot. As we lay down in her very large, very comfy bed, she apologizes to me for whatever she did to make me jealous, and I tell her I was just being stupid. She shakes her head and tells me she understands, but threatens me if I overreact like that ever again. We smile and hug each other and fall asleep wrapped around one another.

~*~

"Oh my God," I groan as I open my eyes. My head is pounding, and the goddamn light filtering into the room through the large windows to my left is *so not helping*.

"I *know*," Tanya groans back to me.

She very slowly sits up, hands grasping her head, and stands even slower. "Are you hungry?"

"Hell no."

"Me, either. I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Me, too."

We look at each other, eyes matching shades of bloodshot and hair destroyed, and promptly bolt to her bathrooms. I'm actually quite proud of myself for

remembering where her spare bathroom is, I was fucking wasted last night. When I've finished emptying my stomach of, hopefully, all of the vodka from last night, I make my way out to the living room. Tanya is already there, head in hands, and there are two bottles of water and a bottle of aspirin in front of her. Oh, and she's dressed. So, I pick up my jeans and t-shirt from yesterday and redress before grabbing the unopened bottle of water and pills and joining her on her couch.

"We good?" Her voice is no louder than a whisper, and I'm thankful as hell for it; I don't think my head could take her being any louder.

"Yeah, we're good."

She looks at me, there's a small grin on her face. "Just so you know...while I do find your man very attractive...I'm just...not interested in Edward beyond friendship. Don't forget that."

I nod as I digest her words, mentally berating myself, yet again, for being so irrational. "Well, just so you know...I'm not interested in Jasper beyond friendship, either. Not anymore."

She blushes and nods and we reach to each other for a hug. I whisper to her, telling her I'll call her later, and leave her there to make my way home. I only have an hour before I'm supposed to be at Angela's and I'm dreading my decision to drink with Tanya last night more than ever. I make it back to my apartment in record time, hurry to the shower, and thank my lucky stars that I did laundry already as I rummage through my closet for something to wear. It's not something I would worry too much about, normally, but I'm going to Edward's tonight, and I want to look nice for him. I decide to switch it up a little, pulling out one of my only skirts, a rather short, denim number, and a tank top. I brush my hair, and decide to just pull it up instead of messing with it; my head wouldn't be able to take that, I don't think. Slipping on a pair of flip flops, I haul ass out of my apartment to make my way to Angela's.

Angela pouts when I tell her I can't stay for dinner because I've already made plans to meet Edward, but Ben clears his throat, making her roll her eyes and mutter under her breath. We watch *Steel Magnolias*, as promised, and munch on fruit—my stomach can take that. When the movie ends, I tell her what my problem was yesterday, prompting more pouting from her. She tells me I how ridiculous I am, and that no one could replace me as her best friend. Then she rolls her eyes, telling me how her brother is too busy 'panting after me' to ever notice another woman, much less one who's been there, and he hasn't felt that way for, before. I argue that he and Tanya have slept together, and tell her I'm not really jealous anymore—which she doesn't believe, and is only partially true, I can't help it—but they were obviously attracted to one another. She argues back, reminding me how attracted to Jasper I was, and asking me if I still am. I begrudgingly admit how right she is, but her mention of Jasper reminds me about Tanya and Jasper on the phone, last night, which prompts a whole new conversation.

I can't say she's thrilled about the idea of Tanya and Jasper together, mainly because she isn't really a huge fan of Jasper, but promises to maintain an open mind about it. I reprimand her for not reminding me of Jasper coming next month, and she gasps, telling me she'd forgotten, and asking if I'm okay with that. I tell her I am, and by the time we make it through *that* conversation, it's five-thirty. I apologize, profusely, for bailing on the rest of the night, but she just blushes and tells me to go see my man.

I can't fucking wait.

~*~

I hear yelling when I make it to Edward's door, so I pause, furrowing my eyebrow and wondering who the hell he's yelling at. It's hard to understand him, so I push my ear to the door to try and hear better. It doesn't really help, his door is too thick, so I raise my hand to knock. I'm early, we'd agreed on seven last night, but I told him I would be earlier, if possible. It's only six now, I'm a whole hour early, but really, I couldn't help myself. I want to see him so bad...so I take a deep breath and knock, three times on his door.

The yelling gets louder; I'm assuming he's making his way to the door, and when he opens it, I burst into laughter. Edward looks quite sexy in his t-shirt and jeans, but the headset perched atop his hair, and the X-Box controller in his hand makes him look like a teenager. His eyes widen upon discovering *me* at his door, and he mumbles into the headset, "Shit—I gotta go." Then he rips it from his head, and tosses it and the controller somewhere to his left. I'm still laughing, but try, desperately, to get myself under control. Edward's wide eyes, narrow at me, and a smirk forms on his lips.

"It's not that fucking funny, Bella."

"I'm *sorry*...I just...wasn't expecting that. So...uh...what were you playing?" I burst into more laughter after asking, and he stalks forward, picking me up and throwing me over his shoulder. I squeal and laugh harder, as he smacks me square on my ass, and drags me into his apartment, dropping me onto his couch. He stalks back to the door and picks up his discarded headset and controller, and then he settles next to me on the couch.

"Here," he says as he hands me the headset. I look at him like he's crazy, and he rolls his eyes. "Just put it on and say hi."

I furrow my brows at him, thinking he's crazy, but do as he says. I murmur a hello into the headset and immediately break into more laughter as Emmett's voice greets me. "*B! What the hell?! You weren't supposed to be there 'til seven! Me and Eddie have to finish this fucking game!*"

"I'm sorry? I told him last night I might be early." I sneak a glance at Edward as I say this, and his grin widens at my words. "What the hell, indeed! I didn't know you and Edward were so buddy-buddy!"

"*Yeah—you're an unobservant fuck, you know that? Hold up, Rose wants to talk to you.*"

I slip off my flip-flops and settle into Edward's couch; I might have scooted a tad closer to him in the process, as well. "*Bella? Big night, huh?*"

I roll my eyes at Rose's innuendo-laced question. "No, just dinner. Just friends. You know—"

"*So, my brother came over here, smiling, today. He was talking about someone named Tanya? Is he talking about your friend?*"

I smile, hoping this means Jasper is healing up completely now. Tanya could be perfect for him.... "That's her, yeah. She answered my phone last night when he called. I think they might have done some...flirting?"

Edward is apparently paying better attention than I thought, he asks, “Tanya and Jasper?”

I whisper, “Yeah, last night, after you called. I never called him back yesterday and Tanya stole my phone. I think they might really like each other.”

Edward rolls his eyes. I huff and ask, “Are you jealous?”

“What? No! I just—” he starts, but Rose says something in my ear, and I can’t hear her when he’s talking.

“Hold on. What, Rose?”

“I said...tell Edward he’s got you for the rest of the night. Right now—shit, Emmett said to tell Edward there’s some dude to the southwest, sniping.”

“Emmett said there’s someone to the southwest, sniping,” I tell Edward, rolling my eyes. I’m a little pissed about his reaction to Tanya and Jasper.

“Okay,” he murmurs. “Bella—”

“And Rose said you get me for the rest of the night, so shut-up.”

He sighs and murmurs an ‘okay,’ again. I turn my attention back to Rose. She really just wants to know about Tanya, so I tell her all I know. She sounds as if she likes what she hears, and we finish our conversation with a promise to call each other this week. Emmett yells out that he misses me, and to give Eddie shit for making their team lose.

I turn to Edward, and raise an eyebrow. “So, what was that?”

He rolls his eyes, again. “I just...don’t like Jasper. And what if he’s using liking Tanya as an excuse to try and make you jealous? I just don’t trust him.”

“Well, I can tell you—I’m not going to get jealous. I think he might really like her, he asked if I might set up a meeting between them when he comes to work with Angela, next month. I get that you don’t like him, you have every reason not to, but...is that really all there is to it?”

He sighs, and leans back. “Yeah, that’s all there is to it. Tanya’s a big girl, and she will be smart about it—it’s not her I’m worried about. I’m not jealous for her...I’m a little jealous of what I told you, though. That he might be using it as an excuse to make another play for you.”

“You *really* don’t have to worry about that.”

Edward turns his head to me, looking me right in the eye. “Promise?”

“Promise,” I tell him with a smile.

He nods. “Okay, I’m sorry I gave you the wrong impression.”

“It’s fine. Soo...what’s for dinner?”

His eyes widen, and his mouth gapes open. “Shit! I completely fucking...fuck!”

“Forgot to make or forgot to order?” I’m giggling as I ask; I don’t really take Edward for a cooking kind of guy—aside from grilling, but there’s no balcony, so I know he won’t be doing that.

“To order,” he says, rolling his eyes. “So, what do you feel like?”

“I don’t know...ideas?”

He grins and grasps my hand, leading me to his kitchen where he rummages through a drawer, and pulls out a stack as thick as a book of delivery menus. I laugh, and tell him, “Bachelor, for sure. You could learn how to cook, ya know.”

He shrugs as he grabs hold of my hips and hoists me onto his marble counter. He raises his eyebrows at me. “Maybe I’m waiting for Miss Right to come along, and cook *for* me.”

I scoff, “Sexist, much?”

“No, I just don’t have any desire to learn to cook. There’s plenty of food here, though. Aside from snacks and shit, Mom set me and Angela up with her grocer. We have lists that get delivered once a week.”

“Spoiled.”

He nods. “Pretty much. So, here, tell me what you want. I’m good with any of that. You want a beer?”

“Probably not a good idea, after last night.”

“What did Tanya make you drink?”

“Grey Goose,” I tell him and watch him shudder in response. I laugh and say, “It was pretty hilarious, actually. When I got into her apartment, after saying goodbye to Jasper—in case you’re wondering why she was there, before me. He asked me about her, anyway.... She was stripped down to her bra and panties and jumping around yell-singing *Hollaback Girl*. Oh, and then she made me join her.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Did you strip down, too?”

My blush answers for me, but I tell him anyway, “Yeah, well...I didn’t so much as strip down, as she forced me to.”

Edward’s eyes darken, and he moves forward, stepping between my legs and leaning against the counter. He’s close enough to smell, and I have to fight to keep my eyes from rolling back in my head. “And did you jump around and sing with her?”

My breathing accelerates. “Yeah...we were drinking....”

“Well...” His voice is deeper now, husky and fucking sexy. I watch his tongue dart out to wet his bottom lip, and he grins as I’m unable to contain a soft moan from spilling out. “I think...you *definitely* need a beer, then. Don’t you?”

My whole body heats up; it feels as if my blush is spreading all over. “Huh?”

His grin widens. “Hair of the dog?”

“Huh?”

He chuckles as he asks me, “Maybe you can give me a demonstration of last night?”

I gasp, “I don’t really think that would be beneficial to our *friendship*...”

He leans closer to me, his face stopping just a breath away from my own. He murmurs, “Fuck our friendship...”

“Edward—” I start, but am unable to finish as his lips find mine. I don’t fight; Tanya’s words are still strong in my head from last night, asking me why the hell we have to go through a friendship first. At the moment, no sweeter words have ever been spoken, and I give in.

His hands have found purchase on my hips, and he drags me forward until his hips are flush against mine. I can feel his hardness, already, and we’ve only just begun kissing. It elicits another moan from me, and my hands crawl up his forearms, past his biceps and shoulders, into his hair, where I pull him more firmly against me. I also might have grabbed a fistful in each hand, in the process. Edward, apparently, likes having his hair grabbed and pulled; he groans, and I swear it goes straight through to my lady bits. My hips begin to move, obviously controlled by what’s nestled between them, against Edward’s hips and we both moan at the feel.

He skims his hands up from my hips—as they obviously don’t need his help in moving—over my sides, and further.... They skim the outside of my breasts, and I gasp as his thumbs flick at my nipples, but he doesn’t stop there; he keeps moving his hands up, over my collarbones, until he’s cupping my jaw. I gasp again, and his tongue licks its way across my bottom lip, before I greedily suck it into my mouth. He inhales sharply and pulls his tongue from inside of my mouth, tilting my head back with his hands, and kissing his way down my chin, skimming his lips further down until they reach the junction of my shoulder and neck. He begins to place soft, gentle kisses there before dragging his tongue back out and over me, and sucking the delicate skin into his mouth.

My hips start bucking, wildly, at the feel of his wet mouth on me; his own hips meet me thrust for thrust. Both of my hands leave his hair, and make their way down, over his shoulders and under his arms; I drag my nails down his back, making him gasp sharply, until finally, *finally*...I reach his ass. I grab handfuls of his luscious behind in each hand and jerk him even closer to me, he obliges and just like a well oiled machine, we’re moving perfectly together.

“Edward,” I breathe as his lips make their way back up to my own. My voice is deep as well, and beyond breathless.

“Fuck,” he hisses as I squeeze his ass, again. “Fuck, angel, you’re driving me fucking crazy.”

I nod against his lips, which are leaving soft kisses on my cheek. They find my own lips again, and we’re both incapable of speech. There’s just rubbing and groaning and Edward and me, and it’s *fucking fantastic*. Our lips are moving against one another, and my tongue decides, of its own accord, it wants a taste of Edward. It slips its way into his mouth, and he sucks in a sharp breath through his nose. His hands leave my jaw and make their way, swiftly, to my hips again, where he grabs tight and lifts me from the counter. I wrap my legs, tightly, around his waist and we’re moving. I don’t know where, and I don’t care—all I care about is his mouth on me, and his hands on me, and his hips, nestled firmly against my own.

Abruptly, my back makes contact with something hard, and my eyes fly open. We’re in his bedroom, but we’re nowhere near his bed; he’s only just shut the door with my body and now he’s grinding, even harder, against me.

“Edward,” I whine; I want him naked and over me.

“No, angel,” he pants.

“No?”

“Clothes on, today.”

“Why?”

“We’re not ready. Shut-up, enjoy.” With that, he pushes against me fast and hard, making me gasp, sharply, and cutting off any chance I had to form words. He keeps pushing against me at this same pace until I’m literally seeing stars, and then *oh!*

My orgasm rips through me and I’m screaming my release, not caring how loud I am, or who can hear, or *anything*. It’s the most amazing orgasm *ever*, and Edward is still pushing against me, making it last longer, and it’s even more intense. His breathing becomes choppy, and his thrusts erratic; he tightens his grip on my hips, and thrusts one, two, three more times before he stills. His head comes forward to rest against my shoulder as his body trembles against my own. Every breath he takes pushes its way down my tank top, and just like that—I’m ready to go, again.

Edward isn’t though, and I know this. So, I raise my hands to his hair, and push my fingers through his sweat-damp locks. Eventually, I feel his heart slow down and his breaths even out. He pulls his head back to look at me, a sheepish expression already in place.

“I’m sorry,” he tells me.

“I’m not.”

“I know,” he says as he sighs and shakes his head. He bends his knees and loosens his grip on my hips; I take the hint and unwind my legs from his waist, setting my feet back on the floor.

“Why’d you bring us to your bedroom if you weren’t gonna let us get naked?”

He shrugs, guiltily. Quietly, he tells me, “Today was laundry day. I wanted your smell in my sheets, again.”

I gape at him and gently push him. “Jerk!”

He smiles and states, “Yeah, but you love me.”

I sigh and smile and tell him, “Yeah, I really *do* love you.”

30. Never Say Never

This one's a little late- I know I usually post right after midnight, I'm so sorry about that! I don't want to sit here and give excuses, so I'll just say it's been a hell of a week and leave it at that!

All of you who have read, alerted, or reviewed this story, or me, I want to thank you all so much. You have no idea how much your words mean to me. A BIG, huge, OMG thanks go out to les16, who gave me my very first rec in her own fic. (And yes, Les, I read what you said, but I'm still gonna do it!) If you haven't read it, you so should. It's a hell of a slow burn; her Bella is adorable and her Edward is a Daddyward, which, I don't know about you, but it makes me weak in the knees! It's called *The Path We Choose*. Go! Read it, and let her know what ya think! Thanky, bb! Beausoir! Woman! I'm missin' you! I hope everything settles down soon, because this chapter is all for you!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stepheni Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Some things we don't talk about,
Rather do without and just hold the smile,
Falling in and out of love,
Ashamed and proud of, together all the while.

You can never say never,
While we don't know when,
But time and time again,
Younger now than we were before.

Don't let me go,
Don't let me go,
Don't let me go.

—Never Say Never, The Fray

An exaggerated sigh. "You guys are kind of going about this whole relationship thing all wrong. You know that, right?"

An intentional eye roll. "Says you!"

An exasperated grunt. "Yes, says me! I'm serious! You guys had *phone sex*! Don't you think that's...*backward*?"

A disapproving set of pursed lips. "Again. Says you!"

An angry huff. "That's different!

A surprised jaw dropping. "How? Please, tell me. I *so* want to hear this!"

"Oh my God, Tanya! Edward and I already *knew* each other—"

"And so do Jasper and I—"

"No! You guys *met*. That's different! Edward and I—"

"Already practically bumped uglies. *I know*—"

"That's not what I—okay, well it *kind of* is what I mean...but—"

"Why can't you just be supportive?" This is a sound I've never heard from Tanya before; she's *whining*.

I roll my eyes and sigh. "I'm trying! It's just...I know Jasper...and I just—"

"So help me God, Bella. If you try to tell me he's no good for me, I *will* slap you!"

"No! That's not what I'm trying to say! I just don't want you guys to move too fast!"

She scoffs, "Yeah—you're the authority on moving fast. How long have you and Edward been *not* seeing each other now?"

She's right; I really shouldn't be telling her shit. It's a Saturday; last night Tanya, Edward and I went out to their usual Friday night bar trip—I've gone with them for the past two weeks. Tanya and I haven't had any more problems with each other, and while I can't say my jealousy issues pertaining to Edward's and her friendship are completely put to rest, they're kept in check for the most part. We have a blast when it's the three of us—last night was no exception. I don't even have a hangover today; Edward kept an eye on both Tanya and my alcohol intake last night. Now, Tanya and I are sitting on her couch; we had another girl night last night, though Edward was firm with us, and didn't allow a trip to the liquor store on the way to her apartment—most likely the reason I'm not hung-over.

She's just informed me of an incident of phone sex which occurred between herself and Jasper earlier this week, and for the life of me I can't keep my mouth from spewing should-be-helpful-advice at her that should be heeded by none other than myself. Like I said, she's right.

My relationship with Edward is moving at a snail's pace and I only have myself to blame for it. It's been two and a half weeks since that amazing sex-with-

our-clothes-on-against-the-door-to-Edward's-bedroom has happened. I mean, I guess to an outsider it would look as if we are a couple...a couple in a relationship; to those who know us though...we're still just friends. It's not for lack of wanting each other, that's for sure. If I had my way, Edward and I would be doing that whole scenario every day, all day long—with less clothing. I'm quite sure Edward feels the same way; his attitude of late has been poor, and I know it's because he's frustrated. Not just with our lack of sexual activity either; he's frustrated with *me*.

Something is holding me back and I haven't the slightest clue as to what it is. It's equally annoying and relieving; I'm annoyed at my inability to pinpoint why I'm so afraid to move forward into a relationship with Edward, and I'm relieved for the same reason. It's scary to think about being that committed to someone again, after Jasper. Everything has been weighing down on me recently; exactly how wrong the two of us were in starting our relationship like we did, what we did wrong once we started it, how selfish I'd been in letting it go on, and how selfish Jasper had been overall. That we wanted each other was never questioned; I wasn't lying to him the night he asked about our sexual relationship—it was perfect. Therein lies one of my problems...I've begun to compare the two; Jasper to Edward, Edward to Jasper, and it's blocking me from being able to move forward.

Not that there's really a comparison to make between the two; not when it comes to me. Edward will always be more than Jasper could have ever been, I know this, but with this knowledge comes guilt. Ah, guilt—we're such good friends.

Where Jasper had been all suave and charm, Edward is just as charming—maybe even more—but there's an endearing side to him I love more than anything; Edward...is a dork. Nobody warned me about this, though I should have realized on my own. The night I caught him trying to hide his handheld game behind his back should have tipped me off; the night I came to dinner at his house and found him playing a shooter game online with Emmett...was my proof. It's not just video games, either. Edward has an unhealthy obsession with all things anime—something of which I know nothing about—and compares situations in life to those in these strange cartoons. Then there's the models—not supermodels—plastic and glass and rubber and vinyl figurines he keeps hidden in his guest bedroom; they're of his favorite characters from said anime, and some from his favorite video games. I won't even start on his habit of bringing his laptop to bed to read *fanfiction*.

There are other things as well that separate the two so fully from one another; their looks being one, but that's a given. If I could just make my *mind* catch up to the fact it's *Edward* who wants to kiss me...that I won't open my eyes and see blonde and blue.... It scared the shit out of me when it happened; right after our infamous bedroom incident Edward had gone to the bathroom to clean himself up, and I decided to surprise him by granting his wish. I snuggled between his sheets and plotted ways to get him into my own bed so that I could smell him there, all week long. He surprised *me* by climbing in with me and taking up post between my legs, pressing kisses all along my neck, and up to my cheeks before finally brushing them against my lips. I was smiling the whole time, happy as can be; I couldn't remember ever feeling quite so content. Edward called me baby. Not angel. He called me baby, and I still don't know if it was just a slip of his tongue, or if I was imagining it altogether. I never asked, but I did damn near hyperventilate; the result being that we've backed off from physical interaction for a while.

Edward is being patient, but I have to wonder how much longer his patience will last; I'm worried about keeping him waiting too long.

At least I won't keep him waiting seven years. ...I think.

Then there's Tanya and Jasper; they've been talking since the night after Tanya and I drank it up until we passed out. Everything seems to be going so well for the two of them; Tanya never has a bad thing to say about him, and the smile that resides upon her face when she gushes details of their conversations is amazing. If I didn't know better I would say she's already fallen in love with him, but I *do* know better, and I know Tanya won't make that mistake.

You mean—Tanya won't make the same mistake YOU did, Bella.

Well, that's the truth; I do know she won't repeat my mistakes, and I'm not worried about her in all actuality. What really bugs me is Jasper. He was in love with *me* for longer than he realized—we talked about that. He proposed marriage to me because of how much he loved me—he said he couldn't *be* without me. He presented me with his grandmother's ring—a treasure of his whole family. He was so goddamn sure about the two of us—so much so, he even had me doubting my decision for a moment. So here's my fucking problem: Am I that goddamn forgettable? Really, we're sitting at a month being broken up—okay, a little over a month—and he's just *fine*? Ready, in fact, to move on with someone else; or at least, that's how it sounds to me.

I'm afraid of him making the same fucking mistakes he made with me. I'm afraid of him hurting Tanya, who has come to mean so very much to me. I'm afraid he's forcing their relationship to go faster than it should, and I'm afraid it's all because of me.

There's so many things running through my head, all the time; all of my thoughts jumble, and I can't make sense of anything. It's taking a toll on me and I'm ready for it to stop; I want the puzzle solved, I want to be with Edward, and I want my life to move forward!

“Bella?” Tanya's voice has become gentle again; this is the tone I'm more accustomed to.

“Sorry. What were you saying?”

Her brow furrows as she studies me, and she reaches a hand across the table to grasp my own. “Where were you?”

I shake my head at her. “Zoning. Just thinking about what you said. You're right, Tanya. I just need to support the two of you.”

She sighs as she asks, “You're not...jealous, are you? Of me and Jasper? You said—”

“I meant what I said. I'm not interested in him like that. Promise.”

“Then what's the deal?”

Reluctantly, I tell her; my fears spill out of me once I get started, and I realize she's the first person I've confided in like *this*, besides Ben—who I haven't seen...professionally...since returning from Forks—since Alice. I've shared details of my past with Angela, Edward, and Esme, but nothing like this. It's relieving. She listens patiently, never interrupting; her face remains impassive throughout—I haven't the slightest clue as to what she's thinking. When I finish, I sort of grimace, and then I just wait for her to say something, *anything*.

“Okay. Let me get this straight. You're not jealous of me, or even of me and Jasper exactly.... Well, shit, you're not really jealous at all. You're...hurt.”

My head whips around to face her as my eyes widen in response of what she's said. "N-no! I'm not hurt! That's ridiculous! I was the one who—"

"That you broke up with him doesn't change the facts, Bella. You were in love with him for seven years. That love wasn't unrequited, in fact, it was returned ten-fold. I was there, remember? I watched him drop to his knees and beg you. I *know* how much he loved you—hell, *loves* you—he always will; he's told me as much. Now you see him moving on...and it hurts. *Bella....* This is why Edward is so hesitant with you, why he's *been* so hesitant with you—bedroom and phone sex not included, but he is a *man*, after all. He wants you to be past what happened with you and Jasper before moving into a relationship with him."

"In the car, the night we got hammered—you said—"

"I know what I said. I still believe that to an extent—people do meet and go right into a relationship, no friendship beforehand necessary, all the time. I guess now...well I guess I never realized how much your relationship with Jasper was still affecting you—"

"*It's not—*"

"So then why are you hurt?"

Huh. Good question.

"I don't...know?"

"Well, I think once you find the answer to that question...everything else will just sort of happen."

~*~

I find it by accident; I'm looking for extra tissues when I get home from Tanya's. I've been crying since I left, unable to stop the tears no matter what I try. The sad thing is—I don't know why I'm crying. The relief I felt after telling Tanya everything diminishes the minute I walk out her door, and the impact of her words hit me full-force. I am hurt, incredibly so; the word I've been unable to find whenever thinking about Jasper, now rings in my head constantly. *I'm hurt. I'm hurt. I'm hurt.* Yet, I don't know why.

Really, I broke up with him; I shouldn't be hurting over that. In fact, I was sure I was over Jasper Whitlock the night Edward Cullen kissed me for the first time. I was *positive*. So, what the fuck? What the fuck is indeed what is running through my head at this moment in time; I'm sitting on my bed, tissue pressing against my mouth to contain a sob which makes no noise, and Jasper's letter in my hand.

It's been in this drawer since the first day I moved in to this apartment; the drawer hasn't been opened in all this time. I can't bring myself to open it—I don't *want* to know what it says. I'm pretty sure it's some form of his expressing his love for me, and after the day I've had, and finally being able to place a word to the emotion I'm feeling, I just don't think I can read it.

I can't put it down, either; my hand just won't do it. The letter is grasped tightly between the same thumb and pointer finger I'd held it in to try and catch a hint of his smell before, and my eyes are glued to his scratchy handwriting.

To Bella, From Jasper

I don't know what to do. I sit there and just stare at his letter in my hands for an eternity it feels like, before finally lowering my hand gently upon my lap. The hand holding the tissue moves toward the letter; in a sort-of-tunnel-vision, I watch a finger slide under the seal. My breathing stutters and I pause, wondering if this is the right thing to do. I almost feel as if I should just burn the damn thing, or throw it out. My hand decides for me, sliding a bit further along the seal; every tiny centimeter is a test to my breathing capabilities and I find myself on the brink of hyperventilating again.

A knock breaks my trance and the letter falls to the floor. I draw in a deep breath—the first since pulling the letter out of the drawer. Shaky legs carry me to the door, and I open it to find a smiling Renee. *Well, hello, stranger.*

Renee hasn't been by since I moved in here either; after the day I'd joined her for dinner—which resulted in her telling me not to bring any drama to her house—I've only talked to her briefly. In Forks I promised myself to keep in better touch with her, but once I arrived back in Jacksonville...well, everything has all happened so fast, it seems. I haven't told her anything that's going on. For some reason, the smile on her face—blinding me—leads me to believe she really doesn't want to hear about my crappy life.

"Bella! Oh, honey! I've got the best news, and I just couldn't wait to tell you!"

I try to smile at her though it most likely looks like a grimace, and motion for her to come through the door. I lead her to my couch, where she immediately slips off her flip-flops and assumes the 'Zen position,' or at least, Renee's version—legs folded underneath her, hands placed upon her knees, fingers pressed together, elbows tucked into her sides. Gotta love Renee. *Wait a sec!*

There's a big-ole-hunk-a-diamond resting on my mother's left ring finger! *Holy shit!* "Is that—"

"Phil proposed!"

"*Bella! Jasper proposed!*"

I know this, already—of course I do. I saw the ring the moment she stepped out of her car; the sun glinted off the diamonds and I just knew. I guess I'm not surprised. Jasper and Alice just celebrated their seventh anniversary, but still. This is the point of my life I've known was coming, but never wanted to have to face. Now, it's staring straight at me; a band of white gold with three emerald-cut diamonds, mocking me as it rests on Alice's tiny finger. It's the ring I would have chosen for myself—if ever given the chance. Alice's smile is heart-breaking; it's stretching across the whole of her face, and she's undeniably happy. Alice is always happy, but today Jasper made her dreams come true; today her smile is more.

I try to speak, but my mouth is completely dry. My tongue darts out to lick my lips, but it's dry as well. I clear my throat, almost choking in the process, and finally muster up enough false happiness to tell her, "Oh my God, Alice! Tell me everything!"

So she does—for the next hour and a half. She tells me how she never expected him to do this, how they've just been so happy lately, but she just didn't see it coming. She tells me how Rosalie already suspected, and was ecstatic when Alice showed up with a ring on her finger. She tells me how she just knew, all along, she and Jasper were meant to be; she says she knew the minute she laid eyes on him. Funny, I remember thinking something along those lines as well—except I was the one wearing the ring.

“You'll be my Maid of Honor, won't you?”

I shake my head and cough. Her question takes me by surprise; I mean, I always figured Alice would have a big wedding—though I always hoped it wouldn't be to Jasper—and I guess I can see why she would ask this of me, but.... “What about Rosalie?”

“What about her?”

“I uh.... Isn't it customary for the groom's sister to take that role?”

Alice laughs. “Well, I guess. But...you're my best friend, Bella. It's always been me and you. Magnets! That's what Charlie says! Of course I want you to stand beside me.”

I lower my head, unable to meet her steady gaze. I don't want to stand beside Alice as she marries Jasper; I can't imagine a greater pain to inflict upon myself. How to turn Alice down though? There isn't a way, and she hasn't a clue of my feelings for her now-fiancé. Hell, he doesn't have a clue, either. I'll be damned if that secret ever gets out. It would be so much easier if they did know—to turn down her request that is. Pain flashes through my heart at what would happen if the truth of how I feel were to come out; I would lose them both. Alice, my best friend and sister—I can't imagine not having her in my life anymore. Jasper, the man I love and one of my dearest friends—the thought of never seeing him again breaks my heart in two.

Ultimately, there is only one thing to do. “I'd love to be your Maid of Honor.” Best to inflict the pain on myself, and keep those I love in the dark about how awful a person I really am.

“Oh! Bella! Thank you!” She wraps her arms around me; I feel her body shaking with sobs and find myself joining her. Hell, I've been crying for three days already—since I slipped and told Jasper about how much I love his smile; I even named the damn thing. Nothing says rejection better than watching the guy you tell something like that to haul ass out of the room, which is exactly what he did.

“Bella?”

I shake my head, bringing my attention back to my mother who is now staring at me with concern on her face. Not before realizing just how cruel Alice's request actually was; she knew how I felt about Jasper, and she asked me to be her Maid of Honor to hurt me—not because she cared so much about me standing beside her.

“Sorry. Zoned out. That's awesome, Mom! When's the date?”

Renee smiles widely. “Not sure, yet. I needed to check your schedule and such...Bella, what's the matter? You are happy for me aren't you? Of course you are, I don't know what I'm saying.”

I nod my head at her. “Of course I am.”

Her smile fades slowly from her face and her brows pinch; after a moment, she tells me, “Okay, look. I know I haven't always been there, and I really know I haven't been there lately. But...I am still your mother, and while I haven't always played that role very well...I am a good listener, Bella. Sometimes I even give good advice—well Phil says I do. Do you think I give good advice? Never mind that—I can't recall ever giving you advice.”

I sigh and tell her, “I just have a lot going on. It's been stressful since I got back.”

She pouts her lips. “Tell me. I know I was kind of a bitch the last time I saw you, but...honey, you can talk to me.”

“That's all I've been doing lately—talking. It's not helping, apparently. So...thanks, but it's alright. I'll get my shit together soon.”

She sighs and shakes her head. “You sound just like Charlie.”

“He raised me.”

The grimace that appears on Renee's face tells me just how cruel that statement is. “I'm sorry—I don't know what's the matter with me. I shouldn't have said that.”

She looks down; her voice is quiet, almost teary sounding when she says, “It's true though. The truth has a way of hurting sometimes.”

“Still—”

“So now's the time for me to try and make it up to you. Talk to me, Bella. Maybe I'll tell you something different, maybe I'll help.”

I stare at her for a long while, contemplating her offer; Renee isn't one I would have thought of to tell any of this to, but she makes a valid point. Her thought processes are different than anyone else I've ever met, and she might just be able to help me. She stares back at me, never speaking, only waiting for my decision. Her silence makes up my mind—if Renee weren't really willing to try and help, she would have jabbered on about something inconsequential. It's harder than it was with Tanya, but it's because I'm going back to the beginning; I'm telling her about meeting Jasper at sixteen all the way up to the conversation with Tanya this morning. I don't miss the small smile that forms on her face when I talk of Edward; Phil knows him, not well, but knows his family—Phil is how I got the job at Cul de Sac, and only because he's friends with the owner—that would be Esme. I'm surprised; Renee doesn't zone out once, or even ask questions, she just sits and listens.

When I don't say anything for a couple of minutes, she takes the hint that I'm done. She asks, “So you're hurt because Jasper seems to be having such an

easy time of moving past you?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s what it sounds like.”

“Okay?”

“You won’t ever know unless you ask him, but I’ll tell you—you probably don’t want to know, Bella. That truth might hurt worse than not knowing. Now, where’s this letter?”

“Why?” My voice is alarmed. Why does Renee need to see the letter? She’s not going to— “You’re not going to read it, are you?”

She laughs lightly and rolls her eyes. “Of course not. The letter wasn’t written to *me*. Where is it?”

I regard her suspiciously for a moment before leading her to my bedroom, where the letter is taking up space on my floor. Renee grasps my hand and squeezes it tightly before moving toward the letter and picking it up. She stares at it for a moment, and then tells me, “This part I can help with. I’m going to teach you what my mother taught me to do when I was learning how to live without your father.”

“But you left—”

“And so did you. I’m not passing judgment on you; I would appreciate if you passed the same favor on to me.”

I reluctantly nod; she’s right. She moves to my closet; her eyes dart to all corners before settling on a box left over from moving. She pulls it out and asks, “Do you have any pictures of Jasper?” Of course I do.

An hour and a half later, the box is pretty much filled. We’ve scoured every inch of my apartment gathering pictures left in albums and some in frames still, every piece of Jasper now residing in this box, save one picture in my hand; we even found a t-shirt of his tucked under the mattress. I didn’t know it was there; if it weren’t for the habit of putting my diary under my mattress, there isn’t any way of knowing how long Jasper’s t-shirt would have stayed there. Renee insisted though; she said if my diary had passages devoted to Jasper then it had to go in the box too. I don’t resist for once—Renee seems very sure about all of this; I do, however, burst into tears at the sight and smell of Jasper’s t-shirt in my hands before Renee quickly grabs it and replaces it with a tissue. She places the letter at the top of the box and glances pointedly at the picture still held in my hand.

“This is goodbye to the past, Bella. Jasper will still be in your life, and you’ll have more pictures of him—you don’t have to throw these away either. But… keeping them lying around is a reminder you don’t need.”

I nod and gently place the picture of Jasper’s smiling face on top of the letter. “Why can’t I read the letter, again?”

“It’s counter-productive. Unless your feelings about Edward and Jasper have changed....” She trails off and stares at me; I quickly shake my head—my feelings for Edward haven’t changed one bit, and I don’t want to be with Jasper again. “Then why would you want to read a letter that most likely confesses feelings you don’t want anymore?”

I sigh and nod as she hands me the packing tape. “This part you have to do. Trust me, honey, you’ll feel better after.”

So I do; all things Jasper Whitlock are now taped shut in a moving box, and without thinking I carry it to my closet and put it on the topmost shelf before pushing as far back into the darkness as it will go. A sigh of relief leaves my body and I realize—Renee is absolutely right this time. It’s an amazing thing to realize your mother *is* actually older and wiser than you, which is something I’d always thought to be false in my case. I turn back to face her; she’s smiling at me.

“Okay.” She nods once. “Now! Call Edward; I think it’s time he met your mother.”

~*~

“She didn’t!”

“Oh, yes, she did! It was the funniest thing! Charlie and I talked about it for years!”

Edward shakes his head, laughing boisterously at Renee’s retelling of yet another clumsy-Bella-moment. She’s been telling him all the embarrassing stories of my childhood she can remember; I’m just about at my wit’s end with her.

“What did you do?”

“Well, I gave her the birds and the bees talk. Of course.” I roll my eyes; the story she’s just retold is one of my tripping and falling off the jungle gym when I was *six*. It’s not my fault Mike Newton broke my fall. It’s also not my fault my teeth collided with his—knocking one clear out of his mouth. Renee said it was “just as cute a first kiss as anything!” and then proceeded to, like she said, to give me the birds and the bee’s speech. Did I mention I was *six*?

“At six?!”

Renee shrugs. “One can never learn early enough and I thought it appropriate—”

“You mean horrifying! Mom! Boys still had *cooties* when you told me that story!”

Edward laughs at me. “Cooties, angel, really?”

“Yes!”

Renee joins in his laughter. “Ah, Bella.... What is little Mikey Newton up to now? I thought for sure you two would have gone out.”

“Wasn’t for lack of trying on his part,” I mutter. Shaking my head, I tell her, “He married Jessica Stanley. They’re running his parents’ store now.”

“Well, it’s probably for the best,” she says as she smiles at Edward. They’ve been getting along famously, and Edward sounded overjoyed when I invited him to join my mother and me for dinner. I think he’s now one of Renee’s favorite people. “Ah, look at the time! I’ve got to get going; you two don’t mind, do you? Phil’s plane is landing in an hour and I promised to pick him up.”

I smile and shake my head as I lean forward to hug my mother. I whisper, “Thank you.”

She pulls back; her smile is beautiful. “I love you, Bella.”

“Love you, too.”

Edward rises from his seat and wraps his arms around my mother to hug her goodbye as well. He whispers something to her I can’t hear, and Renee snuffles and nods; the scene chokes me up—the man I love and my mother. She turns back and smiles one more time before rushing out to her car. I smile as I watch her go, wondering why we aren’t closer and promising myself, and her, to do something about that.

“I like her.”

My smile turns to Edward. “She likes you, too.”

He grins bashfully and ducks his head. I love this adorable, embarrassed side of him; I love everything about him, actually. “What made you finally decide to let me meet your mother? I thought for sure you’d make me wait until we started dating.”

I take a deep breath as I contemplate his question; I didn’t really decide—Renee did. That’s stupid though—I know if I didn’t want them to meet, then I would have made an excuse and begged my way out of the situation. He’s already met my father, and introducing him to Charlie was so easy; I was proud to do it, to share him with my father. With Renee, it’s different. The whole situation is different because we’re wasting time with a friendship when we so clearly want to be together. In fact—

That’s exactly it; the reason I wanted him to meet Renee: I’m sick of waiting, of forcing ourselves to be something less than what we are. I know I want to be with him; it’s my fears holding me back, but just like that...I’m not so afraid anymore. It’s not really that we’re wasting time trying to be friends—we *are* friends—it’s that we’re meant to be friends and *so much more*. I know, with perfect clarity now, this to be the reason the whole friendship thing with Edward has been so hard. I’m sick of pretending.

“Angel?”

My eyes shoot to meet his. There’s no hesitation in my question. “Will you have dinner with me?”

His brow furrows. “Uh...isn’t that what we’re doing?”

I shake my head. “Not tonight. I mean, of course we’re having dinner tonight, but I want you to have dinner with me on a different night.”

His expression turns to one of amusement. “Okay.”

I huff, “Just okay?”

Amusement back to confusion. “Uh...no?”

I roll my eyes. “Do you *want* to have dinner with me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then why aren’t you more excited?”

“Well...wait, what? Are you...Bella are you asking me out on a *date*?”

Oh! “Yes?”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

Edward’s whole face lights up when I answer his question with no hesitation and absolute conviction in my voice. “When?”

“Tomorrow?”

“Six o’clock?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll pick you up?”

“Please.”

He just sits there and smiles at me for a long while before he asks, “So...does this mean...?”

“This means...I'm yours.... Completely.”

31. I'm Yours

Ah! I stayed up all night finishing this one! Crazy weekend - should have gotten this done sooner - sorry everyone! Husband started new job last week - midnight to eight a.m. shift and it's totally fucking with our sleep schedules, therefore writing schedule. Hopefully we get the hang of it soon! Les16 has rec'd me like...3 chapters in a row - which, btw darlin' - love the story, still, swear to God I'll review today after I wake up! (Because I'm about to pass the hell out!) Anyway - you have no idea how awesome a thing that is Les, and all of you out there, if you haven't read her story *The Path We Choose*, get busy with that! Beausoir - my voice of reason! Love ya, darlin', and I hope like hell you know - this chapter probably wouldn't be near done right now if it weren't for you and your awesomeness and your "Shake it off, girl!" Love ya!

To those who are reading the story, sticking with it, and those leaving reviews or alerting - my sincere thanks and gratitude. I love hearing your thoughts, even if they aren't good! If I haven't responded to a review that's been sent out - know that I will, I'm just slacking like hell right now, and even if it's a late reply - I will reply!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Well open up your mind and see like me,
Open up your plans and damn you're free,
Look into your heart and you'll find love, love, love, love.

Listen to the music of the moment people, dance and sing,
We're just one big family,
And it's our God-forsaken right to be loved, loved, loved, loved.

So I won't hesitate no more, no more,
It cannot wait, I'm sure,
There's no need to complicate, I'm sure,
This is our fate, I'm yours.

-I'm Yours, Jason Mraz

"Wear whatever you want. *God*, Bella, you act like you've never been on a date before." Tanya laughs as she says this and I imagine she's rolling her eyes at me on her end of the line.

I sigh and tell her, "You know that's not true.... It's just...this is *Edward*—"

"Which is exactly why you should wear whatever. You know he won't care, hell, he'll probably be more concerned with getting you out of your clothes." She giggles suggestively. I roll my eyes at her this time.

"So not helping."

"Why are you nervous? You guys have done this song and dance already; doesn't matter if it was under the pretense of *friendship* or not."

"I don't know," I mumble while trying to control my breathing. "It's just different."

"Of course it's different. Because you finally pulled your head out of your ass and realized what's in front of you, but Bella, he's still just Edward. That's not different."

"*I know*."

"Good, then, wear whatever you want. I gotta go, Jasper's calling. Talk to you later, have fun!"

I sigh again as I mumble out a goodbye to her. Really, she's right. I don't have any reason to be so nervous. It doesn't change the fact that I am whether I should be or not. I also haven't a clue what to wear—Tanya was no help on the phone; just telling me to wear 'whatever' and laughing at my nervousness. Right now, for the first time in a *very* long time—it feels like—I miss Alice. She would send me a text showing me the perfect outfit from her catalogue of Bella's closet, all while rolling her eyes at the limited selection of skirts and heels I have for her to work with. I would probably spend an hour on the phone with her while she argues the benefits of wearing a thong versus boy-shorts under said outfit, and we would end up laughing. I wonder how much of our conversations she really even enjoyed; if she was just gritting her teeth throughout or if there was still some kind of kinship between us. All evidence points to Alice hating me, and I wonder if she ever really even liked me.

Huffing at my train of thought and mentally berating myself for thinking of such things *today*, I go about looking through my limited selection of clothing. I'm still trying to figure out what to wear when my phone chimes a text message. I'm overcome with a strong sense of *déjà vu* as I reach for the phone, but breathe out a sigh of relief when I see it's not Alice texting me—it's Jasper.

What the hell is he texting me for? Isn't he supposed to be talking to Tanya or possibly phone-sexing her up?

I sigh; doesn't matter why he's texting me, really. Opening my phone, I let out a little giggle at his question:

Do you remember that pair of jeans you wore to that barbeque at the Cullen's?

Of all the things.... Why is he asking me about jeans? Rolling my eyes, I text back:

Yeah...why?

I wait a few minutes for his answer and laugh when it comes through:

Your ass looked hot in those—wear them tonight, doesn't really matter what top you wear, he'll probably be so fucked from looking at your ass in those jeans, he won't give a shit.

A blush spreads over my cheeks; the blush is partially from imagining Edward's eyes staring at my behind and partially from Jasper telling me how hot my butt looked in the jeans he suggested. I decide to ignore the comment and respond with:

I take it Tanya told you?

His response comes faster this time:

Yep. 'Bout time, Bell. You guys have fun tonight—you fucking deserve it.

Tears spring to my eyes reading his message and I decide to leave our conversation right there; any more well wishes from Jasper would just make me cry and I don't want to do that today—especially not today. So I do just what the message says to do: find the jeans I wore to the barbeque and a nice sweater and call it good. I still have two hours until Edward is due to pick me up and I've purposely left getting ready until now because I had a feeling I would be nervous. I was right; I'm crazy nervous and I drop the shampoo bottle three times on my right big toe whilst showering, then burn the back of my neck with not only my flat iron, but also the blow dryer beforehand—who knew a blow dryer and a round brush would burn you? I roll my eyes at myself; I'm becoming a bigger mess by the minute so I stop and just breathe.

It doesn't really make me feel any better, but it saved my neck from any more heat torture.

~*~

Edward takes my breath away when I open the door and I'm glad as hell I listened to Jasper on what to wear—Edward is in jeans and a sweater as well. It's not his clothes that do me in though, but his face; I've never seen Edward look quite this happy.

It's not until I hear his chuckle that I realize I've just been standing there staring at him—blatantly checking him out. I clear my throat to speak; the breathiness of my tone completely surprises me.

“Sorry. Hi.”

He tilts his head toward me and unleashes that sexy fucking grin. “Bella.”

A smile forms on my lips without my permission. “Edward.”

He chuckles. “Are you ready?”

My head is bobbing up and down. “I am.”

“Do you need to grab anything?”

My head is shaking back and forth. “No, I'm good.”

“Let's go.”

My smile turns all toothy and embarrassing as Edward reaches a hand toward me, and I realize that I get to do this whenever I want to now. I can hold his hand no matter what or where or when because he's *mine*. No nice friend-guy, no jealous ex; just me and Edward. Really, I can't be blamed for the wattage of my grin but I'm still embarrassed about it.

Edward grabs my left hand in his right and raises them over my head to loop his arm around my shoulders and I'm giddy. I'm also realizing quickly how much Edward likes this whole no-friendship deal we've got going on. His grin is wider than normal; it looks like it normally does when someone gives him really good news—more teeth, more dimple, more sexy—I love it. He squeezes my right shoulder and we're at his car. He hasn't spoken, or at least, I don't think he has. I've been lost to static since his skin touched mine and if he said anything I didn't hear. I don't think this is the case, however, because Edward's voice always cuts through. Maybe he's just enjoying this—like me.

Just like the gentleman I know Esme raised him to be Edward opens my door for me, and after he's sure all limbs are inside of the vehicle, he flashes me another blindingly sexy fucking grin before closing the door gently. I didn't realize I was leaning toward him until the door closed and my nose sort of ends up smooshing against the glass. Edward, of course, sees this and his eyes pop wide open in horror; I just peel my nose off the window and retreat into the darkness, therefore safety, of Edward's car. He rushes around to the driver's side and even as embarrassed as I am, I still check out the way the sweater hugs his muscular frame.

As soon as he's seated he asks, “You're okay?”

I nod and blush but don't answer. Thankfully Edward gets the hint and doesn't say anything about it instead changing the subject after a few beats. He clears his throat and asks, “I thought we could go downtown. There's a brewery on the river I thought you might like. They have just about everything, but we can go wherever, I just thought—”

“That sounds great.” I try not to let the annoying squeak bother me too much. I can't figure out why I'm so fucking nervous; I mean, this is *Edward*—we've known each other for awhile, and after the initial shock of, well, *him* was over, I haven't found myself nervous around him, not really. Tonight I am though, and if I'm right—judging by the way he's gripping that steering wheel and chewing on his bottom lip—he's nervous too.

What I wouldn't give to chew on that bottom lip...

The thought of chewing on his lip is still running through my head as we pull to a stop light and I can't really help myself anymore. I'm stretching against my seat belt and my hands are flying to his face and my lips are on his before I realize what I've done. Edward doesn't seem to mind though, and before I know it we're making out at a stop light like two fucking teenagers. I can't be bothered to even be remotely upset—Edward's lips are the star of all my dreams and have been for some time. So to have them against mine, well, I'm fucking ecstatic right now.

A horn honks and I shoot my head to the dickhead behind us, my middle fingers rising on both hands to show the inconsiderate driver just how unwelcome his interruption is. The driver just arches his brow and lays on to his horn again and I'm wondering how unladylike it would be to go and rip the fucking thing out from under his hood and shove it up his ass when Edward's chuckle distracts me.

"Sit back down, angel. We have plenty of time for that." He shoots me a wink and a downright-delicious grin and we're rolling through the stop light. I huff and cross my arms as my bottom lip juts out in my show of just how un-childlike I am while trying to take my mind off of Edward's lips. It's harder than it looks.

I'm only able to carry on the pouting for a few more minutes though; Edward's hand lands on my left knee and I jerk my head down to stare at it. The smile on my lips is joyous and I'm still trying to grasp the concept of being able to touch and be touched by Edward whenever we want—without the feelings of guilt afterward for doing something that would be considered more than friendly. My own hand reaches for his and just like that—we're holding hands. Like a couple. Like a *real* couple. I might giggle.

He squeezes my hand and I jerk my head up to meet his eyes—I've just been staring at our joined hands and smiling. He motions his head behind him and I turn to see the coolest brewery ever. It is three stories tall, all wooden, lit up like a sailor on leave, and just...*fun looking*. There's a deck visible from where we're parked, actually scratch that, there's *three* decks—one for each story of the establishment. Tables are scattered all over the decks with couples and college kids and families sitting at most all of them. You can see the same thing inside the brewery—there's huge bay windows just...*lining* all three stories.

"Wow."

"You like it?"

"Uh...yeah. Like might be an understatement. I didn't even know about this place."

Edward chuckles. "That's because you have an unhealthy obsession with eating leftovers."

I jerk my head to him and roll my eyes. "It's called being frugal, Edward."

His eyes crinkle as his smile widens. "I know, angel. Let's go eat, I'm fucking starving."

I make to open my door, but Edward grabs hold of my arm to gain my attention again. When I turn my head to look at him, the grin on his face almost makes me hyperventilate—it's wide and beautiful with just the right amount of deviousness. He arches his eyebrows and when he speaks his pleasure is evident in his voice. "Date, remember?" I nod my head and furrow my brows at him. "Stay—I get to open your door tonight."

I roll my eyes at him but smile despite myself and Edward shakes his head and chuckles as he walks around to my side to help me out. He links our hands and pulls them over my head again, draping his arm over me and pulling me close to his side. My grin is ridiculous; his is no better. My body tucks perfectly against his and there isn't any awkward stumbling; we move perfectly with one another and I'm reminded of the night at Angela's house—our bodies were completely in sync with one another that night as well. The only way Edward or I stumble with each other is through words and me, well as Charlie loves to say, getting my shit together—I stumbled like hell trying to do that.

Edward pulls open the doors with his free hand and we're immediately greeted by the hostess. I'm of the firm belief it's because of Edward—she's sending him a flirtatious grin and batting her eyelashes. She's quite pretty; tall, blonde, tan and busty, and I might have been jealous except she looks as if she's having a seizure—someone really needs to teach her how to bat her eyelashes properly. She doesn't so much as look my direction even though, you know, Edward's arm is draped around me, and leads us to an outside patio table. The view is incredible; the Jacksonville skyline is all lit up and the buildings reflect beautifully in the water. The only thing that might make this better is if the hostess would go away—she asks *Edward* if she can get him anything to drink.

Door-whores don't take drink orders, do they?

Her annoying, deep, scratchy voice answers me—she sounds like she's smoked way too many cigarettes in her short lifetime. "No, we usually don't. I just thought—" I'm not listening past that because my cheeks are flaming bright red and my eyes are actually starting to tear up, and I realize I just said that out loud. I just called this nice hostess lady—well, she might be nice if she weren't eye-fucking my goddamn date—a door-whore. It's not even something I think about, but would never say out loud. A terrible nickname I picked up in college from Alice because she always had this exact same problem with them when she and Jasper would go out—the hostesses would undoubtedly flirt and fawn all over him. I would snicker about it when she would tell me stories and before I knew it I was referring to all hostesses as door-whores, and now I've just said it to this girl's face.

How fucking embarrassing!

Edward's voice cuts through my inner bashing. *Thank God*. "Uh...think we'll just have a pitcher of beer. Bella? What kind do you want?"

The goddamn hostess is *still* standing at our table, only now she's glaring at me, which, I would be too if I was just called a door-whore. "Um...I don't care?"

His grin is infectious and directed at me and me alone. I can't help grinning back and he asks, "Foreign or domestic?"

I bite my lip and tell him, "You pick."

"Let's do something light—since I'm feeding you too. Amstel Light?"

I nod thinking he's asking me, but apparently I'm not the only one who thinks this. *She's still here?* "Oh, yes, we have that."

He chuckles. "I hope so, seeing as it's on the menu."

She giggles and covers her mouth. I roll my eyes at her as she continues to eye-fuck my boyfriend. "Now?"

Her giggles stop abruptly and she turns a glare to me before stalking off. I smirk at her departure as Edward tells me, "If she spits in my beer, I'm gonna be pissed at you. I need that beer."

I scoff, "Please! She'll send her number out on your coaster and spit in mine, which is why I'm asking the waiter for a new one as soon as they get here. I wasn't just gonna sit there as she continued to flirt with my boyfriend. You should know better."

I shake my head at him and watch as his grin grows. "Boyfriend?"

Oh, shit! I said that out loud too! Fuck!

"Oh, well, uh...I just...I don't want to assume—"

"What can I get you two to drink tonight?" *Thank you, nice waitress lady! I'll name my first-born after you for saving me from having to answer that!*

"Oh, the hostess took mine and my girlfriend's drink order. I haven't had a chance to look at the menu yet."

Our waitress—who is absolutely adorable with pink, fluffy hair and piercings all over her face—smiles and says, "Ah, yes. That was very nice of her. I'll just go check on that while you two take a look-see at the menu." With a wink and grin at me she turns on her heel and goes to check on our drinks. I didn't even catch her name.

I nod toward her departing figure. "I like her."

"Me too, *girlfriend*."

I squirm in my seat; I know he's teasing me but I also know he's baiting me—he wants me to say it. I try to deflect. "Why didn't she seat us a table we can sit beside each other?"

"Because there aren't any out here, and I didn't want to sit inside. I thought you'd like it better out here but if you want—"

Ah, fuck it. "No, I like it out here. *Boyfriend*."

His grin turns into that sexy, crooked smirk and all the blood rushes to my lady bits. *I'm so going home with him tonight, hope he realizes that.* "So, uh... what's good here?"

"A lot of things, actually." He's not even looking at his menu—he's actually staring at my tits, and not like glancing down and then away, but straight up ogling them and licking his lips. "There are a couple of things right in front of me that I'd love to taste. In fact—"

"Alright! Here's your pitcher of Amstel Light. You'll have to forgive me, I actually sent our nice door-whore back to her podium—it's a hard job, ya know." Our waitress winks at me again, and I chuckle at her use of my slip. I wonder where she heard it... "My name's Nessie, and I'll be your server tonight. Did you guys get a chance to look at the menu?"

I might be taking back that whole naming my first-born after her, but I totally dig this waitress.

We place our orders and it's a damn good thing because my stomach is actually starting to ache from hunger and it won't be long before it starts gurgling as well, and how fucking embarrassing would that be?

"So I got an interesting text earlier."

I raise my eyebrows and smile at Edward. "Really?"

"Yeah, well for one...I don't give a shit what you wear, angel. But Tanya thought you were adorable trying to figure it out." He chuckles as my cheeks flame red again. *Damn you, Tanya!* "Why didn't you call Angela? She wouldn't have given you the shit Tanya did, you know that."

"Because I love your sister to death and we would have ended up on the phone for way longer than was necessary."

"Good point."

"So what was so interesting about Tanya's text?"

"Oh! Uh...it wasn't from Tanya, actually. It was from Jasper."

My eyes fly wide open and my mouth gapes at Edward. "What the fuck? How did he even—"

"Tanya gave it to him. Would you like to read it?"

I shake my head, trying to focus my fuzzy brain. "Uh..."

"It's not bad, angel. Well, it *could* be bad but.... Here, just read it."

He passes his phone across the table to me; it's already open to Jasper's text. I take a deep breath and look.

Don't fuck with her. She loves you and so help me God, I will fucking murder you if you ever hurt her. She's an amazing woman and you're a lucky motherfucker, but don't think you can ever jerk her around. Just—take care of her, okay?

I pass the phone back to him in a daze. Jasper is being so accepting of all of this; why is he having such an easier time with it than I did? I really feel ready to start a relationship with Edward, more than ready actually, it's just mind-boggling—this 180 Jasper has pulled.

"I texted him back. Gave him the same warning about Tanya. I want you to know that because I don't want that shit to come back and bite me in the ass one day."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't want you to become jealous, thinking I was jealous, and then we have some big blow-out. I just worry about her and well, Jasper doesn't have the best track record. That's all."

"Doesn't have anything to do with him being my ex?"

"Maybe a little."

I nod and look down. Quietly, I ask, "Can we...not talk about Jasper or Tanya again tonight? It's our first date."

He grins at me and says, "Last thing. He told me he'd kick my ass if I didn't tell you how good your ass looked in those jeans. So...."

I blush again but the smile on my face is happy. "When did you get a chance to check out my ass anyway? You've had me tucked into your side since we left my apartment."

"Complaining?"

"Hell no."

"Good. Because I like having you beside me like that—get used to it."

My smile was starting to become ridiculous. "I think I could do that—get used to it, I mean."

His teeth scrape his lower lip and the left side began to sag lower as the right caught on the teeth; he looks down and I swear he blushes. He glances up at me from under his eyelashes and says, "I think I could get used to anything so long as it involved you."

It's my turn to bite my lip. "Well, so long as you don't think you're getting me into one of those stupid outfits that the big-breasted plastic figurines you keep hidden in your guest room wear...I think I could get used to just about anything with you, too."

He rolls his eyes at me. "You know, you aren't gonna talk so much shit about those figures once you actually watch the various anime they come from."

I laugh as I tell him, "Oh, yes I will. You just wait."

"Mhm. We'll see."

"Here's your order, guys! Sorry it took so long," Nessie says as she sets our delicious looking meals down in front of us. We smile and thank her, both of us digging in without waiting on the other—he must be as hungry as I am.

"This is really fucking good," I say even though my mouth is *full* of fucking food. I can't help it; I didn't eat all day because of how nervous I was about our date and now I'm freaking starving.

Edward seems amused at my lack of table manners and makes it a point to arch an eyebrow at me as he finishes his bite before speaking. I roll my eyes at him again. "I'm glad you like it. This is one of the best places to get good fish, except sushi. Do you even like sushi?"

Which just reminds me how much of myself Edward doesn't know. I want to remedy that shit right away, so I launch into a long-winded list of my likes and dislikes when it comes to food. Of course I love fish, and I do love sushi, but how could I not anyway? I was raised by Charlie Swan, fisher extraordinaire—it's like in my blood or something. I tell Edward this after I've finished with the dos and don'ts list and he chuckles.

"Damn. Should have told them to make you gut your own fish. I'd like to see that one day."

I roll my eyes, again, and tell him, "Well, you will. Charlie is gonna make you go fish—I hope you know that."

His grin softens. "You're gonna take me back to Forks one day?"

I blush because, I didn't even think of what I was saying. I keep forgetting we're on our *first date*, though I don't know why—as nervous as I've been about it. I just made a reference to the fact that I already feel as if we're in a long-term relationship, which we are—I think, but it's only just begun. I'm already thinking about taking Edward back West with me for family vacations, and well, I threatened (myself, anyway) to name our first-born after the waitress. I even called him my boyfriend without really thinking about it. It all just seems like such a...*natural* thing to do when it comes to Edward. *Fuck it*. I'm telling him just that.

"It doesn't freak you out when I talk about the future like that, does it?"

"No."

"Or that I just called you my boyfriend with no prior discussion?"

He chuckles as he says, “No, of course not.”

“Does it bother you that I silently promised myself to name our first-born after our waitress because she saved me from answering the boyfriend question and well she’s really kind of fabulous anyway because she called the hostess a door-whore after I called her a door-whore and oh God—you probably think that’s way trashy of me to call someone that, but I promise I never said that shit out loud before and I swear to you that sometimes my goddamn filter is just like broken and I don’t even have a say over what comes out of my mouth because I don’t even really know that I’m saying it and I’m really fucking nervous because you’re sitting there all pretty and I’m just me and I just...okay. I’m done.”

Jesus, Bella. Ramble much?

I just sit there and look at him expectantly but his eyes are glazed over and I’m pretty sure I lost him about halfway through whatever-the-fuck I just said. “Edward?”

He shakes his head a little and smirks at me. “I’m not naming our first-born Nessie. I’m sorry.”

“Seriously?” Really, all that shit I just said—the fact I mentioned having babies with him period—and he chooses to say he won’t name our first-born Nessie?

“I just don’t really care for that name, Bella. Nessa...maybe—we could probably work with that. But what if it’s a boy?”

“Edward—”

“I don’t want to name him after me, most definitely not. Did you want to name him after your dad? What’s Charlie’s middle name?”

“Edward! Are you fucking serious with—”

“What about Eric? I always liked that name.”

I sigh; he wants me to play along. “No.”

He grins again, delighted I’m willing. “Why?”

“There was an Eric in high school who was kinda creepy and went out with the hugest skank in town.”

“What’s her name, maybe we can—”

“If I have a son, I want to name him Paul.”

Edward purses his lips and furrows his brows as he brings his right hand up to stroke his jaw line. *Dick*. Now I want to lick him there, or at least be that hand. “Did you even really think about it, or did you just choose a random guy name?”

“I just chose a random guy name. Don’t we have a few more years before we need to pick out our kid’s names?”

His crooked grin forms on his face; my blood rushes south again at the sight. “You know...you’re right. Though to be honest, angel, I would like for us to start around the same time Angela and Ben decide to—that way our kids can grow up together. I mean, shit...” He takes a deep breath and shakes his head. “I know we were just kind of playing, but that last thing I said is something I really want. With you, I mean, and only if you want it too. But don’t answer that shit right now, I just wanted you to know, well, after it slipped out I wanted you to know.”

I grin at him and reach my hand across the table to grasp his. “We’ll talk about it maybe on our third date. Okay?”

His laugh is loud and happy, and couples and families and kids are turning their heads to watch our table. I blush but don’t really care, I’m happy I made him feel better. Nessie comes back then with our ticket and tells us, “Just so you guys know...my name is Vanessa. Damn cousins nicknamed me Nessie when I was little and it stuck. So, I find it perfectly acceptable for you to use that or Nessa.”

We both gape at her and she laughs at our expressions. She raises her finger to her ear. “Perfect damn hearing—boyfriend says it’s from all the metal.”

I burst into laughter and so does Edward. We thank her and Edward pays our tab, making sure to tip her extra well and we’re out the door—completely ignoring the scathing glare from the door-whore on the way out.

Once we’re back at the car I lean my back against it, making it impossible for Edward to open the door. He grins at me and puts his hands on my hips as he steps closer, almost flush with my body. His nose touches mine and I lean forward to kiss him; he, however, speaks before I can. “You feel like going to see a movie? I’m really not ready to just take you home and not see you anymore tonight.”

I frown at him. *He obviously didn’t get the memo stating that I’m sleeping in his big, plush, black-sheeted, Edward-smelling bed with him tonight. Preferably naked.* “Uh—no. I don’t want to go see a movie.”

It’s his turn to frown. “Are you tired? I guess I can take you home, but can I come in for a little—”

I cut him off with my lips, pushing my top lip between his and taking his bottom lip between mine. He doesn’t seem to mind this one bit; he just squeezes my hips tight and closes the small gap left between our bodies. My hands fly to his jaw—they’ve wanted to touch him here all night—and tilt his head to the side before slipping my tongue between into his mouth. Edward groans but obliges me, tangling his tongue with my own and opening his mouth even wider.

When we pull apart—and only because the need to breathe became too great—I tell him, “Don’t argue with me, okay?”

He’s panting from our kisses but has enough sense to not know what the hell I’m talking about. “Huh?”

I smile. “You are gonna strap me in your car, drive me to your condo, and take full advantage of your girlfriend tonight. I’m done waiting, Edward.”

His eyes widen and his breathing stutters. “Angel...it’s only our first—”

“And we already know what our first daughter will be named. Now, let’s get to practicing.”

He huffs a breath and stares at me for a long time. Finally, he steps back from me and pulls me away from the door, opening it and helping me inside before rounding to enter himself.

He starts the car but before putting it in gear, he asks, “You’re sure?”

I grab his hand and squeeze. “You know I love you, right?”

He nods while turning his head to look into my eyes. “I love you, too.”

“Then don’t ask me that again tonight.”

He chuckles breathlessly before reaching for the gear shift and backing out of the spot. Right as he puts the car into drive he mumbles, “Fine. But any shit from Ben will be dealt with by you.”

Bwah! Yes I did cockblock all you hooches! See ya on Friday!

32. The Warmest Part of the Winter

I'm not saying shit! You guys have waited...31 chapters for this! Love you all!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Tell me you love me, but don't say it with words,
I wanna feel your body around me,
And twenty years of push and pull have left you searchin' for a name,
But maybe I have come here to die,
To watch the life flow out of my body,
Take apart the ugly days and you will never see the sun.

I had a name, I let it leave me,
I had a plan to settle you in,
I am a man, I am amazing,
Come out, come out,
And let me come in.

-The Warmest Part of the Winter, Voxtro

Much to my disappointment, Edward keeps his hands to himself for the rest of the drive to his condo. I pout pretty much the whole way. Every time I chance a glance at him it's to find a smirk, firmly in place, on his face. He knows exactly what he's doing—and I want to slap him for it.

He smoothly pulls his car into his parking spot and I remind myself to stay seated—to not reach for the door. My patience is rewarded as his hand appears in front of me; I'm grasping it, and smiling like a lunatic as he pulls me along to the elevator connected the parking garage. His thumb is rubbing small, distracting circles on the back of my hand, and I want nothing more than to turn my head and lick him or bite him or kiss him—anything. The damn elevator is taking forever to get here—it feels like we've been waiting for five hours on it—and I'm just about at my wit's end with this man. Does he not know how irresistible he is? *Fuck it.* I turn my head to just go ahead and do something to him; so long as my lips can touch him I'll be happy, but, unfortunately, the elevator dings and opens in front of us.

I sigh, and mumble, "Fucking elevators."

Edward chuckles as he tells me, "This elevator didn't do anything to you. Why are you cursing it?"

"Because—" I don't get to finish telling him how the elevator is totally cock-blocking me because he whips me around, so that my back is pushed firmly against the wall. His lips find mine as his hands plant themselves on my hips. My eyes slam shut and I moan as his grip tightens, keeping my hips back and away from his. I run my hands over his, trying to get him to move them further back—I want them on my ass, but he won't budge. I groan in protest, but it's weak and he knows it; he just chuckles into my mouth as he continues his assault.

I finally give up and my hands inch upward, slowly, over his muscular forearms and biceps. I stop at his shoulders, tracing my fingers over the lines of muscle, and down—over his defined pecs, which are visibly straining against his sweater. My fingers find his nipples and I start to draw circles around them, which makes Edward groan. Loudly. I smile against his lips and let my tongue come out to play; I push it inside of his mouth, and he accepts it eagerly. His hands move up from my hips, slipping under my sweater and skimming the skin of my stomach. They stop at my breasts, and Edward cups them both lightly before squeezing—I moan again.

I hear a bell of some sort which confuses me, but it's the incessant clearing of a throat that finally brings me out of my lust-induced stupor. I jerk my head back from Edward, hitting it soundly against the wall of the elevator, and I groan at the pain. Edward just stares at me, his eyes as dark as night, and pants as he tries to calm his breathing. His brow furrows and his lips pout, and my head is moving forward again—the pain forgotten—to kiss him again when the throat clears, once more. My head jerks to the right, and I find a man standing there, eyes narrowed and lips pursed. I shoot him the dirtiest glare I can muster, and Edward finally turns his head to see what I'm scowling at.

His hands drop from me immediate; I promptly pout. Edward clears his throat and says, "Please excuse us, Caius. We were just on our way to my condo."

The man, whose name is apparently Caius, smirks at the two of us. "So you're not going down?"

Edward sends the man a smirk of his own. "Oh, I don't know about that." My jaw drops. "But, right now, no. We'll just be on our way."

I must be dreaming; Edward's hand lands on my butt and he squeezes it before pushing me forward and out of the elevator. I hear the man chuckle as we pass him and I shake my head—unsure of what voodoo Edward has used on me. We make it to his door, and he pulls me to place my back against it. One hand digs into his pocket and one hand comes up to grasp my skin—right at the junction between my neck and shoulder—his thumb caresses my jaw. He leans forward and presses a chaste kiss against my lips, but pulls back quickly; I pout again.

Edward is smiling at me—the crooked, sexy one—as he tells me, "Sorry about that. I was a little out of it."

I shake my head. "I'm not sorry. Well, I am, but only because that jerk interrupted us."

He chuckles at me. "Are you an exhibitionist, angel? Because we were well on our way to exhibiting a lot to the public."

"We weren't in public. We were in an elevator—with four walls around us. That's pretty private, if you ask me."

"Are you forgetting the fact that I was caught with two handfuls of your tits by my neighbor? Who happens to work with my Dad at the hospital, by the way."

My jaw drops again, and I breathe out, “Fuuuuuck.”

He shakes his head at me as he grins. “Don’t worry, angel. My Dad has been referencing this for awhile now—you know, offering me condoms and such. Like I’m not thirty years old and haven’t had sex before.... Though...my Mom and him—most likely Ben and Angela, too—will probably know about this in approximately five minutes or less. So we should probably turn our phones off.”

With wide eyes—that don’t stray from Edward’s smirking face—I scramble my right hand to my back pocket, pulling my cell phone out and promptly turning it off. Edward chuckles at me and shakes his head before lowering his lips to mine again. I hear the key slide into the lock; his left hand comes to rest on the small of my back as the right pushes the door open. Without pulling his lips away, he pushes me through the door and slams it shut. His left hand joins his right—both rest on the small of my back, and he pulls me against him completely.

I groan when I’m flush with his body; even through both of our sweaters I can feel his muscles—my nipples tighten. His hands roam upward and under my sweater again. The feel of his skin against mine is electric, and his fingers burn a trail to my bra. I can feel the cool, air-conditioned air on my back as my sweater gets pulled further up, and I shiver. His fingers—smooth and sure—unclasp my bra, and as it loosens from my body the material rubs against my nipples. My eyes roll into my head—it feels fucking amazing.

“Cold, angel?” I shake my head at his question—and because he pulled his lips from mine to ask it. My lips try to find his again, but I can’t open my eyes because his hands have moved from my back; they’re cupping my now-bare breasts. I moan again at the feel of his skin on mine, and—just like that—my shirt and bra are over my head and on the floor.

“Fuck—you’re beautiful,” Edward whispers; his tone is hushed and full of wonder. “I can’t believe you’re mine.”

A smile graces my lips, and I open my eyes to look into his. Edward’s gaze roams between my bare breasts; his eyes are dark and hungry. With just his fingertips he grazes the sides of my breasts, and then under, and finally over my nipples—which are hard as rocks now. My eyes flutter closed again; the sensation is too much and not enough, and I reach my hands up to cover his. His breath catches when I move his hands to cup me, but he follows my instruction anyway, and his thumbs start their incessant flicking over my nipples.

“Edward,” I whisper. His head shoots up to look at my face; his cheeks are flushed, his brow is pinched, and his lips are forming the most adorable pout ever. I grin at him, and say, “I love you.”

His breath leaves him in one fell swoop as his lips form an ‘o,’ and he tells me, “I love you, too.”

My hands grasp the hem of his sweater and I tug it upward. He makes a sound of disgruntlement because, I’m sure, to actually take his sweater off, he’ll have to stop touching me—he’s glaring at his hands. He moves them anyway and I stand on my tip-toes to pull it off of his tall frame. My nipples graze his chest while I’m doing this, and we both moan. His hands get tangled in the sweater because he reaches for me as soon as our skin comes into contact with the others’, and I become trapped—by Edward’s arms *and* his sweater. I don’t mind though; my hands reach for his head, pulling him back to me. We both breathe a sigh when our lips touch, and I feel his hands struggle to get his sweater the rest of the way off.

Edward finally, *finally*, gets his hands untangled, and the sweater makes a dull thud as it hits the ground, but I don’t really notice because his hands touch my bare skin again. His fingertips trace lines up and down my back, over and over, driving me crazy. He keeps me too preoccupied with his lips for me to complain about his light touch, and his tongue slips into my mouth; I welcome it, completely. He tastes sweet and salty, and I tangle my tongue with his; I’m breathing through my nose and so is Edward—every breath he takes dances along my skin, and I’m overwhelmed by him.

Suddenly, his fingers stop touching me, but before I can protest, he grabs hold of my bottom and squeezes. I pant into his mouth—he’s pushing me against him, and I can feel his hardness on my stomach. Edward moves his legs to a wider stance and bends his knees; his new position puts his sex center with mine. I moan at the feel, and both of us are moving—pushing and pulling the other closer, rubbing ourselves against one another. He grabs tighter on my ass and again—just like that—I’m lifted into the air, and my legs wrap around his waist. Our lips pull away from each other as my arms link around his neck, and I watch as my hands play with his hair—it’s so soft.

“You’re sorta beautiful,” I whisper to him.

His lips pull into a smile. “I’m gonna take that as a compliment.”

“You most definitely should.”

Then we’re moving; my head pulls to the side, and I rest it on his shoulder. My arms pull tighter and I just hug myself to him, eyes closed, smile in place, and body content just to be against him. I hear a door open and I just know we’re in his bedroom now. He lays me gently down onto the bed, and right after, he lays his body on top of mine. His left hand holds his weight as his right reaches to stroke my face tenderly. With the lightest of touches, he grazes my nose, my eyelids, my lips, my cheeks, and he finally rests his hand there—cupping my cheek.

“Bella,” he whispers, and my eyes automatically open for him. The most beautiful smile ever is present on his lips as he tells me, “I don’t remember what my life was like before you were in it.”

I smile in response, and move my hands to cup his face. He tells me, “You *are* my life now.” Then he lowers his lips to mine, cutting off any and all response to his declaration. My heart is thudding hard and fast in my chest, and I want to cry and scream and yell while I tell him the same thing, but mostly, I just want to spend forever with him—just like we are right now. Wrapped completely up in the other, and never, ever move from this place. He tilts his head to the side, and swipes his tongue over my bottom lip before pulling his lips away from me—I’m too lost in sensation to protest their absence. They don’t leave me, not really; he begins placing small, fast, chaste kisses along the skin of my cheek as he makes his way to my ear.

Once there, he tells me, “And now I’m gonna make you mine.”

My jeans are unbuttoned, and he’s pushing them down my hips; I didn’t even know his hand had been working at them—I was too lost in what he was doing to me up top. I begin to pant again as his lips move down the column of my neck and further; down past my collarbones, and to my breasts. I’m trapped by my jeans—he hasn’t pushed them past my knees because he pauses at my breasts, and his hands come up to join his mouth; he’s squeezing and kneading

them, and his mouth is open around my right nipple as he sucks and licks and bites at it. My panting is becoming ridiculous—I sound like an overheated dog—and then the moaning starts. Really, it can't be helped; Edward's mouth is doing magical things to my body, and he isn't showing signs of stopping any time soon. He pulls his mouth away and blows on my nipple, flicking it with his thumb again before moving his mouth over to the other nipple, and starting up his sweet torture again.

My legs move; I can't take the restriction of my jeans anymore, and I'm pushing them down and off of me. They land on my left foot, but I kick it outwards, and the jeans go flying to the floor. It's then I notice, not only has Edward pulled my jeans down—my panties must have been bundled up inside of them because I'm stark naked under Edward now. I can't say I mind, but he's *way* too overdressed—his jeans are still up all the way and buttoned. My hands move swiftly to his waist, and with little to no trouble at all, his jeans are unbuttoned and I'm working the zipper down as he continues to suck on my nipple. His teeth graze it and he bites down; I moan, and have to stop what I'm doing to his jeans because his teeth on my nipple suddenly demand my full attention.

"Need some help down there?" Why is his mouth not on my breast anymore? He obviously didn't get the memo stating his mouth is supposed to be on me constantly; I pull my bottom lip into a pout. He chuckles at me.

"Why'd you stop?" My voice is breathless.

"To ask if you needed help."

"Uh—no. Start sucking again."

He chuckles but obliges me, and the breath that leaves his mouth with each small laugh tickles my skin, making it pucker. He closes his mouth around my nipple, and my eyes slam shut as they roll back into my head. My hands come alive again; they finish with his zipper, and then grasp the top of his jeans to push them down. His cock brushes against my leg, and I can literally feel the breeze hit my center—I'm so fucking wet for him. I pant as he continues his assault on my breasts with his mouth and tongue, but have the presence of mind to know he's almost naked; my right hand grabs hold of him—he groans.

"Fuck, Bella," he pants as I start stroking up and down his shaft. His voice is deep and husky—he sounds like sex. "That feels so fucking good."

I hum in response, and arch my back, pushing my breasts further into his hands. He pulls away from me, and my eyes pop open to watch him struggle to get the jeans unhooked from his feet. I catch my first glimpse of Edward completely naked; he's all taut muscle, and long, hard shaft—the sight makes my mouth go dry as it droops open, and my breaths speed faster. He finally gets his feet unhooked and then he's against me, cutting my off my peep-show. I don't mind, not really; his cock nestles between my lips and he grinds against me, hitting my clit dead-on.

"Shit. Shit, Edward, *fuck*."

"I know."

My head turns back and forth on the pillow, and my hips push against his. I'm moaning loudly as Edward pushes against me again and again—never stopping. He feels perfect against me, but what I really want, and have for some time, is to taste him. So I push against his shoulders, and he lifts up immediately.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Lay back."

"What? Why?"

"Just do it."

So he does; I pop up from lying down to spread his legs wider as I rest on my knees. I take a moment to look at him—and all of his gorgeous, heartbreaking perfection—before I grin, and lower my mouth to swipe the length of his dick with my tongue. He jerks up suddenly, hips lifting off the bed completely, and breathlessly says, "Fuck, Bella! Warn a guy!"

I chuckle at him, and tell him, "I'm gonna go down on you now. There's your warning."

Then I lower my head completely; my lips close on his shaft as I push my head down further and further. My hand grabs the base and I pump him once while my mouth is as far down as it will go before loosening my grasp slightly and raising my head back up, my tongue runs along his length from inside of my mouth. Edward is letting out a steady stream of curse words; I'm almost positive he's enjoying this. I pull my head off of him completely, and circle my tongue around the tip; lapping up the pre-cum I find there, I run my tongue back down one side of his dick, back up, down the other side, and then back up again before I close my mouth around him once more. I start a rhythm; up and down and up and down, and hand grasping the base tightly and hand grasping the base gently, and tongue up and down the sides, and mouth around him again and all the way down and all the way up, and pumping him and stroking him, and licking and sucking, and teeth grazing, and gentle nips on the head, and harder nips underneath and then *oh!*

Edward's hand grabs my hair gently, and he breathlessly stutters, "Gonna...fuck...I'm...shit...Bella..." I take this as a sign he's going to come, and so I push my head down as far as I can go and start sucking with all I have. I feel him spill into my throat and even if I hadn't felt it, I would have known he was coming—Edward is panting so loud, it sounds as if he's run a race, and he's repeating the same words over and over again. "Fuck! Fuck! Shit! Fuck! Fuck! Bella! Fuck! Fuck! Shit!"

I smile as I pull away, licking the remnants of him off of my lips. I straighten my back and just sit there, looking down on Edward. He's more beautiful right now than I've ever seen him before; lips parted, breathless, eyes clenched shut, jaw tight, sweaty and shiny, hands grabbing his bedspread with the strength of a thousand men, which makes his muscles all strain and look downright lick-worthy. My smile widens as I realize: I did this to him. This gorgeous man is in this condition, he's looking this *thoroughly* sated, he's looking more beautiful than I've ever seen him—more beautiful than, I hope, *anyone* has ever seen him—because of me.

I've never felt more lucky than I do at this moment in time.

“Fuck, angel. I don’t even want to know where you learned that shit, but you gotta do it again.”

“Right now?”

“Hell no. Right now I want to be inside of you.”

“Think you’ll need a few minutes—little Edward looks a little spent.”

“*Little?*”

“Just sayin’.”

Edward growls as he lifts himself from the bed, and throws me back against the pillows. I giggle; he shakes his head and tells me, “I’d say you should pay for that comment.”

I bat my eyelashes at him and pout. “I’m not forgiven for it?”

“What have you done to earn forgiveness?”

“I just gave you awesome head, for one.”

“Hmm. I’ll take that under advisement.”

“Really?”

“Mhm. Right now, I think you’re owed a little something for your efforts.”

“What’s that?”

He grins crookedly at me, but doesn’t say anything. I tilt my head to the side, wondering what he’s going on about when I feel his finger slip between my folds. I gasp and moan at the same time, which, I’m sure sounds ridiculous, but I can’t be bothered to worry about it because his finger finds my clit and starts rubbing circles around it. My eyes roll back again and the panting and the gasping and the moaning become louder and harsher and wilder. My head is thrashing around on the pillow, and it’s my turn to grasp the sheets between my fists. I’m so wet down there; he’s having no problem finding moisture to aid in his circle-making-around-my-clit. His tongue joins his fingers and my eyes fly open. I lift my head to look down at him; he’s planted between my lips—his lips are suctioned around my clit and he buries two fingers inside my hole—but his eyes are wide open and focused on my face. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen in my life—Edward with his shock of bronze hair and his emerald green eyes between my legs.

My hands grasp the sheets tighter as he starts to suck, and his fingers begin a steady pumping in and out of me. He’s relentless with his mouth and I’m seeing stars before my eyes. Abruptly he pulls his mouth away; I groan in protest, but just as fast, it’s back on me. This time, only the tip of his tongue touches me as he circles it around and up and down and back and forth. He flattens it and presses it firmly against the spot that makes me go crazy, and then his lips close around me again, sucking me into him. I’m breathless and wanting, and what I want right now is for Edward to stop what he’s doing and bury his shaft inside of me but he doesn’t stop. I feel his grin around my clit as he curls the two fingers that are inside and—just like that—I go over the edge. I’m screaming as well now, though they are quieter than normal because I’m out of breath and spent.

He kisses my clit one more time before dragging his lips back up my body. My chest is rising and falling in such rapid succession—he stops there and places a kiss, right over my heart.

He tells me, “You do this to me, too. You know that, don’t you?”

Breathlessly, I ask, “Do what?”

With his lips still pressed there—between my breasts and over my pounding heart—he murmurs, “You make my heart beat crazy-fast. I feel like I can’t breathe right when I’m around you, but then I feel like I can’t breathe right when I’m not around you, either. Everything feels better—I feel more alive—when I’m with you, and I love you so fucking much.”

“The world rights itself when I’m around you,” I whisper to him. He’s staring straight into my eyes. “I get so lost sometimes, in my head, wondering if I’m doing the right thing or not. But then, when I’m with you, everything seems so much clearer, and easy. Like my world is right; like I’m doing everything right.”

He nods against my chest, and presses one more kiss there before pulling up and over me completely. He lowers his lips to mine, but before he can kiss me, I whisper, “I love you more than anything, Edward.”

“I love you too, angel.”

I meet him halfway; my head comes up from the pillow and our lips touch, and it’s heaven. These aren’t the frenzied kisses Edward and I have shared on so many occasions, no, these kisses are slow and sweet, and I think I fall a little more in love with him because of them. I could spend the rest of my life trying to figure out every aspect of Edward’s personality, his likes and dislikes, the curves of his muscles, and the curves of his lips. I could spend forever trying, but I know I would come up short. This man is so much more than any man ever has been and so much more than any man has any right to be, and I know, I *know*—I’m the luckiest woman in the world.

His lips begin journey away from mine, across my cheek to my ear again. He presses a kiss right below my lobe and then whispers against my ear, “Be right back.” His body is gone from me then, and my eyes pop open to find him. He hasn’t strayed far—only a little ways away from me on the bed—and his hand is buried in the drawer of the nightstand next to the bed. I grin, knowing what he’s searching for. He finds it and hastily shuts the door before scrambling back to me. Resting on his elbows, he raises the package between the two of us and proceeds to rip it open.

“We’re getting you on birth control, angel. I can’t stand these fucking things.”

“Okay.”

“No argument?”

“Uh—no, definitely not.”

“Hmm. Sex makes you compliant. I’ll have to remember that.”

“Please do.”

Edward tosses the condom wrapper somewhere off to the side as he rises up to roll it onto his length. I bite my lip as I watch him, overly excited that we’re *finally* going to be together like this. He’s quite quick getting the condom rolled on, and then *oh!* He’s pushing inside of me, slowly and steadily. His jaw is taut so I reach for it, and stroke him gently. A small smile forms on his lips, and he pushes further into me. I’m fighting to keep my eyes open; it’s quite hard, but I really don’t want to miss one second of Edward’s face while he’s doing this. I was wrong before—this is the most beautiful I’ve ever seen him, and I’m going to make damn sure he looks like this, as often as possible.

When his hips hit mine I gasp, and Edward groans out a long and low, “Fuck.” He fits perfectly inside of me—something I’d been sure I’d felt before, but now know how wrong I was. I was made for Edward, of that I’m sure. “Fuck, angel. Jesus, I’d think you were a virgin if I didn’t know better.”

“Really?” Really, this is quite the compliment, and so I can’t help that my voice is all high-pitched and squeaky when I ask. Of course, the fact that Edward is finally inside of, all the way, no less, might have something to do with my girlish squeal that is now my voice.

“Mhm…fuck…”

He pulls out, just a little, and pushes back in, slow again. I moan and when he pulls out again, I whimper. All kinds of sounds are coming from Edward’s mouth, most of which I’ve never heard before in my life, and I didn’t even know it was possible to make. Of course, in between the unintelligible sounds, there are the pants, and the groans and the muttered curse words that I will always associate with Edward and sex now. Each time he pulls out, it’s just a little further, and faster, but his thrust back in is slow—it’s enough to make me crazy. When he works himself almost all of the way out of me he holds himself there, and whispers, “Angel, look.”

My eyes open—I can’t be blamed for closing them, the sweet, slow torture he’s performing on me is unbelievable—and follow his gaze to where we’re joined together. His cock is just barely inside of me, and though I can feel it…seeing it is something else entirely. I huff a breath at the sight, and Edward leans forward to slip his tongue between my open lips. He pushes back inside of me as he kisses me, not as slow as before, but still nowhere near fast.

Edward’s left hand slides down my side and under my ass to my leg, which he squeezes to coax me to raise it. I do, and my other as well, and wrap them both around Edward’s waist. The new position makes him groan loudly, and he pulls his lips from mine to take a much needed breath. His forehead lowers to rest against mine and we’re breathing each other in; his breaths match mine—hot and fast and heavy. His arms go underneath me as his hands grasp my shoulders from behind, and his thrusts speed up.

He isn’t muttering curse words anymore; I don’t think he could if he tried, and I know I wouldn’t be able to speak if asked to. The sensations coming from our joining were overwhelming and unforgiving, and our bodies were being ruled by them and them alone. The only sounds in the room are of our skin slapping against each other, but it’s like we’re in a tunnel—oblivious to sight and sound outside of what we’re feeling down below and what our eyes are saying to each other while we stare. His thrusts speed up even more.

My chin tips up, and my lips meet his. His eyes slam shut, but I leave mine open; I want to stare at him. His lips move effortlessly against mine, and I watch as his brow furrows. My tongue slides against his top lip, then his bottom, and I watch as his head tilts further to the side to accommodate me. I slide it between his lips and into his mouth where he immediately tangles his own with it, and I watch as a thick clump of hair falls forward on his face, partially shielding one of his closed eyes from me. My hand raises to move it, but I become side-tracked with the silkiness of it; my hands tangle into his hair, and I watch his eyes flutter behind his lids. I pull his head closer still—if that were possible—as his tongue pushes mine out of my mouth to make it’s way into mine. His thrusts gain even more speed.

My hips begin to move, and not just to meet his, but back and forth and in a circle—all movements are miniscule, but enough—and Edward pulls his head from me to mutter, “Fucking hell, Bella.”

I pull my lip between my teeth; it’s sore and swollen from our kisses, and Edward’s eyes zero in on it. One hand leaves my shoulder as he pulls away from me enough so that he can fit it in between us and then *oh!* His thumb finds my clit; one rough swipe with the pad of his thumb and I’m done. My breath leaves my body in one long gust, and there are black and white and silver and gold and red and blue and pink and green stars in my eyes as I stare at him and then *oh!* I can feel him coming inside of me—setting me off again, and my first orgasm wasn’t even done. Edward pumps erratically inside of me five more times, each harder than the last, and each hard enough to make the stars stay, and then he stills, and collapses on top of me. I can feel him, still twitching, inside of me—well, I think it’s him twitching, I’m pretty sure my walls are still convulsing though, so it could be me.

He lay there on top of me trying to catch his breath, and I pull my hands away from his hair and down to his back to make long, slow strokes across it in hopes of helping him to calm down. I don’t want him to move though; I quite like having his weight resting on me, and I know he’ll move when he can breathe again.

But then, just like I said I would never figure Edward out, he surprises me. He shifts to the side, just enough so his weight isn’t fully on me, but still there enough that I can feel him. One arm loops underneath my neck and the other, of course, rests upon my right breast. He murmurs against my skin, “I love you, Bella.” And then he’s asleep. Like, literally, snoring—just like that.

I chuckle and roll my eyes, but I wouldn’t change him for the world. I look down and see he hasn’t even found it in him to remove the condom, so I do it for him, and reach to the nightstand for a tissue to wrap it in before setting it there—I’ll throw it away tomorrow. Right now, not a damn thing could tear me away from this man.

To no one in particular, and only because he's asleep, I whisper into the darkness, "I love you too, Edward."

Well? Did I redeem myself? Really, really love you all - thanks to all of you who are sticking with me here. In case you haven't noticed, we're in the home-stretch now, only around eight chapters and an epi left to go. I have plans for a new story though - still working it out in my head and on paper, and trying not to think too much about it until TG is over, because that shit is distracting.

Oh! And! Because I'm so freaking excited about it! - Through Glass has been accepted at Twilighted! So, like, if it's gone from here one day, and you feel like reading it...it'll be there! It's only got the first two chapters up, but my Validation Beta, alicedances is crazy fast at getting them back and up! So, woot!

Much love to my fic-wife, Beausoir, who is always the help I need to get my brain going - she's more knowledgeable of Steel Magnolias than I am! And for that, I love her to death (well that and other things, namely because she's absolutely freaking adorable). And mucho, mucho love and huge thanks to les16 for all the rec's she's giving me and for, well, just being fucking awesome! I'll say it again, if you haven't read her story *The Path We Choose* go and read it now. It's adorable, and if my skimming through the last chap was any indication, that story is about to get all hot and heavy! *bats hand in front of her* Hot, woman!

And most definitely - thank you to all the reviewers! You guys are so damned nice, and I love you all for it! See you all on Monday!

33. Fade Into You

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

I want to hold the hand inside you,
I want to take a breath that's true,
I look to you and I see nothing,
I look to you to see the truth.

You'll live your life, you go in shadows,
You'll come apart and you'll go black,
Some kind of night into your darkness,
Colors your eyes with what's not there.

-Fade Into You, Mazzy Star

There's the most delicious friction going on between my legs right now. I'm waking up from, quite possibly, the best night's sleep ever, to feel exactly that. Friction and rubbing and scratching and wet. Jesus, I'm so fucking wet—even in my dream-like just-waking-up stupor, I can feel the moisture pooled between my thighs. My eyes slide open slowly, and, for just a moment, I'm disoriented.

The walls aren't the plain white of my apartment, and the sheets are way too soft—and black—to be mine. I don't know where I am, and my heart speeds up at the thought. Also, because I don't know where I am, who the hell has their finger between my pussy lips? *Oh my God, Bella! Wake the fuck up!*

It's Edward's smell that finally does it though, not my inner voice. I catch one great whiff of Edward and—just like that—I'm smiling. I'm also fully awake because I realize...if I can smell Edward...and someone has their finger stuck inside of me...well, it must be him. My smile is instantly ridiculous—just like the day I came over to nap in his bed so he would have my scent lingering in his sheets. All big and wide and toothy, and, most likely, absolutely stupid looking. I can't bring myself to care though because he is just...hitting all the right spots down there. How the hell he knows how to work me so well, I'll never know, nor will I care—so long as he doesn't stop.

"Mmm, good morning, angel."

"Morning."

"I was wondering when you would finally decide to join the living again."

My smile widens even more, if that were possible. I decide to tease him. "Could you not talk? You're kinda ruining this for me."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Mhm. It's better when you don't talk."

His finger stills; I groan. "Really?"

"Really."

His finger pulls out; I huff. "Edward!"

"Yes?"

"Don't stop! God!"

"I think we should talk."

My bottom lip juts out as I whine, "Why?"

"I think it's quite obvious, Bella. If you don't like the sound of my voice—"

I jump up from lying down and push him onto his back. One leg kicks over, and before he can blink, I'm straddling him. I'm also still pouting, and his eyes have zeroed in on my bottom lip. "Edward?"

He's still focused on my bottom lip, which is actually still swollen from all of our kisses the night before. "Huh?"

A devious grin spreads across my lips, and I run my tongue over the bottom one; his eyes follow the motion. "You really want to talk?"

I pull my bottom lip between my teeth, and watch as his eyes glaze over before me. "Huh?"

Leaning forward, I touch the tip of my nose against his, and his eyes pop back up from my lip to meet my gaze. "I love the sound of your voice, gorgeous. I was just fucking with you."

He huffs out a breath. Wrapping one arm around me and pulling me tight against him, he turns toward the nightstand. With his free hand, he opens it and pulls out another condom, however, my eyes land on the alarm clock—it's nine-thirty. In the morning. I was supposed to be at work an hour and a half ago! *Shit!*

I stand quickly, and begin rushing around the room to find my clothes. My jeans and panties are on the floor but there's no sign of my bra or sweater from last

night. The living room! He stripped them off me in the living room, I remember. Hastily, I pull my panties up my legs, but I'm diverted from doing the same with the jeans because Edward's arm closes around my waist, and pulls me back against him onto the bed.

"Angel, what are you doing?"

"Work, Edward! I'm an hour and a half late!" I struggle against him, but he's not loosening his grip.

"Bella."

"Come on! I need to at least call! I can't lose my job, Edward!"

He's laughing at me. *Ass!* "Did you forget who you work for?"

"Huh?"

Again with the laughter; and now it's harder and louder. "My Mom, Bella! You work for my Mom, remember?"

I huff. "So?"

"You're dating me. You work for my Mom. I work for my Mom. We're both late..."

"Make sense!"

He chuckles as he tells me, "Okay, fine! I already called her. We're not due in until noon. Mom's gone into the office to cover for me, and she's called in a temp for you until then."

"Oh," I respond quietly.

"Yeah, oh. Take your panties back off!"

I giggle, but do what he says. Edward already has the condom rolled on, so I resume my position of straddling him. He grabs hold of my hips as I grab hold of his dick, and I slide, slowly, onto him. A loud moan leaves me as I'm lowering myself; it feels as if I'm more sensitive today than I was last night, and I can't help but voice my pleasure at the sensation. Edward begins to pant as his hands tighten around me, and he tries to speed up my movement. I don't let him, instead, I continue my slow descent onto his length, and I enjoy every. Fucking. Second of it.

When I can finally feel his thighs against my ass I stop moving altogether, and lean forward to rest on his chest as I lower my lips to his, morning breath be damned. He doesn't seem to mind either, and his tongue slides into my mouth as soon as our lips touch. His knees bend as his arms wrap around my waist and hug me closer to him, and his hips begin to jerk up and away. His dick is sliding in and out of me, and even though he's going excruciatingly slow...I don't give a fuck because it feels so damn good.

My breasts are pressed tight against him, and our skin is sliding, just slightly, against each other with every one of his thrusts. The little bit of motion has my nipples rubbing against his muscles, and they're now pebbled up and hard as hell. They're also incredibly sensitive—like my nether regions—and I assume it's from the ministrations bestowed upon them last night from Edward's magical tongue. Each little movement against them is the equivalent of a static shock, but it's not unpleasant; quite the opposite, actually. My eyes roll back at each jolt.

Our lips are still moving against one another fluidly, and it seems as if they're completely disjointed from the rest of our bodies. While every other part seems to be sliding against each other, our lips are perfectly in sync—any and all motions from below aren't affecting our kisses at all. Odd, but true. Of course, now I want to slap myself for thinking about that when Edward's dick is inside of me, but eh...can't shut off the fucking brain.

"Sit up, angel," Edward pants against my lips.

With the way his legs are bent, when I do sit up my ass rests on top of his balls—the feeling is incredible. Even more so when Edward grabs hold of my hips again and raises my bottom from him—to which I look at him confused, until he starts slamming his hips up against me. I can't think at all when he does that because my eyes roll back in my head, and my hands scramble to rest on his chest. I lean forward a bit, and Edward begins to thrust even harder against me. I know I'll be sore later, but right now, I don't give a shit.

"Fuck, Edward," I gasp.

"Mmm, I know. Lean a little more, angel."

I do and...oh. My. God. Leaning forward just that little bit more allows for his pelvic bone to slap against my clit with every surge upward. I'm seeing stars almost immediately, and I know Edward can feel me coming—he groans loudly as my walls convulse around him. He doesn't stop though; he actually keeps pumping away inside of me for a good while before he gives three sharp thrusts and then stills. The grip on my waist is painful, and I whimper. He releases his hands immediately, and pulls me to him.

"I'm so sorry, angel," he whispers breathlessly, still trying to come down from his orgasm.

"S'okay," I tell him, and I'm slurring my words a little. *Edward has fucked me drunk.*

He chuckles as he tells me, "I'm going to take that as a compliment too."

Oh God.

"I said that out loud, didn't I?"

"I think it's fucking adorable when you do that, baby."

I inhale sharply. "What?" he asks.

"Why'd you call me that?"

"What? Baby?"

"Did you call me that the day we had sex with our clothes on against your door?"

"Yeah..."

"Why?"

"Uh...I'm not following, Bella. Do you not want me to call you that?"

I take a deep breath and raise my head so I can look at him. I whisper, "You call me angel."

"Okay?"

One more deep breath and I finally let it spill. "Jasper called me baby."

Edward blinks once before widening his eyes slightly. "Oh."

"I'm sorry. I just...that's how I—"

"I get it, angel. You kept us separate in your mind with the nicknames. I'm not offended, don't worry. I just...didn't realize that was his pet name for you. It's pretty common..."

"I know it is. And I realize I'm probably being stupid—"

"You're not. And I would be a dickhead to get mad about it when you have to listen to Tanya call me Eddie all the time."

I smile as I tell him, "It doesn't bother me anymore."

He smiles back at me, and my breath catches at how beautiful he looks this morning. "Good. Because I can't seem to get her to stop."

"I wouldn't ask her to."

"I might punch him in the face if he calls you that again though."

"I have a feeling you might hear it again. Though I don't think it'll be directed at me..."

"Point taken. Now...I'm pretty sure I stink. You...definitely stink." My mouth gapes open, and I lightly slap him on the chest as he chuckles at my expression.

"What? You do. And...I'm sick of talking about exes. Let's take a shower."

He waggles his eyebrows at me which makes me giggle, and then—just like that, and with Edward still inside of me—he shoots off the bed with me in his arms and drags us to the shower.

I wonder if we'll make it to work on time...

"So..."

"What?"

"Bella!"

"Angela!"

"Tell me!"

"Tell you what?"

She huffs, "Did you and my brother do it?"

"Do what?"

"Oh my God! Fine. Did you and my brother do things that would frighten the fish?" She waggles her eyebrows at me, and I'm instantly reminded of Edward this morning—I burst into laughter. "Don't laugh at me! And answer my question!"

I sigh, and try to calm myself down. "Why can't you ask it normally?"

"I did."

"No, you didn't! You quoted *Steel Magnolias*. Again!"

“So?”

“So, I’m not answering until you ask right.”

“Bella—”

“Ask what right?” Tanya’s voice interrupts Angela’s whining. I turn a smile at her. “So, I hear you and Eddie-boy got your freak on last night.”

Angela’s jaw drops...and then she squeals. “I knew it! I knew it! You guys did it!”

Tanya raises her eyebrows at Angela and bites her lip before she says, “Bella, it’s not nice to withhold information like that. Especially not from your future sister-in-law.”

I blush, thinking about being married to Edward—something I can’t deny I’m excited about, even though, you know, we just had our first fucking date. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re not!” Tanya laughs as she says, “I think you like torturing poor Angela.”

I roll my eyes. “I was gonna tell her. As soon as she got the balls to ask.”

“I did ask!”

“Ask what?” Oh, wonderful, now Esme is here as well. “Oh! Bella, dear! I was just making sure you made it into work on time.” She winks at me as she says, “My son is certainly glowing this morning.”

Really, there should be an operation to take care of blushing—mine is out of control on my cheeks now. “Um...”

“God! Everyone knew before I did!” Angela pouts, and then says, “Some sister-in-law you are!”

My jaw drops. “I said I was gonna tell you!”

“Whatever. I’m over it.”

Esme and Tanya laugh at the two of us before Esme turns back to ask, “Bella, I believe Tanya needed to speak with you about something. Do you mind if I hold down the fort for you, for a bit?”

Really? Esme Cullen is asking me if she can do a job at her own company. A receptionist job, at that. I decide to tease her. “I don’t know. Answering the phones is pretty complicated...”

“Don’t make me slap you, dear. You two run along and let me catch up with my daughter.”

I smile at her, and follow Tanya outside where she surprises me by lighting up a cigarette. “You smoke?”

“No.”

Oh, shit. What the fuck did Jasper do?

“What the fuck did Jasper do?”

She laughs, but it sounds forced. Now that I think about it, her voice sounded strained inside too. *Oh God.* “Have you checked your phone this morning?”

“Uh...no? I forgot to turn it back on. Actually, I didn’t think about it until just now. Why?”

“Well, I’ll just let you go grab it then.”

“Tanya—”

“Please, Bella?”

“Okay...” I leave her standing there and make my way back inside. Esme is on the phone when I round the corner to grab my purse, but her hand shoots out, and in it is my cell phone. I look to find an apologetic expression on her face, but I’m not mad. She obviously knows what’s going on, and knew that I would be needing my phone. I take it from her and make my way back outside, but not before hitting the power button.

“Okay, I have it.”

“I believe you have some text messages.”

“Uh...” Sure enough, there are—holy fuck—twenty nine messages in my inbox. “What the hell?”

“Read them. We have time.”

The first fifteen or so are all the same; all from Jasper, and in some form or another, he’s just asking me to call him. *Fuck. Maybe he isn’t as okay with everything as I thought he was.* Then, I scroll down and, to my amazement, find one from Alice. It reads:

What the fuck?! You don’t want me to have him so bad you pawn him off on that slut-bag hussy?! You’re a fucking bitch, Bella! I hate you!

“What the fuck is this shit?”

“Yeah...”

“Has she been bothering you too?”

“No. Not me...”

“Then who—oh shit. She’s been talking to Jasper.”

“Yep.”

“And...?”

“And he said a lot of things about me. Things he said Alice heard from you...”

“Things like what?”

“Did you ever tell Alice that you thought I was trying to make a play for Edward? Or that I might want both Edward and Jasper for myself?”

“No...”

“Did you ever tell Alice that you and me have engaged in some sort of lesbian activity, and that Edward likes to watch us. Oh, and that we were interested in Jasper watching us while we were in Forks, as well?”

“What the—”

“Perhaps you told Alice that you really did want to be with Jasper, but you wanted to fuck around with Edward for a bit before settling down with him.”

“Tanya—”

“Or maybe you told Alice that because you want to fuck around with Edward, you felt it only right that Jasper has someone to fuck around with too. That’s only fair, right? And so that would be why I have this interest in him?”

“You know that’s not true!”

“Well, I wish you would tell Jasper that! Because he seems quite certain that I couldn’t have any real interest in him, anymore. In fact, he seems to think that last lie is an absolute truth! He doesn’t believe I really want him.”

“Okay, calm down. You stay here. I’ll call him right now, okay?” She nods at me, and I see tears in her eyes. I’m going to fucking kill Alice, and then, I might just kill Jasper too. He’s doing the same fucking thing he did with me—letting his past affect his future. He’s fucking up. Again.

I walk a few steps away and scroll through to find his number, hitting send immediately. I’m pissed, and I’m going to give him a piece of my mind—any hesitation on my part might weaken my ire, and I don’t want that.

His voice is clipped when he answers. *“I’m at work.”*

“So am I! What the fuck, Jasper?!”

“You tell me! You could have told me any of that, Bell, but you didn’t! Why?”

“Because none of it is true! Oh my God! You can’t be this stupid!”

“Fuck you.”

“Really? How about you think about what the fuck you’re doing? You’re fucking up—”

“Well, I don’t think I want to be with someone like her.”

“Jesus, Jasper! You’re letting things Alice says affect your future! You know that our relationship got fucked up because of things she did in the past—”

“No, our relationship got fucked up because you wanted to screw around with pretty boy!”

“That’s bullshit!”

“Is it?”

“You know it is! We were fighting within a day because of shit that happened between you and Alice! And you thought I was going to be the same way!”

“I guess I just don’t learn from my mistakes, do I?”

“You’re certainly not learning from this one, are you? I never said anything to Alice about Tanya! Never!”

“Then where did she get her information?”

“She made it up, you fuckwit! Do you have any idea the lengths Alice went to get you and I to break up?”

“She didn’t have to try very hard, did she?”

“No, you’re right. She doesn’t have to try very hard at all when it comes to you. You’re fucking made for each other!”

“You might be right.”

“Are you serious right now? Fine. I’ll play her little game, then, since she doesn’t like to keep her nose out of other people’s lives. Did you know she’s fucking some Italian dude named Demetri?”

Silence, for fucking once, meets me on the other end of the phone. “Oh, I guess she left that part out. I told you myself that she wanted you back, Jasper. You, apparently, don’t realize what she’ll do to get what she wants. But I guess she, you know, needs someone to fuck around with—seeing as it’s only fair—since you wanted to fuck around with me. Sound familiar? Here’s another one! Did you know that she practically set me and Edward up? She called Angela to tell her that I was interested in him, after she told me how you cheated on her, and tried to get me to rethink being with you. She practically handed me to him!”

He’s still quiet, but I can hear him breathing, so I continue. “Think about what you’re doing, Jasper. Tanya is one of the best people I’ve ever met—even you recognized that. You were the one that talked me down from my jealous rage—”

“You really don’t want me anymore, do you?”

I close my eyes, and take a deep breath. “Look, I’ve tried to be nice about this—”

“Just fucking answer me.”

“Fine. No, I don’t want you anymore. I’m not confused on that. I’m in love with Edward, and I want to spend the rest of my life with him. Is that what you want to hear?”

“Is it the truth?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s what I need to hear.”

I sigh and ask, “Do you even want to be with Tanya, or were you just passing time and Alice has given you the out you were looking for? Because none of what she told you is true, Jasper.”

He sighs on his end, and it’s quiet for a moment. *“I do. But...okay. Look, it wasn’t fucking easy for me when you left. I missed you so much, and...things were so awkward between us when we talked on the phone that first time. You know I still love you, and I was trying so hard, Bell. I really am happy that you’re happy, but it’s hard.”*

“I know it’s hard. Just because I don’t want to be with you anymore doesn’t mean I still don’t think about you, Jasper. Shit...Renee had to make me put all your things in a box because I was just crying over them.”

“Really?”

I roll my eyes. “You’re missing the point. And you haven’t answered my question, either. Did Alice give you the out you were looking for with Tanya?”

“No. I do want to be with her, I just...fuck, Bell. When Ali said that you really did want to be with me, but you just wanted to screw around for a little while before...I know she was trying to make me hate you, but... Well, all it did was make me think about us being together again. I know that’s fucking wrong, on every level, but all I could think about is making sure you knew I forgave you for that, and making you happy again.”

“Jasper...”

“I know. Please don’t tell me again how not true that is.”

“So...you do want to be with Tanya?”

“I do. Things are...easy with her. There’s no underlying tension from our past, and well, until Ali found out...things were pretty fucking perfect. But...”

“How did Alice find out? You really need to stop telling her things like that, if that’s how.”

“I think...we’re done. After this phone call, my next is to Tanya, to beg for fucking forgiveness. I’ll take suggestions on how to earn that, by the way. And then, I’m calling Alice and giving her a piece of my mind. You’re right. It’s not only time that I stop telling her things like this, but...I think it’s time for the two of us to say goodbye. Like forever.”

“At least for awhile, Jasper. I think that would be best. So far as Tanya goes...” I turn my head to look at her; her eyes are following my every movement, and when I throw a smile her way, her whole face lights up. “I don’t think you’ll have to try very hard. Though you should. She’s been through a lot of shit, and she doesn’t deserve any more from you. Grovel, beg, buy her things—jewelry and flowers would be best, make sure you call her every chance you get, and... well, if it’s possible, you should really try to come out sooner than you’d scheduled and spend some real time with her.”

He chuckles on his end, and murmurs, *“I’m pretty sure I can arrange that with the boss.”*

“Look at you—all big-headed and shit. You think just ‘cause you own the company now that you’re hot shit. Huh?”

“You know it, darlin’.”

“Oh, and Jasper? Don’t be a dumbshit again, okay?”

“Alright. And Bell?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Oh, uh, could you do me a favor if you and Tanya happen to end up out somewhere with me and Edward?”

“Don’t punch him?”

“Jasper!”

“Alright, alright! What’s that?”

“Could you...refrain...from calling Tanya, baby? At least...in front of us?”

He inhales sharply. *“Uh...sure. So long as you tell pretty boy I really don’t want to hear whatever the fuck he calls you, either.”*

“Okay,” I whisper.

“I’m gonna let you go now. I have a feeling that I should really call Tanya now. So...talk to you later?”

“You better. Please give Alice a piece of my mind, as well, and I want to hear about it. She left me a rather unsavory message this morning as well. Let me know just how much she dislikes me now. I’d like you to let her know the feeling is mutual.”

He chuckles, but it sounds forced and somewhat sad. *“Will do, Bell.”*

I hang the phone up and walk to Tanya just as her phone starts chiming. I tell her, “Don’t accept that call. Make him keep calling because he will, trust me. Make him earn it, Tanya. You deserve it.”

She hits the button to reject the call before pulling me in for a tight hug. She turns and kisses me on the cheek, and says, “Thank you so much. I don’t know how to repay you for this.”

“You really do care a lot for him, don’t you?”

She nods, looking down. “I know it’s probably weird, considering how anti-Jasper I was at his dad’s funeral.” Her phone chimes again, and she smiles as she, once again, rejects the call. “I know I was drunk the first night, and the next day I was so embarrassed about it. But then he called, and...from the start...things just kind of...clicked? For me, at least.”

“It’s not weird, Tanya. Edward hit me with a door.” I look at her pointedly, and she chuckles. “Make him work for it, okay? I told him he should have to anyway. And he’s calling Alice tonight to give her a piece of his mind. So, at least, you won’t have to have that to deal with anymore.”

She sighs, probably in relief. “That’s...good? I don’t want to sound so—”

“Don’t finish that because it doesn’t matter. This is the best for both of them. They don’t need to be around each other—for awhile, at least. They both need to move on.”

Her phone rings again, and I laugh as I tell her, “Go ahead, you know you want to. I’m gonna go relieve Esme.”

She nods and smiles as she answers her phone, and I don’t stick around to hear what he’ll say. Instead, I make my way back inside, and find Esme doodling on my notepad. I lean over the desk, but she doesn’t notice. I think...she’s drawing hearts...with little B’s and S’s and E’s and C’s in them.

Awww!

“Shouldn’t I be the one doing that?”

She gasps and jumps in her seat as a hand flies to her chest. “Don’t do that! Give an old lady a heart-attack!”

I smile. “Sorry.”

She shakes her head before asking, “Did you get Mr. Whitlock set straight?”

I nod. “I did. He’s begging for forgiveness as we speak.”

“Good. She really cares about him.”

“I think...he could really care for her too. Hopefully, he’ll try. I encouraged him to do so.”

“Good. Now...did you and my son have fun last night?”

I blush as I tell her, “I’m pretty sure you know the answer to that.”

She smiles deviously at me. “I’m pretty sure I do, too. Had to make you squirm a little, though. Bella?”

“Hmm?”

“Welcome to the family, dear. I’m so glad you two got it worked out.”

“Me too.”

“Also, well, two things really, this weekend? I’d very much like for your mother and Phil to come over, as well as you and Edward, and maybe we can have dinner together?”

“I’d like that. I’ll call her to see if she’s free. She’s getting married, you know.”

“I heard! So exciting! You should talk to her and see if she’d make it a double wedding...”

“Esme!”

“Wishful thinking... Now, I have a friend, well, he’s more Carlisle’s friend than mine, but, that doesn’t matter. He’s editor-in-chief at the paper—Jacksonville Daily News—and we were talking about you. I told him about your degree, and he’d really like for you to come and apply over there. You certainly don’t have to, and it’s only a copy-editor position, but, well, you’re so much better than this job, Bella. And maybe working over there might help you find something to write about. That, and, I don’t want this job to ever cause any problems between you and Edward. Some people here might talk, and I don’t want it bothering you. But, like I said, you most definitely don’t have to, it’s just a suggestion.”

“Wow...”

“If you want, I can call and set something up now, so we know when to have a temp here, and to be looking for a replacement because it’s a pretty sure thing—if you want it.”

I shake my head, amazed at this opportunity. She’s right; this job she’s proposing to me would be much more along the lines of something I’m actually trained to do... *Fuck it.* “I’d like that.”

Esme smiles beautifully at me. “Good! Let me just ring Alistair. He’ll be so happy!”

“So Mom told me she set you up with Alistair for a job?”

“Yeah...is that okay?”

“Of course it is, angel! I’m excited as hell for you. He’s an awesome guy, by the way, I think you’ll really like working for him.”

“I hope so. I’m nervous about it.”

“Bella...after all you’ve been through in the past few months...I’d think starting a new job would be a cake-walk for you.”

“I just don’t want to be bad at it! I don’t want to disappoint him, and at the same time, I don’t want to disappoint your mom.”

“It would be impossible for you to disappoint Mom. She’s already planning our wedding, she’s so in love with you.”

I blush, thanking God Edward can’t see it. I’ve been home for two hours, and I want nothing more than to leave it, and go see Edward. We’ve been apart all day, and I miss him. This apartment doesn’t feel like home today, either, not after spending last night in his arms, in his bed, in his condo. I felt at home last night. Not now.

I sigh. *“What’s the matter, angel?”*

Quietly, I tell him, “I miss you.”

He chuckles. *“Well, you don’t need an invitation. I’ll unlock my door for you right now, if you want. Or I can come over there, if you prefer. I miss you too, you know.”*

I smile. “Maybe...”

“Maybe, hell. Pack an overnight bag and get the fuck over here.”

“Okay.”

“Wait, first...is Jasper going to be good to her?”

“I really think so. If he isn’t, you can kick his ass—after I do.”

“But...he sounded genuine to you? About his feelings, or whatever for her?”

“He did. He told me that he was going to call Tanya first—which he did, I was there when her phone started blowing up—and then he was going to call Alice. He’s done with her and her conniving ways. I hope he follows through. He’s supposed to call me tonight to let me know, but I have a feeling that he’ll forget. He’ll probably end up on the phone with Tanya all night, doing what I told him to do.”

“Which is?”

“Beg her for forgiveness.”

"Good. Now, go pack your bag. I'll see you in a bit, angel."

"I love you, Edward."

"I love you too, Bella."

Okay! So...Les16 (who rec's me every. single. chapter. so I'm doing the same thing! Go read her story *The Path We Choose* if you haven't GDI!) said in her last review that she wants some Tanya/Jasper time before the story is over! So...I'm gonna do an outtake for ya, Les! I won't put it here, in the actual story, because this! is! Bella and Edward's! story! I told you all - they just had to get there first! That was like...Chapter 4 I think, geez! I don't know when it'll be up, but I just wanted to give warning - for those who might be interested! Love ya, Les!

I'll also remind everyone that there is a Jasper/Bella alt. ending which is already written, and in the hands of NZTwilighter, who is being so nice and pre-reading it for me, even though her life is one big ball of crazy right now! That will post either the same day or the next, when the epi goes up for *Through Glass!* (It was requested, sort of, by NZTwilighter, as well - who I absolutely adore)

Love to you Beausoir - I can't wait for school to be out so I can take up all your time! :P And very, very much love to all you out there who have stuck with this story this long! My reviewers - you all just make my day, I hope you know that! Thank you all for sticking through! See ya on Friday!

34. The Very Thought of You

Sorry! I know this a little late! Crazy week!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

The very thought of you, and I forget to do,
Those little ordinary things, that everyone ought to do,
I'm living in a kind of daydream, I'm happy as a queen,
And foolish though it may seem, to me that's everything.

The mere idea of you, the longing here for you,
You'll never know, how slow the moments go, 'til I'm near to you,
I see your face in every flower, your eyes in stars above,
It's just the thought of you, the very thought of you,
My love.

—The Very Thought of You, Billie Holiday

"But, Bella, it says right here to grease your pan. Honey, I know I may be dense, but I'm not stupid."

I sigh as I watch Renee study the instructions for a PRE-MADE CAKE. Honestly, I never knew it could be so hard to make something that's already made.
"Yeah, Mom. But you don't use bacon grease."

"Why? It just says 'grease.' It doesn't specify, you know. So why can't I? Besides, I don't have any other kind of grease."

"Then we use butter."

"But, Bella, it doesn't say to butter your pan. It says to grease it."

"Mom?"

"Yes, honey?"

"I'm going to ask you to just...trust me. Okay?"

She smiles and nods, and I wonder why I didn't just say that to begin with. Renee and I have been in her kitchen for no less than two hours, trying to make a cake to take to the Cullen's for dinner tonight. I warned Esme not to let Renee bring anything, but she didn't listen. When the two talked on the phone, I wondered if they knew each other better than they'd told me—they went on for hours. When the phone call ended, I knew I was in trouble. Renee did this thing where she claps her hands together, and her eyes sort of glaze over, and she jumped, a little, right there on the spot. Then, of course, she turns to me and practically swoons as she tells me that Esme Cullen asked *her* to bring a cake. So *she*, of course, calls me first thing this morning fretting over not having any flour. I went to the grocery store and picked up a box cake after calling Esme and pleading with her to call Renee and tell her not to bring anything. Esme laughed at me.

So here I am, trying to teach Renee how to follow the instructions on the back of the box. She did really well with the mixing part, since, you know, it doesn't actually require much. However, when the box said to 'grease the pan' she actually did pull out the coffee can that she stores leftover grease from frying bacon. Thankfully, she asked me if she should melt the grease before lining the pan with it, and I was able to correct her, promptly. Not without a little argument though.

"So...how are things with you and Edward? Of course they must be good—his mother wouldn't be asking us to dinner if they weren't!" Ah, Renee, see that? She didn't even need me to speak, she answered that herself.

Indulge her, Bella. And don't deny that smile on your face at the mere mention of that man, either:

"Things with Edward are...perfect?"

"Surely you can dish a little more than that to your mom, Bella."

"Well, what do you want to know—don't put that much!"

"I don't think I put too much. Oh! Did you get flour like I asked you to? It says I need to put flour in the pan too."

Well, good thing I did buy some flour, after all. I just didn't tell Renee that, and she's been too preoccupied with greasing the pan to read that far into the instructions. "Yeah, it's in the bag."

"That's so funny that you need flour for a pre-made cake! I thought it was supposed to have all the ingredients in the box!"

"Well, it has all the important stuff."

"Speaking of important stuff...details?"

I sigh. "What do you want to know?"

Renee surprises me by putting on a quite serious expression. “Well, have you and Edward gone on a date?”

“Yes.”

She huffs. “Aren’t you going to tell me about it?”

“When you finish asking your questions, I’ll tell you.”

She huffs. Again. “Why did your father get to meet him before I did?”

“Because Edward came to Forks to be there for me. We hadn’t been together for long, and by that I mean less than a day, when I got the call about Jasper’s dad.”

“Oh. Well, what did Charlie think of him?”

“He liked him.”

She huffs. Again. I roll my eyes even though my back is turned and she can’t see me. “Charlie doesn’t really like anyone, Bella. Be specific.”

I roll my eyes. Again. “Well, he punched Jasper, repeatedly, and he supported me when I needed him. I think that was enough for Dad.”

She gasps, “He punched Jasper? Why?”

“Because Jasper kissed me. Oh, after he proposed.”

“Bella! You didn’t tell me Jasper proposed!”

“Huh. I thought I did the other day at my apartment.”

“You most certainly did not!”

“Sorry. Well, he did. And then he kissed me. And then Edward’s punch ended that kiss. That’s it, Mom. Swear.”

“Hmm. Have you met Edward’s family, all of his family?”

“Pretty much. They were all at a party I went to at the Cullen’s.”

“Oh. When?”

“I don’t remember. It was when Jasper was here. Not long after I started working at Cul de Sac. Did you flour the pan?”

“Yes,” she replies, absentmindedly. I look at her; she’s got a faraway look in her eye.

“What’s the matter?”

“Oh...uh... well, did you meet Edward when you and Jasper were still together?”

“I told you I did. I remember telling you that.”

“Oh, that’s right. How silly of me.”

“Can I see the pan? I need to get the batter in it.”

“Oh, sure.”

I go about pouring the batter, and when I’m done I set the pan in the oven to bake. I turn back to Renee, and she’s still got that faraway look about her. I ask, “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” she says quickly.

“Mom.”

“Okay, fine. Did you...know...that you loved Edward right away?”

I sigh; I had a feeling Renee would ask me this. She’s a hopeless romantic that one is. “Well...initially, no. I didn’t know. But...I did love him from the start...I just didn’t know that I loved him. I mean, I was with Jasper, and I’d been in love with Jasper for so long, and I was just blind right then because I finally had him, and I didn’t want anything to mess that up and I don’t know. I mean, I realize now that I loved Edward then, but I didn’t know then. I mean, he hit me with a door! And then he bitched at me for not locking the door! And then he was all cocky and gorgeous, and I was pretty sure I was in lust with him, but I knew that I loved Jasper and so I didn’t think past that back then. But then me and Jasper had that fight, and things weren’t gonna be the same, and then I sent him home, and then Edward shows up for lunch and then he calls because Angela gives him my number, and I’m pretty sure he already knew he was in love with me, but I didn’t and then he kissed me and I just knew that I felt something for him but it wasn’t until I was back with Jasper that I realized and so I told him right away.”

Renee nods, like she understands everything I’ve just said. Then she asks, “Have you and Edward had sex?”

I choke on my own spit, swear to God. “Mom!”

“What, honey? It’s a valid question. I’m pretty sure he’s going to be my son-in-law, so I’d like to know more about him.”

“And what does our sex life have to do with you getting to know him?”

“I knew it! You have had sex!” she says as she claps her hands together. I roll my eyes. “Oh! Oh my gosh! Has he proposed already?”

“What?! No!”

“Oh,” she says, rather dejectedly.

“What is with our mom’s wanting to know if we would just hurry up and get married?”

“Well, honey, you’re pretty much lost with each other. I mean, it’s adorable the way you two fumbled around the other, but, well, maybe Esme and I just want to help. You know, by giving you a push in the right direction.”

“We’ve been on one date, Mom.”

“And you’ve had sex!” She just clapped her hands together again. “What are you waiting for?”

“I don’t know...a second date, maybe?”

“That’s silly.”

“Uh—no, it isn’t. You know, normal people date for awhile before they even consider getting married.”

“Bella, you’re not normal.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Oh, you know what I mean! You and Edward are soul-mates,” she sighs as she says this, and her eyes get that faraway look again. “Oh! I know! We could do a double wedding! You and Edward, and me and Phil! Oh that’s perfect...” I stop listening, and try to keep my eye rolls under control. The wonderful thing about Renee is she answers her own questions, so I’m not really required to be a part of this conversation anymore. If I didn’t know better, I would think she and Esme have been talking. I sigh, and think of a way to break to Edward that our mom’s are planning our wedding, and that it will most likely be when Phil’s season ends.

I wonder how he’ll take the news.

“Oh! Renee, thank you! This looks delicious!” Ah, Esme, got to love the fact she didn’t call Renee out for making a box cake. “I just don’t know how to thank you! And this is my favorite!”

“I’m so glad! Bella wasn’t very helpful in choosing what kind of cake, so I wasn’t sure.” My jaw drops, and I just sort of...gape at Renee. She either doesn’t notice, or chooses to ignore me because she just blinks innocently. “I’m so happy to finally meet you. I feel like I already know you!”

“Oh, I know! Oh, Bella, dear, Angela and Ben asked if they could come along tonight. Is that alright?”

“Of course! Are they here?”

Esme has a twinkle in her eye as she tells me, “I do believe Angela has pulled out all of the old family albums, and they’re in the den. You remember the way?” I nod and take off like a bullet. Family albums means pictures of baby Edward and I *need* to see those pictures! I’m in the den, faster than should be possible for me, and there in the middle, with at least thirty albums stacked to her side, is Angela.

“Please tell me you have pictures of him missing teeth?” I say as I make my way hurriedly to her.

“Oh, I’ll do you one better. I have the pictures of when he went through his awkward stage, and before his hair darkened.”

“Edward had an awkward stage?”

“Bella! Of course he did!”

“His hair was lighter?”

She rolls her eyes at me. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you! It used to be like...bright, copper-orange!”

I gasp, and pull the damn album away from her—she’s totally bogarting the pictures. “Lemme see!”

“Calm down, gosh! Here, right there! See how ugly he was?”

He wasn’t ugly though, just, well, awkward. He sort of reminds me of Alfalfa in *The Little Rascals*, but cuter, of course, he is Edward after all. It looks as if Esme tried her hardest to tame his out-of-control hair, and failed miserably. Angela wasn’t joking either—it’s bright as hell, and copper-fucking-orange. That’s not all; in this picture he’s sporting my most favorite of all his facial expressions—that crooked grin. Only in this picture it’s nothing short of adorable because he can’t be more than nine or ten, and that’s way too young to call it sexy—I’m not a fucking pervert! Oh, and it’s not really sexy at all, just adorable, even though, you know, it just makes me want to see Edward grin at me like this, right now. Possibly take me to that bathroom we like to spend so much time in, and have his way with me. Yeah, that sounds good. I wonder if Esme will—hey! Wait a minute!

“Does he have braces in this?”

Angela scoffs, “Of course! Did you think he was born perfect?”

“Awww. Did he get teased?”

“Only by me,” Angela quips as a devious smile spreads across her lips. “Oh! Look at this one!”

This one has to be teenager Edward, and I have to remind myself that he’s seven years older than me because those clothes are awful! He was obviously trying to be stylish, and failing miserably. “Did he think these clothes were hot?”

Angela busts out laughing. “Oh my God! Edward freaking loved that shirt! And those jeans! He made Mom wash them like, every day! He always wanted to wear them!”

The shirt in question is a button-up. Not just any button-up, either. No, this one is white with very large, very pink stripes running vertically down it. I almost want to laugh, but at the same time, I just kind of feel sorry for Edward’s misguided fashion sense. Hell, even I know that shirt is ugly, and I’m sad that Edward is somewhat blind to it. I gasp; he doesn’t— “He doesn’t still have it, does he?”

Angela starts wailing in laughter. She’s literally rolling around the floor, and she’s even knocked over the remaining albums that were stacked next to her. “Angela!”

“Bella!” she gasps. “Yes! Yes, he does!” Then, she just starts giggling like a fucking hyena, and eyeing me because I’m sure my face is white as a ghost.

“Fuck,” I whisper, and then I remember, “Oh! Never mind. He’s giving me a key to his condo. I’ll just go when he isn’t there, find the shirt, and burn it.”

Angela abruptly stops laughing and sits upright. “He’s giving you a key already?”

I shrug. “Yeah?”

“Oh my...oh...oh my God! Bella! Oh my God!”

“What?”

“Don’t you see—”

“You sound like a screeching banshee,” Edward says as he walks into the room. He sees me and smiles. “Oh, not you, angel. Ang sounds like a screeching banshee.”

I grin at him as he bends over and meets my lips in a kiss. “Edward! You’re giving Bella a key?!”

I feel his smile widen against me, and he straightens back up, looking at his sister. “Yeah, I am. Oh! That reminds me—Bella, I asked Dad about gynecologists, I hope that’s okay. He recommended a good one.”

“I could’ve asked, Edward.”

“Uh—could’ve asked me!” Angela says as she glares at her brother. “Why do you need a gyno—” she gasps, “Bella! Are you pregnant?!”

“What? No! Don’t say that too loud, Angela!”

“Oh,” she says, rather dejectedly. “Sorry.”

I shake my head. “You’re as bad as our mothers!”

“What? What did they do?”

“They’re only planning our wedding!”

“Oh, I know!” Angela exclaims, and claps her hands together, just like Renee. “You and I need to go dress shopping, Bella! Do I get to be your Maid—”

“Angela!”

“What?”

“You do realize that Edward and I have been on exactly one date. Right?”

“Yeah, but you two have already had sex. Way to go slow, Bella,” Ben says as he walks into the room, grinning at me. “Might as well get married now. Besides, Edward tells me you two have already named your first daughter.”

“Edward—” I start to yell at him. Angela, however, seems to love this information. At the same time as me, she says, “Oh my God! What’s her name going to be?”

Why doesn’t anyone else seem to think that Edward and I talking about marriage is crazy? They’re all like...encouraging this shit! What the hell? “Nessa,” Edward says, smirking. “After our lovely waitress.”

“Aww!”

“Mhm, Bella took a liking to her after she called the hostess a...what was it, angel?”

I mumble, “Door-whore.”

Angela starts cracking up again, and laughing like a fucking hyena. This time, Ben joins her. Hell, even Edward is chuckling next to me. My cheeks flame bright red, and then, of course, to add to my embarrassment, Esme walks in.

“What’s everyone laughing at?”

Angela somehow manages to gasp out a response. “Bella! — Door whore! — Hostess! — So funny!”

I roll my eyes as Edward says, “We were just telling Ang and Ben about our date.”

“Oh! Well, Bella, dare I say the hostess probably deserved the nickname? Dinner’s served everyone—Angela, leave those albums, there are a few pictures I’d like to show Bella myself.”

Angela nods, but she’s still laughing too hysterically to pull herself up and walk to the dining room. Ben takes mercy on her, and holds a hand out, which she grasps before he pulls her to her feet. She’s still laughing as she walks into the dining room. Edward grabs my shoulder and spins me around before I can leave the room. I look at him, and can’t help the smile that spreads across my lips.

“Don’t let it get to you. Okay?”

“Huh?”

He grins that crooked, sexy, motherfucking grin at me. “The talk about us getting married. They’re just excited, angel.”

“Oh! I know. But—”

“It’s not freaking you out, is it?”

“No! Well, I mean, it is, but like, not because I don’t want to marry you or anything. Just all these people seem to think it’s absolutely normal for us to be talking about marriage after one date, and I just think it’s strange. You’d think they’d be encouraging us to spend more time with one another or something.”

“Bella, they just know what we already do.”

“Huh?”

His grin widens as he places his lips against my forehead; my eyes slam shut at the feel. “That we belong together. We can go as slow as you want. Don’t feel pressured by them. But they already know, as well as we do, that we’re gonna get married one day. They’re just excited.”

“That’s not your proposal, is it? Because if it is, it’s way worse than the way you proposed to Tanya, and I’m thinking about kneeling you in the nuts.”

Edward laughs; it’s loud, booming, and happy. “No, angel. Promise. You’ll get proposed to the right way.”

“Which is?”

“I’m not telling you!” he scoffs.

I huff, “Might as well! Our family is already planning our wedding!”

“Oh! Good, you two have talked about that,” Esme says as she walks back into the room. She’s doing that thing that Renee does—trying to look innocent. “Dinner! Now! You two can talk more about your wedding later.”

“Esme!”

“What?” She blinks innocently.

I huff. Again. “You are not allowed to hang out with my mother anymore!”

She laughs; it’s a delicate, tinkling sort of laugh. “Oh, Bella, you crack me up, dear.”

“Come on, angel. Let’s go eat. Mom gets gripey if her dinner is cold.”

I roll my eyes but follow him into the dining room. Everyone’s already seated, but Carlisle rises from his seat as we walk into the room and pulls me in for a tight hug. “So glad you could make it, Bella. Your mother was just telling us about your first kiss.”

I huff, “Mom!”

“Oh hush, Bella. They’re practically your family. They need to hear these things.”

“No, they really—”

“C’mon, Bella! That story is awesome,” Angela says, still laughing. Obviously, she and Renee were made from the same batch.

“Really, Bella, just think of it this way: the more your mother tells us...well, that’s all the more stories I get to tell you about Angela and her huge crush on James when she was growing up.”

Angela gasps, and huffs, “Mom!”

Edward's laughing, and so is Ben. I join them as I ask, "James? Really?"

Angela turns a glare at me. "Don't you say a word! I was twelve years old!"

"But...James?"

"Bella!"

Renee decides to chime in with, "What? Is he ugly or something?"

I roll my eyes. Esme answers, "Oh, no! James is quite nice looking, actually. He was one of Edward's best friends growing up, and now he's happily married as is Angela. We just like to tease her about it. So does James. Oh! She does this thing where she blushes like crazy around him! I'd almost swear she still had a crush, if she weren't so in love with her husband."

"Mom!"

"Speaking of weddings," Carlisle says, butting right into the conversation. It kind of irks me a little—I was enjoying hearing about Angela's embarrassment. "Esme tells me we have one coming up?"

I'm the color of a fucking strawberry. I've bypassed the tomato stage and gone to pure red. "Uh..."

"Oh! That's right," Esme says as she throws a wink at me. "Phil, Renee, I do hope we get an invite?"

Thank you, God, for making Esme Cullen so wonderful.

"Of course! I'd love some help in planning it, if you don't mind. My first wedding was a JP wedding, so I really don't have any experience."

I feel a pang, thinking of Charlie in Forks, all by himself. I hope he's okay when he hears Renee is getting remarried. Maybe I should call him, well, call him more often, and see how he's doing. He probably doesn't even know yet.

"I'd love to help! I helped plan Angela's. I'll tell you all the little secrets I learned."

Just like that, Esme has turned Renee's attention from talking about my wedding. Now, she's too immersed in hearing about different venues and flowers to think anything of a double wedding. Hell, she practically has stars in her eyes. I smile, involuntarily, and Edward's hand lands on my knee. I turn to look at him as he squeezes my knee, and he sends me a wink. I'm glad he knows how awesome his mother is, and I hope I can one day convey just how much I adore her. Esme has an uncanny ability to put anyone at ease, and to direct a conversation into exactly what she wants it to be. Angela even seems excited about my mother's wedding, and asks if she can do anything to help as well. Renee thanks her exuberantly, and tells her how much she appreciates that since her daughter obviously doesn't have any interest in weddings. I don't take the bait, and Esme directs the conversation, once again, away from talks of Edward's and my wedding.

Dinner is delicious and when we've all eaten our fill, Esme asks if we want coffee in the den. I find it strange to drink coffee at night, and after eating, but such is the way with people with money. I'm all for it though because going to the den means looking at more incriminating pictures of Edward. So we gather up our plates as Esme insists we leave them, and tells us she'll clean them up later. I can't have that though, so I decline the invitation for coffee, and when Esme is preoccupied with showing Renee pictures of Angela's wedding, which Angela is giving more details than necessary on, and the boys are converging by the fireplace—not drinking coffee, by the way, but scotch—I slip out of the room, and to the kitchen to wash the dishes.

I'm elbow deep in dishwater, and halfway through with the dishes, when I hear a noise behind me. I turn my head, and find Edward there smiling at me. I raise my eyebrows at him, and he shakes his head at me.

"You could've told me you were planning on this. I would've come in to help."

"You know how to wash dishes?"

"Very funny. Just because I have a maid now, doesn't mean Mom didn't make me and Angela do these things when we were younger."

"Brat."

"Of course."

"I'm almost done anyway. Go back out there and enjoy yourself. I'll be there in a minute."

"Let me help you."

"I'm almost done. Swear."

I turn back to the water, and finish scrubbing the plate in my hands before rinsing it and putting it in the drain. Suddenly, I feel Edward's chest against my back, and his arms surround me as he dips his hands into the water, linking them with my own. His lips are at my ear, and he murmurs, "I think I would rather like to help you."

My breathing speeds up and my cheeks flush. I gasp, "I don't think it would be much help. You're distracting."

"Mmm, I certainly hope so."

"Edward!"

“What? Did you drive here, or did you ride with Renee and Phil?”

“I rode with them.”

“Mmm.” He presses his lips right below my ear for a kiss before taking my earlobe into his mouth. My eyes roll back in my head, and I’m pressing back against him involuntarily. He chuckles quietly, and then asks, “Come home with me tonight?”

“Okay,” I whisper without hesitation. He chuckles once again, and then pulls away from me completely. As he’s grabbing the dishtowel beside the sink to dry his hands, I realize what just happened. “Hey! You can’t do that!”

“Do what?”

“Get me all riled up and breathless and stupid, and then just leave! You’re using sex to make me compliant!”

“I told you I would remember that.”

“That’s not fair!”

“Bella,” he says, sighing. “You do realize that you don’t even have to do anything to make me feel like that, don’t you?”

“Well, it doesn’t show. You always seem to be just fine—” He grabs my hand suddenly, and with it still dripping wet from the dishwasher, presses it to his heart. I can feel it beating rapidly inside of his chest. “Edward—” His lips come to my ear again as he pulls my body flush against him, our hands trapped between us against his heartbeat.

“Listen to me,” he says breathlessly. He doesn’t say anything else, and I just stand there, distracted because I’m so close to him. His heart speeds up under my palm and his breathing goes choppy. His other hand grabs my free one and places it around his neck. The muscles there are tight and strained, and when I lower my hand to rest on his back, I find the muscles there the same way. “I’m always like this around you, angel. I told you this. And you don’t have to do a thing to make me this way. You just have to be somewhere in my vicinity, and I’m done for.”

“Oh,” I say quietly. I’m feeling a little foolish now because I was sure that I was the only affected in this relationship. I can see now how obviously wrong I am though, and Edward is just as much, if not more, taken with me as I am with him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap. I just—”

“Don’t apologize, angel. We are still feeling each other out, after all.”

I’d like to feel something...

He chuckles. I blush. Yes, I said that out loud. “We can discuss that at home.” This time, my heart speeds up, and I know it’s because Edward just referred to his condo as home—as our home. Well, it’s implied at least. I couldn’t be more thrilled about it. “Do you want me to help you out in here? We could get it done faster, and then you can go make fun of me while looking at all the pictures Mom has set aside for you.”

“She set aside pictures for me?”

“Of course, she’s quite excited to show you some of them. She keeps saying something about burning some of them though, so I’m not sure if the piles are all for you to look at, or if some are for you, and some are to burn.”

“Does she want to burn the ones in the pink and white shirt? Because I’m totally supportive of that.”

“Hey! That was my favorite shirt!”

“I know,” I say, sighing. “I’m going to burn it myself when I find it, so you won’t ever be able to wear it again. That shirt is god-awful-ugly, Edward.”

“It is not!”

“Is too!”

“It is—”

“Bella! I told you I would do those dishes later!” Esme says as she joins us in the kitchen. “Stop that right now! Besides your mother and Phil are about to head off, and they wanted to know if you want to join them or catch a ride with Edward.”

I don’t miss that twinkle in Esme’s eye. She’s been doing that all night. “Oh...uh...think I’m gonna go home with Edward. I’ll just...go...tell them bye, I guess.”

Renee winks and grins at me before pulling me into a hug and telling me goodbye. Phil and I are still in our awkward stage with each other; no matter how cool the dude is, he’s still only three years older than me, and he’s about to be my step-father. I hope he doesn’t try to call me daughter or anything. We hug each other anyway, and he sort of pats me on the back as he pulls away. *Awkward*. Everyone stands out on Esme’s beautiful porch as they drive away, and someone grabs my hand when their car is out of sight. I look down to the hand and follow the arm attached to it to find a beaming Esme.

“Now,” she says, arching an eyebrow, “you want to see some pictures?”

I giggle and nod, and follow her into the house. Carlisle refreshes our coffee before joining the men-fold back by the fireplace, and Esme, Angela, and I kick off our shoes and cuddle together on the couch to look at pictures. There’s so many that I want copies of, so Esme promises to have copies made of them all, and I can have them as a wedding present. I blush as she winks, and she tells me, “I’m just playing with you, dear. Well, not really, you will get them as one of your wedding presents, but I’m not trying to pressure you at all. I’m just happy that both of my children are so happy.”

I smile at her, and she pulls me into a hug. Angela joins us and we only break apart when we hear then men-folk chuckling at us. In unison, we huff, roll our eyes at them, and go back to looking at pictures.

It's way late when Edward and I say goodnight to everyone and drive to his condo. I can't remember ever feeling happier, and I'm assaulted with images of this day, happening all over again, with the exception of a ring on my finger, and my last name being Cullen. I'm giddy at the thought.

Edward grins at me as he unlocks his door, and he barely waits for me to walk through before slamming it shut and picking me up to carry me to the bedroom. Our kisses are frenzied and hungry, but when the clothes start coming off, we slow down. He makes love to me that night, slowly and tenderly, and I fall asleep in his arms, dreaming about the day I never have to go home.

I wish I could just fast-forward to that day.

Thank you all so much for still reading! I love you all so much, you've made this experience worth it. Fair warning: the last chapters aren't gonna be angsty at all, really - not that I think you'll complain, just, you know, that kind of thing isn't like this story - for there to be no angst! :P

All of you leaving reviews are so damn wonderful - I love hearing what everyone thinks! I know I've been fail at responding, but I think I'm just almost caught up. Life's just been crazy, husband's new job (which he lost last night because the plant laid off like over half of the workers, *sigh*), and he's joining the Air Force, and that's just been one big ball of crazy right there! I promise I'll respond if you've reviewed - just please be patient with me!

Go read Les16's *The Path We Choose*, if you haven't. You'll love it just as much as I do! Oh, and while you're at it...swing by Miracle1901's profile page and take a gander at her stories, I hear they're amazing...^~

Beausoir! I'm so glad your hubbie's home! I'll count on not hearing from you for the rest of the weekend...*snicker snicker*

Lastly! All you Momma's out there! Happy early Mother's Day - since I won't get a chance to say it before then! Thanks for reading everyone!

35. Feels Like Home

My sincere apologies for the extreme late-ness of this update, I'll explain down bottom!

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Somethin' in your eyes, makes me wanna lose myself,
Makes me wanna lose myself, in your arms.
There's something in your voice, makes my heart beat fast,
Hope this feeling lasts, the rest of my life.
If you knew how lonely my life has been, and how long I've been so alone,
And if you knew how I wanted someone to come along, and change my life the way you've done,

It feels like home to me, it feels like home to me,
It feels like I'm all the way back where I come from,
It feels like home to me, it feels like home to me,
It feels like I'm all the way back where I belong.

-Feels Like Home, Chantal Kreviazuk

"I'm sure there's a good reason he hasn't called. Or told you that he's in Jacksonville. I think, maybe, he just—"

"Rose, really, it's okay," I interrupt her. She's spent the last fifteen minutes on the phone with me, doing nothing but apologizing for my non-existent-knowledge of Jasper's whereabouts in Jacksonville. Apparently, he's been here for three days, and I haven't heard hide nor hare from him. Of course, Edward has told me that he hasn't heard from Tanya either, so it all sort of makes sense. This visit would mark his fifth to The Sunshine State, and his fifth at avoiding seeing me. "I'm sure he's just spending time with Tanya. Plus, it might be too soon...you know."

"Yeah," she says, sighing. *"I just wish you two could get past that stupid, awkward stage already. Christmas is just around the corner and I'm hoping you're coming to visit Charlie..."*

I laugh as I tell her, "Yes, Rose. Gosh, you and Renee are gonna get along really well with as good as you are at fishing for information."

She laughs as well, and says, *"Yeah, I can't wait to meet her: I've been looking at airline schedules, you know, for her wedding? I still can't believe she invited me...but I need to know..."*

"Know what? Just spit it out, Rose."

"Well, I mean...it's been six months since I've seen you...and...ugh! Okay, I'm just gonna say it. Lord knows I've never been one to beat around the bush. Are you and Edward gonna move in together? Do I need to make hotel reservations?"

I choke on my drink. "Uh—what?"

"Bella!" she says exasperated. *"You guys have been together for awhile now...it's only natural that I ask."*

"Um...okay? Well...um...look, the thing is..."

"Just spit it out! Emmett wants to come with me, and he'll want to see Edward—you know those two are like little girls when they play video games together. He's having delusions of sitting at Edward's house and playing the damn shoot-em-up game side by side, so they don't have to spit out commands on that stupid headset. Really, Bella, he's driving me crazy. So I need to know where you're going to be living!"

"I'm just not following. I'm sorry, but, what does where I live have to do with where you guys stay?"

She huffs, *"Well, if you are gonna be living at your apartment still—if you're gonna renew your contract, then we'll stay with you. I'm inviting us for you, so thanks."* I laugh. *"But if you're gonna move in with Edward, then we'll make reservations at a hotel because I don't know how he'd feel about us staying with him..."*

"Oh," I say stupidly. Really this isn't something I've even thought about.

It feels like the last six months—after returning home from Forks—has flown by. Edward and I have 'officially' been dating for four and a half of those six months, and it's been wonderful, no...it's been fucking blissful. Amazing. Astounding. Absolutely fucking perfect. The list could go on and on. Our parents are in a constant state of pushing; pushing Edward to propose to me, pushing me to propose to him, pushing us to elope to Vegas, pushing us to just move faster in our relationship. I realize they're just trying to show their support of us, and in their way, that's exactly what they're doing, but it hasn't prompted either one of us to actually move any faster. I'm pretty sure Edward is just as happy with our current state as I am.

Rose's question is out of the blue though. With all of the encouragement to do...whatever...with our relationship, never once has moving in together come up. It's not something I've paid any thought to. Really, I spend more time at Edward's now than I do at my own apartment, and until Rose brought it up, I'd completely forgotten that my lease was up on it in a month. It is though, and I need to make a decision. Like now. Unfortunately, I can't make that decision without talking to Edward. The thought of moving in with him makes me smile a mile-wide, and I'm pretty sure there are stars in my eyes. I need to talk to him.

Renee's wedding is also next month, and, as promised, I'll be her Maid of Honor. Really, there isn't a lot for me to do as MOH, considering Esme and Angela have pretty much planned everything out already. It's been hectic as hell around the Cullen household lately, and my mother has spent more time over there

than I have. I think Esme is even decorating a room just for her, I can't wait to see how that turns out.

I shake my head; with everything going on, the thought of moving out of my apartment, or extending the lease, hasn't even been on my radar. I need to talk to Edward.

First, I need to placate Rose. "I need to talk to Edward about it. We haven't discussed what I'll do with my apartment."

She sighs as she tells me, *"Well, you need to get off the phone with me then. Because I need to know pretty quick, Bella. Like today or tomorrow quick. Hotels are hard to get reservations for if you don't give enough time..."*

"Yeah, Rose, I'll get back to you tonight, if possible. If not, then tomorrow. I don't know. I'm at work right now, and I can't leave until at least five. And I know Edward is swamped too, so..."

"I get it. I'll just be waiting to hear from you. All lonesome and alone since Emmett is at work...and you're at work...and I don't have anyone to talk to..."

I laugh and tell her, "You shut-up! Go see your Momma or something..."

She laughs as I hang up on her, and I dial Edward's number as soon as the call ends. His private line rings and rings, and after the, probably, twentieth ring, I sigh and hang up. He must be out of the office because he always answers when I call. I decide not to call his cell because he's probably really busy, and I don't want to disturb him if he is. I close my eyes and try to refocus on the work in front of me, but I know it will be a futile attempt—Rose's question about where I'll be living has just...fucked me up.

My new job is great, and I'll forever be grateful to Esme for aiding me in acquiring it. Alistair is a truly unique individual and because of that, he's a blast to work for. He is incredibly strict when it comes to meeting deadlines, and he'll be the first to call you out if you're slacking in that department. However, he'll also be the first to break out the champagne, for afternoon mimosa's, or ask if you got into any trouble over the weekend. Oh, and if he finds out that you did, he encourages you to write about it, and also to allow him to print it out in an article that runs every weekend, called "Lit-up in Pitch-black." It's a hit with the college crowd. I'm happy to say...I've never submitted anything for that article.

Happy is an understatement though. Friday nights are still dedicated to Tanya, Edward, and myself out at their favorite bar, and those nights are a blast. The rest of my weekends are usually spent rolling my eyes at Edward while he shouts through his headset at Emmett while playing their shoot-em-up game, or curled up on the couch of either Tanya or Angela, and watching girly movies together while eating our favorite flavors of ice cream. There's the odd weekend when Edward and I, and usually one or two of our friends, go out though, and then there's some weekends spent at Esme and Carlisle's, or Renee and Phil's. Every weekend is a blast, and I absolutely love them. I don't do anything to warrant a "Lit-up in Pitch-black" article though, and that's just fine with me.

My weeks aren't *that* different from my weekends. I'm not lying when I say I spend more time at Edward's condo than my apartment. Most nights, I just go straight there instead of heading to my apartment at all because I have an extensive amount of my wardrobe planted throughout drawers and mixed in with his in his closet. He even went so far as to buy me all the necessities of being a woman, and I do mean *he* bought them, just to keep me around more. I didn't prompt him to, not really; I only said one Sunday that I needed to head home because my monthly visitor had come, and the next time I was there, he'd bought them. In bulk.

It's not really that I think Edward would have a problem with me moving in with him, not at all. I just don't want him to think I'm expecting it, even though, I guess I kind of am. Now. Since talking to Rose.

"Bella!"

I clear my throat and blink my eyes, drawing myself from the daze I was in. "Sorry. Yeah, Alistair?"

"I need that, on my desk, by five. Today. Quit daydreaming and get busy."

"Sure. Sorry."

He nods and walks off, and I go to work.

As is normal these days, I bypass even going by my apartment, and instead make my way to Edward's condo as soon as I leave work. I don't think he'll be there, but I go regardless. On the way I decide to make dinner for the two of us instead of letting him order out, so I stop by the grocery store on the way. It's while I'm browsing through the various selections of noodles I decide that tonight is going to be just fine. I know that I will talk to Edward about what Rose asked about, and I know that everything will be perfect. Hell, he gave me a key within two weeks of being together. He encourages me to come over all of the time. He's practically giddy whenever he finds me cooking in his kitchen. And...he shows me how much he loves me every single night.

This isn't a big deal.

It is though, or I guess, it would be for most couples. Talking about moving in together is a natural progression kind of thing, and even though Edward and I haven't *technically* been together for that long...our relationship has grown by leaps and bounds in the time we have spent together. He'll probably jump at the chance for me to actually live with him. Like actually live with him, not just stay over ninety-nine-percent of the time.

This isn't a big deal.

It's while I'm paying the cashier that I begin to panic. What if it is a big deal to Edward? What if he doesn't really believe in couples living together before marriage? I mean, giving me a key, and telling me to come over whenever isn't exactly telling me to move all of my things in and never leave. What if he wants us to get married first? What if that's just something he was brought up to believe? Well, that just plain sucks. I mean, if this is how Edward feels...then it'll be at least another year before we have this conversation again because my apartment complex doesn't do less than a year leases, and I really don't want to move all of my things again. Unless, of course, it's to move them to storage or to Edward's condo. I sigh and shake my head as I transfer my bags into my car and put the cart in the corral. What if...

No. I won't think about that. Not at all.

I let myself into his condo and go about making dinner for the two of us. Edward isn't home yet, but I'm not surprised—after he didn't answer today, I figured he would be late because of work. I know where everything is here, so it's not like I need his assistance, and I feel at home being here, with or without him, but that doesn't change the fact that I wish he was home already. I miss him, which is pathetic because my night clothes are still on the bathroom floor from when Edward stripped them off me this morning in his haste to get inside of me. It's been less than twelve hours since I've seen him, but still, I feel empty without him around. Always.

Surely Edward feels the same way. He's given me no reason to think anything contrary. He'll want me to move in. This isn't a big deal.

That's my sort-of motto as I put the noodles in to boil, and brown the meat in the skillet. Once I have everything going in there, I make my way back to the bedroom to change into something more comfortable. A smile forms on my face as I rifle through my shorts drawer and find at least five pairs of Edward's boxers mixed in with them. I've called his housekeeper off of doing his laundry, instead taking the task upon myself, but Edward fancies himself a folder. He just hasn't learned to put things where they belong yet... Next time he wakes up, bitching because he doesn't have any clean boxers, I'll address this with him. I slide on my shorts and find a tank to throw on, toss my work clothes into the hamper, and make my way back out to check on the food.

Detouring to the living room, I snatch up his remote and turn the television on—it's too damn quiet in this condo. I noticed that the very first time I visited. You can't hear any road noise, or any noisy neighbors, and Edward's snores and sleep-mumblings are clearly audible throughout the whole condo. That might be something I have to warn Rose and Emmett about if they decide to stay with us—Edward's sleep-talking. He says I do it too, but no one has ever said anything to me about it before so I think he's just lying because he's embarrassed by the way he moans my name in the middle of sleep. I giggle a little to myself at the thought of Edward and his dirty little dreams.

He loves me enough to think of me when he's dreaming, always, and my name falls from his lips more times than I can count in a night. It's sweet and loveable, and just further cements how ridiculous I'm being by thinking Edward will have a problem with the discussion that will take place tonight. This isn't a big deal.

The smell of the garlic in with the meat pulls me from my thoughts, and I race back to the kitchen before I fuck up dinner beyond repair. My phone starts ringing as I'm running, and I decide dinner is more important. It's probably Renee anyway, calling me with some kind of wedding talk. Oh, and to guilt trip me again about why Edward and I aren't engaged or married yet. I shake my head again and pick up the spatula to stir the meat, and add the sauce before turning down the heat a bit. I check the noodles too because I'm fucking famous for turning my spaghetti noodles to mush, but thankfully they're fine. I make my way back to the bags and pull out the loaf of French bread I bought as well, and go about turning it into garlic toast. Once that's in the oven, I set out the makings for salad and get to chopping.

Everything inevitably finishes all at once, and I dish it all up before bringing it to Edward's dining table. We usually just eat on the tall, cushy barstools in his kitchen, or in front of the television in the living room, but I feel like tonight—with the conversation that will take place—the dining table might be a good place to be. Plus, it'll alert Edward to the fact that something is up, and hopefully he'll broach the subject. Since I'm such a chickenshit...

I sit and wait. Thirty minutes pass with no Edward walking through his door. I sigh. Remembering my phone ringing earlier, I slap myself in the forehead, now wondering if it might be Edward that was calling. Of course, me being me, I stub my toe on the table in my rush to my phone. I curse and cradle it between my hands, just sort-of hopping around the room in pain while trying to make my way, still, to my purse. I hiss once I'm there—at my purse where my phone is still—when I put my foot back down and the pressure goes straight to the toe I stubbed. I don't think it's broken, and when I'm not in so much fucking pain, I'll try to move it, and I'm sure it will move. It's just...Edward's dining table is all heavy wood and I hit the damn thing hard. Like really hard, like I see stars still hard, but I'm still curious as to who called.

One missed call.

One new voicemail.

I sigh out of relief when I see Edward's number identified as the missed call, and the pain in my toe is completely forgotten as I hastily press the buttons that will connect me to voicemail. I let out a breath the minute his voice comes over the line—a breath I didn't even realize I was holding in.

"Sorry to call you so late, angel. I've been stuck on a plane all day, unable to use my phone. But, I just landed, and I'm calling you first thing. I probably should have called you before I left, but I wasn't thinking, but then I thought Ang might tell you I'd be gone, or Mom, or Renee, or Tanya, or Jas—nevermind...I just hope that someone told you because I know you're probably worried about me. Actually, you're probably pissed at me. That's why you didn't answer your phone, right? I'm so sorry, Bella. This trip has been coming for awhile, but was just kind of sprung on me. Today. I mean, I had to go today. I'm sorry. So damn sorry. And I miss you! It's only been like twelve hours since I saw you, and I miss the hell out of you! Fuck...okay, I see, uh, my ride, so...this is me hoping like hell that you'll call tonight...and to tell you that I'll be gone for a week. I know, I know...I should have said something sooner...I'm sorry. This trip is...well, it's important, but I've been nervous about it, and I didn't know what to say to you and I'm sorry, angel. I love you. Please call..."

I frown as the message ends, and sniffle before I realize that I've been full-blown crying. My hand swipes at my cheeks; the moisture left from the tears feels thick and slimy and I almost want to throw up because of it. A week? Edward will be gone for a week? He definitely should have said something to me, and from the sound of that phone call, he should have said something to me...like...awhile ago. I get it, I really do. Edward is running a highly successful business, and Florida is a popular spot to buy real estate. He has clients all over the world that he works with, even though he's not technically a 'realtor' he handles all legal matters for the agents, and tries to maintain a 'family-business' mojo for all the clients. Thus, being friends with them, treating them like family...and sometimes that includes him having to go out of town for periods of time. I know this.

Doesn't make me any less sad.

I shake my head as I breathe in sharply and slam my phone down on the counter, mad at myself. This is exactly how I shouldn't react; I shouldn't act sad, or mad, or even holier-than-thou with my 'he should have told me' nonsense. I'm not fucking perfect, and I should know by now that Edward isn't either. He's trying, and I need to get control of my emotions and try just as hard. That's what Edward deserves.

A knock at the door releases me from my musings, and I grab a paper towel to wipe my face with before making my way to answer it. I open it to reveal a

grinning Tanya.

“Hey you!”

“Hey,” I kind-of-croak. My voice is still being affected by the tears I shed apparently.

“Are you okay?”

I try to smile and nod, but the smile drops from my face, fast, when I see Jasper step from his hiding spot by the door and to stand beside Tanya. My eyes don't miss the way he grabs her hand and squeezes. My eyes don't miss the light blush that covers her cheeks as a result. They also don't miss the sparkle in Jasper's eyes when he comes into contact with Tanya. I realize...I'm staring at two people...very much in love with each other.

“Ass! Five fucking visits, Jasper? Really?”

He rolls his eyes as he grins at me. “I wasn't exactly visiting you, Bell...”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter and motion with my hand for the two of them to come in. I can't help but smile again as Jasper doesn't hesitate to enter Edward's condo, but just follows Tanya through the door willingly. “What are you two doing?”

Tanya invites herself to the dining table and motions to the food. I nod and head to the kitchen to grab another place setting, and when I come back I find Tanya and Jasper sitting across from one another, so I take a place at the head of the table—to Tanya's left, and Jasper's right. It feels odd to sit at the head of the table. Charlie always sat at the head of the table.

“I wanted to make sure you'd talked to Eddie.”

I sigh as I turn my head to her. “I haven't. I was making dinner when he called, and I didn't answer because of it. I just heard his message before you showed up.”

“This is really good, Bell.”

“Thanks.”

“So, I talked to Rose,” he says, and I can feel his eyes on me. They don't feel the way they used to. They don't make me uncomfortable or heated or lustful. His eyes are only inquisitive now. “It's really no big deal, and I think you should just tell her to get a hotel. Save yourself from stressing over this shit.”

“I love your sister,” I say, and he nods.

“I know, but she can stay at a hotel, Bell. You don't need her pushing you to do something you're not ready for—”

“Who says she isn't ready?” Tanya asks, eyebrow arched and eyes sharp on Jasper.

He shrugs. “I just don't want her stressing over it, Tan. It's wrong of my sister to put that pressure on her.”

“Who says Rose is pressuring her?”

“You've not spent enough time with my sister...she pressures everyone.”

“She's not pressuring me, Jasper.”

His head whips to me, and I can see Tanya smile gently out of the corner of my eye. “But—”

I shake my head as I tell him, “I want to live with Edward. I practically do already. I just...didn't realize my lease was up so quick. I need to talk to him soon. As for where Rose and Emmett will stay, well, they're always welcome to stay with me.”

“But, Bell—”

“Shut-up, Jasper. You heard the woman,” Tanya interrupts. I send a grin her way which she returns. “So you heard about his trip though. Are you okay?”

I sigh again and close my eyes. “I'll be fine.”

“That's not what I asked.”

“I know.”

“Answer me.”

“You're not fine, Bell. Anyone can see that. You were crying before you answered the door.”

I shrug. “I'd just heard the message. I tried to call him earlier, after I talked to Rose, but he didn't answer. Now, I know it's because he was on a plane. It all just caught me off-guard, and I'm still processing, I guess.”

“It really did come out of the blue, Bella. He got the call early, saying that he could come right away. He pretty much hauled ass to the airport. Jasper said—” Jasper's throat clears, and Tanya shuts up. I raise my eyebrow and look between the two of them. They're plainly uncomfortable.

“Jasper said what?”

“Um—nothing. Do you have any dessert? I’m still—”

“Tanya,” I interrupt, “tell me. Or better yet. Jasper, you tell me, since apparently you said whatever she was going to.”

I watch as his eyes lift to her, and see the silent conversation the two have. I’m a little jealous to be honest. I’ve never had a conversation with anyone with just my eyes. I wish Edward and I could do that... Suddenly, Jasper clears his throat and tells me, “Nothing, Bell. He was just really nervous about the trip. I’m sure he would’ve called you, or told you, if he’d had more time.”

“Wait. Wait, wait, wait. You mean to tell me that you’ve spent time with Edward?” Jasper nods, and I can tell he’s reluctant to share this piece of information with me. “Since when?”

He hesitates, looking to Tanya once again before informing me, “Since my third trip. It’s not like we hang out or anything...just...like lunch and shit. With Tanya, I mean. It’s not like it’s just the two of us. Except for today. I drove him because he didn’t want to leave his car at the airport.”

“Why didn’t he call me to get a ride?”

“Bella.” I turn to Tanya, and to be honest, I’m kind of mad. It’s like I’ve entered into some sort of alternate universe. Really, Jasper and Edward are willingly spending time together? Oh, and, they aren’t inviting me to spend time with them. They also haven’t bothered to tell me that they’ve spent time together at all. I get it from Jasper, really I do. He and I haven’t spoken at all since the day I called him to chew his ass out about his treatment of Tanya, which is why I wasn’t upset that he hasn’t tried to contact me on any of his trips. I understand; he needed time to deal with everything, and honestly, I think the time spent not speaking to one another was the best thing for both of us.

However, I see Tanya almost every single day. I spend weekends with her on a regular basis, and I talk to her on the phone every single night—aside from the times that Jasper is visiting. She never thought to tell me that her boyfriend, my ex-boyfriend, and my boyfriend, her ex-fiancé, were on speaking terms?

And Edward. I’m more than a little miffed that he hasn’t said anything to me. I wouldn’t have been upset! I said to myself that I thought the two might have been friends under different circumstances! While it doesn’t sound as if they’re *friends*...well, they’re definitely more than acquaintances now. It would have taken Edward two fucking minutes, hell, two fucking seconds, to tell me that he’s been spending time with Jasper!

“Bella, don’t.”

“Don’t what, Tanya?” I bite at her. “Don’t get pissed off? I think I have the right! Why was it some big secret anyway?”

“Jesus, Bell. I told you I wanted to be friends with you—”

“And then you don’t call me for almost five months!”

“I needed time!”

“But it’s okay to spend time with my boyfriend?”

“He’s part of your life! I wanted to—”

“Wanted to avoid seeing me, but have lunch with Edward?”

“I wanted to get to know him! Goddamnit, Bell! It would have been hard for me to see you two together back then, and I wouldn’t have given the guy a fair shot!”

“That’s fine! I get that! I’m fucking ecstatic that you’re giving him a shot, and vice versa! But I wouldn’t have pushed! I would have given you your space—”

“I know—”

“So then why couldn’t Edward say something to me? Huh? Why the cloak and dagger routine? And now he’s fucking gone—”

“He had to go, Bella—”

“You keep saying that, Tanya! But no one—including Edward—bothered to tell me anything about this trip!”

“Bell—”

“Bella—”

“No! I get that he has to go out of town! I knew that going into the relationship! But he didn’t say a fucking word! And airplanes have phones! He just thought it would be okay for one of you to tell me? He just thought that I wouldn’t be here waiting? I don’t fucking think so!”

“But, Bella, it really was out of the blue.”

I shook my head. “But it really wasn’t! He told me he’s known about this trip for awhile, but he didn’t know what to say to me! He had God-only-knows how long to tell me! But he didn’t!”

“He had good reason,” Jasper mumbled from my side.

“Then fucking tell me!” I snap at him.

He shakes his head and looks away from me. Tanya says, “It’s not our place, Bella.”

My eyebrows furrow and my eyes squint. I shake my head, and I can literally feel the blood pounding in my brain. What the fuck to they mean by telling me that? “That doesn’t make one lick of sense! He’s on a business trip! You work for him, Tanya! Why can’t you tell—”

Jasper cuts me off. His words slice through me and make me feel foolish and child-like. “He’s in Washington. With your father. Asking for your hand in marriage. He had to go when Charlie had time off. That’s now, Bell. Happy?”

Well, that certainly shut me the fuck up.

So...like two weeks, yeah? Without an update from me. *Sigh* I really am sorry. My husband lost his job right before the last update - I mentioned that - and my brother called and said that it was “high time we came to see him” so we did. We’ve been in Houston since then, and it was damn near impossible to get on my laptop at all, much less to write anything. We got back last night, and first thing this morning I finished this chapter. It was a little under a quarter done when we left. The visit was fun, but...let me tell ya, riding in a car for six hours with no air-conditioning in Texas in the summer? Not fucking fun! I’m still spitting bugs out of my teeth.

To the absolutely beautiful individual who wrote me such a wonderful PM - I have not forgotten about you, and will be sending you one in return, shortly. I just wanted to get this out. Thank you for your words though, you have no idea how much I needed them.

Beasoir! My love! E-mail INC! Swear!

Les! *Hides* Review(s) INC! Swear! Go read *The Path We Choose* by Les16 if you haven’t! But don’t tell me anything because I’m way fucking behind! Can’t wait to read~~~*happy dance*!

My reviewers! I love you all! Replies INC! Swear!

Thank you all for sticking with me - it means so much! And for the new readers that have come over from Twilighted! Gosh, you’re awesome! See you all on Friday!

36. Oh, It Is Love

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

Your heart may long for love that is more near,
So when I'm gone these words will be here,
To ease every fear,
And dry up every tear,
And make it very clear,
I kiss you and I know,
It is love from the first,
Time I pressed my lips against yours,
Thinking, oh, is it love?

-Oh, It Is Love, Hellogoodbye

As much as I hate it, I refrain from going back to Edward's condo after that night. I tried, *tried* to sleep in his bed that night, but ended up going home in the middle of the night because smelling him, and not being able to touch him, made me cry. And cry I did. I should have been overjoyed by what Jasper let slip, and I'm not going to lie, I am, but I'm so upset with myself for overreacting...again...and that Jasper had to spill the beans just to calm me down. Tanya freaked out and yelled at him, and kept yelling at him, and yelling, and yelling, but I just sat there stunned.

I mean, I kind of knew it was coming — Edward and I and a proposal, that is — but only because we joke around about it so much. That, and the fact that our families won't let up on us about it. Still, to actually have confirmation of the act, actual, informed confirmation... Well, to be honest, I'm incredibly nervous.

What if Edward doesn't propose right away? What if he's waiting for something in particular? Some specific date, or event — like Renee's wedding, or Christmas, since I want him to come to Forks with me for it — to actually propose? Renee's wedding is just under a month away, and Christmas isn't far, but too far for me to carry this knowledge around in secret. I'm a terrible liar, and Edward will know something is up with me. Also, I haven't the slightest clue as to how I'll be able to act surprised when he does actually propose. Terrible liar.

Then there's the issue of where I'll be living. It seems such a minor thing to worry about now. We're talking marriage now. I'm pretty sure that means he wants me to live with him. However, I haven't the slightest clue how to broach the subject still. I've even begun to pack my belongings back into boxes because I know that I won't be living in that apartment anymore, but I'm unsure of where I actually will be living. Tanya offered up her guest room though, just in case Edward doesn't feel right about us living in sin, and I'm only partially sure he won't mind.

I *want* to live with Edward. I want to come home every single day and make dinner for the two of us. I want to sit next to him on the sofa while he yells at Emmett over the internet. I want Tanya and Jasper, and Angela and Ben, and Esme and Carlisle, and James and Victoria, and Renee and Phil to come by *our* place for dinner. I want to wake up each morning and wrap myself around Edward while he reads the newspaper and drinks his coffee. I want to watch Jacksonville wake up before my eyes each morning next to Edward. Mostly, I just want to never be away from him.

This week has been a true test of my patience. He's called every day, and I've done my best to not let on that I know where he is. I even went so far as to call Charlie once and make bullshit small talk just to throw Edward off my scent. I tell him I miss him, and I tell him I love him, and I try not to let on that I can hear Charlie's ESPN going in the background. Edward really sucks at this undercover thing. Secret-keeping too.

I don't know how many times he's almost slipped and said either Charlie, Rose, or Emmett's name. I giggle each time, and nonchalantly ask who he's talking about, to which he always responds with, "Uh, my client." So I let him have his little secret, because I have mine as well, and I don't want one ruining the other. It means the world to me that he flew all the way to Washington to ask for my father's permission to marry me, and I'm not going to do anything to jeopardize his good intentions.

Once I'd found my wits at the dinner table with Tanya and Jasper, I calmed her down and turned to him. I asked, "Why did he have to fly all the way to see Charlie? Why couldn't he just ask over the phone?"

Jasper shrugged and grinned as he told me, "Oh he told Charlie what he wanted. Well, asked. Charlie wouldn't give him his blessing."

"What?"

"Damn, Bell, calm the hell down," he scolded me while rolling his eyes.

"But you said —"

"You didn't let me finish. If you had, I would've told you that Charlie wouldn't give Edward his blessing without knowing him better. So they talked and decided that a week spent with one another should be sufficient time for Charlie to come to a conclusion about Edward. Charlie took a vacation week as soon as he could, and Edward had to go when Charlie got the time off. Now, as I understand it, Charlie wasn't supposed to get that vacation for at least another two weeks, which is probably why pretty boy hadn't said anything to you—"

"Jasper," Tanya warned in a low voice.

He rolled his eyes. "—but the station decided to surprise Charlie. Since he hasn't taken a vacation in years...they all got together and decided to make him take a month off. Edward went as soon as he heard. He's only staying a week though, Bell. I don't know what Charlie is gonna do for the rest of the month. You should get him to come visit you, actually."

That was pretty much the extent of the conversation. Tanya ushered Jasper out not long after that, and she looked thoroughly upset the entire way. That was Thursday of last week, and Thursday of next week, Charlie will be here to stay with me for a week. I had to lie my way around it, and I'm surprised it worked...Charlie has always been able to see through my lies. I told him that one of his deputies called me and told me about his vacation, and that Charlie was missing me something fierce. I swear to God, I could feel my father's blush through the phone, but he still agreed to come visit. Now, I just have to decide the best way to tell him I've been spending most nights at Edwards — aside from this past week — and that my apartment is somewhat bare of my clothes because of that reason.

I know Charlie. He's going to check my drawers. Damn Chief of Police.

Oh, and then I have to decide the best way to tell Charlie that I want to live with Edward. Before marriage-like.

First though, I should probably discuss that with Edward. Which is what I'm currently sitting and fretting over. Chewing my fingernails and popping my knuckles, curling my toes and almost losing my flip-flops in the process, bouncing on my toes and bouncing my knee... fidgeting is what I'm doing. All while standing outside of the airport and waiting for Edward's flight to come in. We agreed that I would pick him up and we would be on our way to Angela and Ben's house for dinner. I couldn't bear to go to Esme's tonight — though she offered — because Renee was heading that way tonight, to talk about the wedding. The words 'wedding' and 'Renee' are two things that should never be in the same sentence. Oh, and, I don't want to listen to her bitch at me about when my wedding will take place. No, that's the last thing I need. Especially right now.

Edward's mop of bronze hair enters my line of vision and, for just a moment, all of my previous anxiety is forgotten. A smile a mile-wide forms on my face, and I'm all teeth and thin lips without realizing...but he's smiling at me now, and I don't care. He's running toward me, only he can't *really* run because of all of his bags; it's more like he's...scooting toward me, trying to run but can't, but he's moving faster than he would be just walking, and so I take mercy on him and meet him halfway.

His bags drop and his arms surround me, and it feels like he's been gone a year, not a week. I missed him more than I realized. My feet leave the ground, and just like in the movies...he spins around in a circle and my feet kick out behind me. Thankfully, I don't kick anyone.

"I missed you so fucking much, angel."

"I missed you, too..."

He breathes in deep and squeezes me tighter still. His lips find my neck and right there, with his lips pressed against my skin, he murmurs, "Love you...can't do that shit again..."

My smile widens even more, if that were possible, and I whisper back, "Don't."

"I won't."

The circles still and there are people moving all around us, all of them with something different to say. Some comment on how in love we look. Some tell us to get a room. Some just excuse themselves and walk on. All of them walk completely around us. No one touches us.

A few minutes later, his lips ghost along my neck and up, until they reach my own. The shock that I always feel when my skin touches Edward's is magnified when our lips come together, and I'm breathless and giddy and overwhelmed. I gasp and he wastes no time pushing his tongue against my own. We kiss and kiss as the observations of the others around us stay the same, but mostly they're just white noise to my ears. All I can see, feel, or hear, is Edward.

I try to breathe only through my nose, but eventually can't stand it anymore, and pull away to breathe. Edward presses his forehead against mine and breathes out a laugh. "Sorry, I've just...dreamt about that all fucking week long."

"Me too."

"Are you ready to go?"

"I'm ready to not be in public with you."

He grins. "We're supposed to have dinner with Ang and Ben tonight though... Right?"

My bottom lip pouts. "Let's cancel."

"She'll kill us. She made my favorite."

"I'll make it up to her."

"Angel..."

This is where I resort to whining. "*Edward!*"

"Bella, come on...Ang really wanted us to come over."

"But — "

"She made fajitas, Bella."

"Edward — "

"Chicken and beef fajitas, Bella."

“I can make some for you — “

“You know we won’t eat if we go home right now.”

“We will — “

“No. We won’t. Once I get you home...we’re going straight to the bedroom. And we’re not coming out for at least another week.”

“I have work.”

“So do I. We’ll call in sick.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Of course you can.”

“Edward!”

“Bella, please? My sister really wants us to come over. We’ll eat dinner and then leave. Fast, I promise. And then we’ll go home. Okay?”

It’s the second time he’s said that in the course of five minutes. We’ll go home. Like we live together. Already. Which totally sobers me up because it reminds me of what I need to discuss with him. Oh, and, it also makes me wonder if he’s going to propose. Like tonight. Maybe that’s why he’s so adamant about going to Ben and Angela’s for dinner. The fidgeting immediately commences.

Edward, of course, notices. “What’s wrong, angel?”

“Oh, uh...nothing?” Why that had to sound like a question is beyond me.

“Bella.”

“No, you’re right. We should go over there for dinner.”

“Really?” He’s smirking; I don’t know what that means, or if I should answer his rhetorical question.

“Absolutely.”

“You sure changed your tune fast,” he says with an eyebrow raised.

I shrug, and hope like hell it doesn’t look forced. It probably does anyway. “I just...um...I don’t want to be all whiney?”

“Uh-huh.”

“No, really! It sounds like you really want to go eat some fajitas...so...um...” My bottom lip snags on my teeth, against my will, and I can’t figure out what to say. I’m undoubtedly nervous now, and blushing, and my middle fingernail automatically starts to scrape against the cuticle on my thumb. It’s pretty much gone already — I’ve been picking at it all week long — and I know if I don’t stop myself, soon, it’ll start bleeding. Then I’ll have to explain to Edward why I’ve suddenly starting picking at my cuticles. I hate doing it, and haven’t since high school, but have sunk back into it easily with everything that’s been running through my mind this week. I hate it.

Of course Edward notices because my arms are still around him, and his are still around me, and I’m still hanging off of him, feet dangling almost a foot off the ground. The minute I start with the cuticle-picking, my forearms tense up, and Edward’s brow furrows as he asks, “What’s wrong? And don’t say nothing.”

I completely suck at lying, so I’m biting my lip harder, trying to keep nonsense from rolling off my tongue before I actually think about what to say. Edward’s face grows more and more concerned, and just as he opens his mouth, I’m sure to question my pause, a security guard walks up to the two of us.

“Excuse me, but you two have been standing here for awhile now. Not that that’s any problem, but...you’re not really watching your bags, sir. Maybe you two should continue this after they’re secured...somewhere else?”

I’m sure that’s not what the nice security guard wanted to say. I’m sure he wanted to tell us to go make out somewhere else, and to take our bags with us because he doesn’t want to have to fill out the paperwork involved in stolen luggage. He was nice though, and because of that, I’ll be nice too.

“Sure thing, sir. Sorry about that.” Oh, and, he saved me from having to answer a question I really didn’t want to.

“Thank you. You two have a nice day.” He smiles and walks a few feet away, but lingers there, and I know he’s waiting for us to actually move on.

I sort of jiggle my feet; Edward gets the hint and puts me down before grabbing his bags and following me to the parking garage. We’re quiet now and that’s alright. It’s giving me time to think about what I’ll say. Not that it will really matter — I’ve had all week to figure out what I’ll say or how I’ll act, and I haven’t...come up with anything. We reach Edward’s car, and I roll my eyes at the grin on his face when I hit the unlock and open trunk buttons. He really likes his stupid Volvo way too fucking much. I’m going to have to do something about that.

“Soccer moms, Edward.”

“Huh?” His eyes are running along the paint of his car. I know he’s looking for nicks, or proof that I hurt it. I almost want to slap him.

“Soccer moms drive Volvo’s.”

He rolls his eyes. "Soccer moms have good taste then."

"Not really."

"You drove it."

"You asked me to."

"Only to pick me up."

Really? He thinks I was driving his car while he was gone? Oh. My. God.

"Yep. Which means I'd never drive it because I actually wanted to. And no, I didn't drive your stupid Volvo while you were gone."

He rolls his eyes as a smirk forms on his face. "Yeah, but you gotta admit — this car shits and gets. Does it not?"

I begrudgingly agree.

Angela made entirely too much food. It looks as if she's prepared to feed an entire army. However, I don't mind so much, seeing as I'm actually a little nervous to be around Edward right now. Alone, at least. Plus, it warms my heart to see the smile Angela gives her brother as she welcomes him with a hug. I don't miss the whisper they share in each other's ears either. Or the sparkle in Angela's eye as she slyly glances my way.

They're definitely talking about me.

"Bella!"

I grin at her. "Hey there, Angela, Ben."

Ben nods and grins before pulling Edward along after him into the living room. I follow Edward with my eyes until I can no longer see him, and only stop looking at the spot he disappeared when Angela clears her throat. I turn to her, blushing, and mutter, "What?"

"You've got it bad."

I nod; I completely agree with her. Before I can answer vocally, however, she keeps talking. "Are you two moving in together?"

"Uh..."

"Your lease is up in three weeks."

"Yeah..."

"You haven't thought about it, have you?"

"Actually — "

"Are you afraid to ask him, or do you not want to live with him?"

"Well — "

She squeals. "I knew it! You do want to live with him!"

"Angela!"

"What?"

"I didn't even...how the hell did you know that?"

"I didn't. You just told me!" She's all embarrassing toothy grin now too. I don't feel so bad about looking like a fool while smiling when I see that goofy grin light up her face. "Just let me handle it. 'Kay?"

"Well — "

"Oh, and Tanya called. Told me about Jasper's slip. Honestly, Bella, you need to not freak out so much. Remember... I told you a long time ago. Don't sweat the small stuff. And don't tell Edward you know."

"I wasn't gonna — "

She grabs my arm and starts pulling me into the kitchen behind her, but she talks the whole way. "Boy! You have to let me help plan it! Please? Renee says I've been a huge help planning hers... Did you know that she wants flamingos at her wedding? I don't know why anyone would want *flamingos* at a wedding. Well, I don't know why anyone would want them at all... Could be worse, I guess. She could want penguins. Still, flamingos. Oh, and she wants the cake to match them. Pink and black. I told her she should just go all out — you know — blush and bashful..."

She's grinning at me. I know what she's doing; she's trying to distract me from myself. I have to admit...it's working. "Pink and pink, Angela?"

"Blush and bashful, Bella. Two shades of pink, one much deeper than the other."

I crack a grin as I ask, “How precious is this weddin’ gonna get, I ask you?”

She breathes out slowly, closing her eyes just a bit before popping them back wide open. “There you are,” she murmurs, “I was worried about you. Especially after talking to Tan. I knew you’d be freaking out.”

“I don’t know why though, to be honest. I really do want to marry him. More than you know…”

“It’s completely normal, you know.”

“It is?”

“Yep!”

I breathe out in relief. “I’m so afraid of slipping up and saying something to Edward that’ll alert him to the fact that I know…”

“Yeah… just… don’t shut him out, and change the subject often. Should be fine. Trust me.”

“Okay.”

She nods, once, and then turns her back to me, grabbing up the plates with the fajitas on them. “Help me set the table?”

The boys are already sitting there, and Edward’s eyes follow the steaming grilled meat like a hunter following his prey. I’m a little scared. A thought occurs to me from out of the blue. “Does Renee really want flamingos at her wedding?”

Ben starts laughing, and Edward even glances away from the plates to look at me like I’m crazy. Angela giggles as she answers. “Yep! That *so* wasn’t a joke.”

“That’s so… tacky.”

“Bella! That’s your mom!”

“I know,” I say, sighing. “That’s the only reason I’m not laughing my ass off about it — it’s completely a Renee thing to do.”

“Don’t say it’s tacky!”

“It is!”

“To each their own!”

I shrug. “That’s right. It’s my opinion that it’s tacky. It’s Renee’s opinion that it isn’t. I think. She could just be asking for it to see if someone will call her on it.”

Angela smirks at me. “Just because you wouldn’t have them in *your* wedding — “

She’s cut off by Edward, who begins choking and coughing on the rather large bite he’s just shoveled into his mouth. Everyone turns and gapes at him, except for Angela, whose smirk widens, and a gleam takes over her eyes. “Too spicy?”

He glares at her and grabs for his water as soon as he’s finished swallowing down his food, and his coughing has ceased. “No. It’s good.”

“Good enough to choke on?” Ben asks, raising his eyebrow.

Edward nods, glances at me, shoots another glare toward Angela, and proceeds to stuff another large bit into his mouth. Angela snickers. “Oh! Bella! Isn’t your lease up in, like, three weeks?”

Then I’m choking and coughing, except there’s no food in my mouth, and my skin turns red as I look toward first her, then Edward, with wide eyes. “Um… yeah?”

“Are you gonna renew your lease? ‘Cause ya know you can only do it for a year, right?”

“Yeah…”

Edward stops throwing food into his eager mouth and turns to me. “Angel?”

“Um…”

“You’re not going to renew, are you?”

I turn to him, lip firmly lodged between my teeth, and cheeks a beautiful shade of burgundy. “Um…”

“You guys should just move in together. Edward owns his condo. No pesky leases,” Ben offers. Angela turns an adoring smile to him, which he returns, and I just kind of…gawk at him. He shrugs at me. “What?”

“That’s a great idea!” Angela interjects, smiling widely at the two of us and blinking innocently. I just sit and stare at her for at least two full minutes before glancing back toward Ben, who motions with his head to Edward before winking at me.

Finally, I turn back to Edward, and I’m blown away by what I see. He’s not eating for one, and he’s slumped over his plate, definitely pouting. “Edward?”

He raises his head to look at me. “Well, that isn’t the way I envisioned it, but…”

“But…?”

Shaking his head and closing his eyes, he asks, “Do you… I mean… Would you…”

“Geez, Eddie,” Ben mutters.

“What, dude? You guys just sprung this shit up at the dinner table! Really? And don’t think I don’t know that you planned this shit, either.”

“Damn right I did!” Angela exclaims. “Why do you think I wanted you two at dinner tonight?”

I sigh. “Edward — “

“Bella was in on it,” Angela blurts. My jaw drops and my eyes widen, and my cheeks, *God*, my cheeks grow even darker. “She so was! What do you think we were talking about in the kitchen for so long?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Edward turn his head to me. Angela winks, and mouths, “Go on.”

“Angel?”

One deep breath and then I ask, “Is that… I mean… Would it be alright — “

“Yes!” Edward shouts before I can even ask properly. “Hell, yes!”

Instantly, I’m grinning. “Really?”

“Fucking…of course! Angel…I gave you a key a long damn time ago. I’ve wanted you there all along.”

I breathe, “Oh, thank God.”

We sit and stare at each other, grinning like complete fools until Ben says, “Well, now that’s cleared up. Let’s eat, dammit.”

Angela giggles and I join her. Edward winks, and mouths, “I love you.” I mouth it back, and we have the most pleasant, relaxed dinner of my life. Ben and Angela are completely comfortable around me now and it shows. They tell me the funniest stories — at Edward’s expense — of things that have happened over the years, having to do with the Cullen family. Edward proceeds to badger Angela about her crush on James when she was younger, and Ben jumps in to defend his wife’s honor…but not before getting a little teasing in of his own. I love it, and I feel as if I’m sitting around with my family, or, at least, the way I always imagined sitting around with a family would be.

I would have never had this dinner with Alice, I realize. There was always some lingering resentment to her, though it didn’t really start overwhelming me until close to their seven year mark. I tried not to let it, but it eventually wore me down. Jasper, Alice, and I would have never been able to sit around and have this good of a time. Well, maybe it would have looked that way, but underneath, there would have always been my resentment toward Alice, and my secret infatuation with Jasper. Alice would have always held some hate in her heart for me, though for the life of me, I don’t know what I ever did *back then* to warrant that emotion from her, and she would have always wondered about Jasper’s real feelings toward me. Jasper would have spent forever trying to find ways to ‘take a break’ from Alice, and he would have always wondered why he felt the way he did for me. Like I said, this dinner…this completely honest, relaxed, comfortable, amazing dinner…would have never taken place with the three of us.

However, with the people sitting around this dinner table…it’s like we’ve never *not* done this. It’s as if we’ve known each other forever, and honestly, I feel like I’ve known them all forever. I love them. They are my family.

Angela whispers in my ear as we’re leaving that she’ll keep her cell on her, and if I freak out, at all, to call her. I smile gratefully, and then laugh as Ben tells me the same thing. They wave goodbye to us with their arms wrapped around one another, and Edward grins as we pull out.

“What are you smirking at over there?”

“Nothing,” he answers.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah — no. I know you better than that. What are you thinking about?”

“You.”

“Vague much?”

“You living with me.”

I blush. Quietly, I say, “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

It’s quiet for a few, and when we stop at a light, he turns to me. “Was that what you were nervous about? At the airport.”

My cheeks flame brighter than they have all night. Maybe brighter than they have all my life. “Um… yeah…”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Well, I was worried it might be — uh — something else.”

I look away from him and out the window, biting my lip and smiling wide. He doesn't say anything else until we reach his... er... our condo. In the elevator, he grins and asks, “When do you want to start moving your stuff over?”

“Oh, uh, whenever? The sooner the — shit — what about Charlie?”

His eyes pop wide open and his breathing goes a little choppy. He croaks, “What about Charlie?”

“His visit?”

“Visit?”

I know what he's thinking; he's thinking I'm talking about *his* visit with Charlie. I'm not. “Yeah, remember I told you? He's coming next week?”

Edward lets out a breath and says, “Ohhh!”

“Yeah...”

He shrugs. “He'll stay with us.”

I really like the way that sounds... “Have you met Charlie? His baby girl living with a man is something he's never experienced...”

“Well, then it's time for him to grow up. Don't you think?”

“Um...”

“Speaking of people staying with us. Rose and Emmett are coming for Renee's wedding, right?”

“Yeah?” I wonder if he knows how close he is to giving away his whereabouts this last week right now.

“They should stay with us too.” He shrugs, grinning. “No sense in them getting a hotel room, unless, of course, she wants to stay with her brother's girlfriend.”

Didn't even think of those two staying with Tanya! “I think they want to stay with me, or, well, us. It was kinda up in the air as to where I'd be when we talked about it.”

“Well, you should call her. Tomorrow though. ‘Cause right now...” he trails off as his eyes follow the curves of my body. The sexiest fucking grin ever forms on his lips as his tongue traces the bottom one.

“Yeah...” I breathe, and the elevator dings.

We somehow make it to the door, neither taking their eyes off of the other the entire way. I don't even bump into anything. I step in front of him to unlock the door, and he pushes through it right after me. I hear his bags fall to the ground, and no sooner than I have the door locked am I turned around, and my back is up against it.

“I missed you so fucking much,” he breathes, moving his face closer to mine slowly. Too slowly. I grab his shirt and jerk him forward. His body collides with mine and our lips find each other effortlessly.

Edward groans when our lower halves meet, and he dips down at the knees as his hands grab handfuls of my ass cheeks and hoist me up. His hardness presses against my warmth and I moan when he moves against me. The moan must set him off because my back feels cool air hit it and I realize he's pulled me away from the door. He's walking while holding me, and for the life of me, I can't stop grinding against him. His step falters, and he almost drops me.

“Fuck, Bella,” he moans. My feet hit the ground and he's turning me around, away from him. My breathing stops, and I become worried that my exuberance might have bothered him. That only lasts until he pushes forward on my upper back, and I realize he's leaning me over the couch.

“Oh my God,” I whisper. His fingers fumble with the button on my shorts, but only for a second, and then they're sliding down my legs. I step out of them and kick them and my flip-flops to the side, all the while hearing him doing the same to his jeans.

He doesn't have to push me forward again. As soon as I hear him kicking his own pants to the side, I'm leaning forward, and spreading my legs wide for him as I raise myself up onto my tip-toes.

“Fuck, angel...that's so goddamn sexy...”

His right hand runs down my back and his left grasps my hips. Down, down, his hand goes until it ghosts over my lips and inside, spreading the moisture. “So wet,” he whispers. “You're ready for me.”

I nod desperately. His fingers disappear but just as fast, the head of his cock brushes against my clit, eliciting another loud moan from me. “Edward — “

I don't finish my pleading because he gives me just what I want. In one swift, sure stroke, he's inside of me completely, and we're moving together flawlessly. The condo is filled with the grunts and the moans and the begging and pleading of our love-making, and I want it to always sound this way. I want to always be with Edward, this way, just as we are, right now. Forever and ever.

When we're both exhausted, and our legs are functioning normally, we gather our clothes and make our way to the shower. Inevitably, as always when Edward and I shower together, we come together once again. I'm insatiable when it comes to this man, and I know that won't ever change. I'll always want

him. I'll always love him. I'll never tire of him. I'll never want another.

As I lay in bed that night, I come to a decision. It's long after Edward has dozed off beside me, but that's okay. It's not something that I'm going to do straight away, and it will help me to keep the secret of what Jasper let me know last week. I know, for sure, what I want to do.

I'm going to ask Edward to marry me. At Renee's wedding.

Okay, so a couple things...first! Sorry this wasn't out this morning, or late, late last night...had computer technical difficulties, well, that and my free trial ran out and I had to pout a little bit, and figure out how to make the dash in Open Office... second! Next chapter won't be out until next Friday...I know, I'm sorry, can't be helped. My niece, SaraKaye, is graduating from high school, and so we're all heading off to East Texas today to watch her walk the stage tomorrow. I won't have the time to write it, I'm so sorry - but I'll try to get it out sooner than Friday, at least.

Thank you to everyone still reading this, reviewing, and putting up with my craziness! Kisses to my wifey, Beausoir - love you - so happy you like the last chap woman!

Hugs to Les16, for putting up with my flakiness (I swear shit's crazy Les!) Go read *The Path We Choose*, it's one of the best stories I've ever read, and you'll be in for a treat if you give it a chance. Trust me.

Lastly, I just had to share this, and to say, if you haven't read any of Rochelle Allison's stories, you should go do it. She's amazing, and all of her stories are unique and different and breathtaking. I haven't the slightest clue where to tell you to start, but, I read them in this order: 1. *Volition*; 2. *Boys of Summer*; 3. *With or Without You*; 4. *Curtains*. And don't be put off by the shortness of *With or Without You* or *Curtains*, because I made that mistake and wanted to kick myself after I did read them, and found them to be absolutely amazing.

"Like a flower I open her, petal by petal, just as pretty, just as soft. I won't go slow when she lets me inside, but I can go slow now, knowing after this the then will be over and we'll be forever in the now."

-Chapter 24, *Curtains*; Rochelle Allison (Probably my favorite line from a fictional story ever, and had to share, so you would see what you're missing. I think that's beautiful.)

Thank you all for still reading! See ya next Friday!

37. Stories

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward, and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them.

Please see author's not at the bottom - that is if you haven't given up on me entirely.

Too much of the same stories in our lives,
I think it's time for change, don't you?
Too much of the same stories in our lives.
(I think it's time for us to walk away from here.)

-Stories, Trapt

"Where's your car?" Charlie grumbles. I've just met him at the airport and now we're driving to the Cullen's for lunch. He doesn't exactly know that I'm living with Edward yet, and it's something that I want to talk to him about on the way, but I don't exactly know how to broach the subject. That's also the reason I haven't told him over the phone before he arrived. Telling my father that I'm living with a man—before marriage, no less—isn't something I've ever thought about. Of course, it's all I can think about these days, and I'm so fucking worried about how Charlie will take the news.

Edward has been telling me all week how I'm overreacting. So has Angela, and Ben, and Esme, and Renee just laughed. It probably wasn't the best idea to pick Charlie up from the airport in Edward's car, either. However, I know my father, and I knew he would show up to Florida in jeans and a flannel shirt. Not exactly ideal clothing for humid, hot weather.

"My air conditioner is broke. I didn't want you to be hot."

"So whose car is this?"

I clear my throat before answering, "Um... Edward's?" *Gah! Why did that have to sound like a question?*

"You sure 'bout that?"

"Yes?" *Again! Grrr... damn... small-town police chief making me nervous.*

"Positive?"

"Dad! What the hell? What's up with the twenty questions?"

He shrugs. "Just took me by surprise, I guess. Sorry 'bout that, Bells."

I breathe out slowly. "S'okay. Just... stop with the interrogation."

"It's a really safe vehicle. I'm glad he's not letting you drive around in some crazy, speed-demon of a car."

"Yeah. Edward takes really good care of me, you know," I tell him in a small voice.

"I know it." That's the end of that. Charlie has said his peace on the matter, and he's not going to go any further. He's a man of few words, and he always has been. "You looking forward to your mom's wedding?"

I decide to ignore the edge in his voice as he asks this. I know he'll always love Renee, and I know it's not an easy question for him to ask. "No."

He chuckles. "Why?"

"Because it's Renee's wedding—"

"Don't call your mother by her name."

"—and she's going all kinds of crazy with her plans. It's going to be ridiculous."

Charlie shakes his head as he grins at me. His expression is a fond one. "Yeah, well, then she hasn't changed. Did I ever tell you she wanted flamingos at our wedding?"

"Are you fucking serious?"

"Watch your mouth, young lady."

"I thought she was just trying to get attention!"

He raises his eyebrows and widens his grin. "She wants flamingos at this wedding?"

"Yes!"

He shakes his head, chuckling. "Figures. Glad I don't have to deal with *that*."

I let him be for a minute. His chuckles turn into belly laughs before they die down. Then, I strike. "Um, Dad?"

“Yeah?”

“I... um...” *Fuck, Bella! Spit it out!* “Well... I just... um...”

“Spit it out, Bells.” *Listen to your father! He’s smart!*

I chuckle nervously and turn to look at Charlie; he’s not laughing. I quiet immediately when I see the serious expression on his face. “Well, um,” I clear my throat, “you see—”

“Isabella,” he warns in his best ‘fatherly voice.’ He knows that will do the trick. *Damn him.*

“ImovedinwithEdward.”

“Say again?”

I clear my throat, again, and take a deep breath. Forcing myself to speak slowly, I finally tell him, “I moved in with Edward.”

“Really.”

“Yeah.”

His head turns away from me to gaze out the window, and I worry about this reaction because I’ve always been able to judge Charlie by the look on his face. I don’t know what to do. “Dad?”

Charlie turns back to me with a neutral expression. He’s not fast enough though, and I catch the grin he was sporting just before. “So things with Edward are pretty serious then?”

I take another deep breath. “Yes.”

It’s quiet for a few moments. My lip goes between my teeth as I wait for him to say something, anything else. Finally, he shrugs. “Good to know.”

My brow furrows as I ask, “You’re not mad?”

“Why would I be mad?”

I don’t answer because he’s right. I may be his little girl still, but there’s no denying I’m all grown up. I’m old enough to make my own decisions, and while knowing that Edward went to ask for my hand in marriage might help me to understand Charlie’s nonchalance, it doesn’t change the fact that he really has no say in how I live my life now. I feel absolutely foolish for being so afraid of my father’s reaction.

We make idle chit-chat the rest of the way to the Cullen’s home, and I chuckle as Charlie remarks about Esme having the same ‘Welcome’ mat he does back in Forks. I made the same observation the first time I saw their home as well. Esme is waiting for us on the front porch; her grin is warm and wide.

“Charlie Swan! It’s about time you make it out to this neck of the woods!”

My father blushes as Esme envelopes him in a hug. “Thanks for having me.”

“I’d be absolutely devastated if you came all the way to Florida and didn’t come to visit me! Now, come along, there’s family you need to meet. Bella, dear, Edward is in the kitchen. Please stop him from doing... whatever it is he’s doing.”

“But—”

“Go on, Bells. I’m sure I’ll be just fine with Esme.”

“Of course you will! My mother is the sweetest person ever! Aside from me, that is.” Angela sends a wink my way as she practically skips into the room. “You must be Chief Swan. Bella got her eyes from you.”

He blushes. Again. I’m so happy to not be the center of attention. “Call me Charlie. And you must be Angela.”

“Indeed, I am!” Angela drawls. I just know she’s gearing up for a *Steel Magnolias* quote, but I don’t have it in me to tell her Charlie won’t know what the hell she’s talking about. It would break her little pea-pickin’ heart.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Charlie tells her, wide, kind grin in place. “Bells told me a lot about you when she came home. You’ve really helped her out, ya know.”

“Well... it’s hard not to love Bella.” Angela winks at me causing a blush to form on my cheeks this time. Charlie grins wider as he notes this fact. “Just ask my dear brother.”

“You could actually ask any of our family. We’re all very partial to Bella,” Carlisle’s voice is gentle as always when he says this. He’s just entered the room, hand extended toward Charlie for a shake. “I’m Carlisle Cullen. My wife and son speak very highly of you, sir, and for that, I must say that I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Charlie’s head bobs in a nod of ‘hello’ as he takes Carlisle’s hand, and for just a moment, a tightening forms in my throat. My father and the man who has already been like a second father to me shaking hands is a momentous occasion, and one, I realize, that I wasn’t entirely prepared for.

“You have a lovely home, Carlisle. And I just gotta say... your family is incredible. Thank you all for taking care of my daughter. I was worried about her, but luckily... she met some real good people. I’m grateful.” I don’t imagine the tremor in Charlie’s voice as he says this, nor do I miss the glassiness of his eyes

before he lowers his head to the ground. My own eyes start to tear up looking at my father this way. He's never been one to show emotion like this. I'm not used to it.

"I'm not as sweet as I used to be!" Angela exclaims, obviously trying to lighten the mood. *Ever the life of the party, that one.*

It works though because Charlie chuckles, albeit a bit uncomfortably. The sound makes me giggle. In his timid, unsure voice, he says, "That's... nice?"

"Angela likes to quote *Steel Magnolias*, Dad."

Charlie nods, but his brow is furrowed. As discreetly as possible, he leans toward me and asks, "That's a movie?"

Only he isn't discreet enough. Angela gasps, "You haven't seen *Steel Magnolias*? Oh my God! Come, come, come! We must remedy this!"

I grin as I watch my father's cheeks become as red as an apple. Slyly, I look toward Esme's beaming face. She mouths, "Go," and sends me a wink. I leave my father in the much-capable hands... of the Cullen women, and make my way to my very own Cullen. Besides, I know Carlisle will keep him safe.

My grin grows as I walk through the door of the kitchen and see Edward. I'm not sure what he's doing, but his brow is furrowed and his lips are pouted, and he looks like a little boy trying to figure out a difficult math problem. He's bent over the island in the middle of the kitchen, studying a box as if it contains the secrets to the universe. I stand, staring at him for a moment, and allow myself to think back over the past week.

Moving out of my apartment, and into Edward's condo, was a crazy two-day event. I should have known the Cullen's, and now Renee, wouldn't allow me to do it on my own. Still, waking up at five-thirty in the morning to pounding on Edward's door was a surprise. Opening it and finding Esme, Angela and Renee standing on the other side with Starbucks in hand was an even bigger surprise. The biggest surprise of all was finding Tanya and Ben in my apartment, packing up my things already.

I wasn't mad at anyone. I'm still not mad at anyone. Overwhelmed is what I am. On top of the support from everyone—even Jasper, who called and congratulated me—it's just such a shock to be so included in so many people's lives. I've never had that before, and I'm still adjusting. It's strange, and wonderful, and completely unexpected, but... it's my life now.

"You just gonna stand there and stare at me? Or are you gonna help?"

I chuckle as I tell him, "I don't know, gorgeous. Your mother specifically told me to stop you doing whatever you're doing."

He rolls his eyes and mumbles, "She doesn't trust me in her kitchen."

"Edward, I don't trust you in *my* kitchen." I hope this blow is softened by the grin I'm still sporting.

"*Our* kitchen, missy. Get it right."

"Do you cook in *our* kitchen?"

"Uh—no. You don't let me."

"Exactly. My kitchen."

Edward sighs, but grins anyway. He mutters, "Yeah, yeah. Your kitchen. Will you ever let me cook in it?"

"Probably not."

"Why?"

"Because I love that kitchen and everything in it, and I just don't trust you with it."

"It was my kitchen first, you know."

"I know."

"So I could assert my authority and *make* you let me cook."

"You won't."

"How do you know?"

"I know you."

He scoffs, "You're stubborn."

I grin, remembering him saying those exact two words to me the first time we met. "You love that about me."

His eyes focus on my own, and my cheeks blush under his penetrating gaze. He's always making me blush. I think he does it on purpose. "I do love that about you. Amongst other things."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah."

“Like what?”

“Like...” Edward rounds the island, and before I know it, he’s standing directly in front of me. He’s turned my body around with only his stare, and now I’m pinned between him and the island in the kitchen. His hands come forward, skimming past my sides, to rest upon the tile of Esme’s counter. “This...” His lips graze the skin below my lips; his touch is tender and slow, and not enough. He presses a kiss between my bottom lip and my chin before ghosting his lips to the right and up. “And this...” Another kiss lands upon my skin, this one at the corner of my mouth. I begin to pant.

Really, it can’t be helped. Edward always has this effect on me, and he knows it. He’s toying with me. “Oh, and, this,” he murmurs as his lips trail even further north, stopping just to the side of my nose. His mouth opens as his bottom lip takes control, grazing the skin to the point of my nose. His lips close and the gentlest of kisses is pressed against me. “But what I love the most about you is...” The trail leads to my eyes, which are shut tightly in anticipation. He presses a kiss to the right first, then the left, and tells me, “Your eyes. That’s what I love the most.”

Oh. My. God. What can I even say when his lips are against me and he’s spouting off the things he loves about me?

“I love your eyes, too,” I respond, breathless and panting at the same time.

“I know.”

“Huh?”

“You said so in your sleep.”

What? I do NOT sleep-talk!

“Uh—think you’re confused. You’re the one who talks in his sleep.”

“You do too, angel.”

“No, I don’t!”

“You do!”

“Do not!”

Edward rolls his eyes. “Last night you said that your father was going to kill me, and that he could so get away with it since he’s the Chief.”

I gape at him. “I didn’t—that’s crazy—Charlie wouldn’t—I do not sleep-talk!”

He just chuckles at me, and nonchalantly says, “Whatever you say, angel.”

“Edward!”

“Bella, dear, oh good. You distracted Edward,” Esme says, smiling as she enters the kitchen. She snatches the box of whatever-the-hell-Edward-had and flies across the room with it. I watch as she opens a cabinet, puts the box back in its proper place, closes the cabinet door, takes a key from her pocket, and locks it. She whirls back around to face us.

I laugh. “Did you really just lock that up?”

Esme grins at me. “Edward, honey, you know you’re not allowed to make pudding anymore. You remember what happened last time you—”

“*Mom!*” Edward whines.

I find this quite interesting, and want to know what happened last time. “So what’d he do? To be banished from making pudding, that is. And to the point that you actually *lock the box up?*”

“Mom,” he warns.

Esme just smiles deviously and winks. “Remind me of that question next time we’re alone.”

“Will do,” I respond with a nod and a grin. I might have winked back at her as well.

“Will not do,” Edward says as he glares at Esme. “Mom—”

“Oh, shush, honey. It’s my right as your mother to share all your secrets.”

“But—”

“Now, let’s go save Charlie. I believe Angela is probably overwhelming him with stories of Shelby’s sacrifice for her son.” Esme sighs. She turns a tender look toward both of us. “You know how she is.”

My grin is still wide as Edward mumbles his agreement about how odd Angela tends to be, and we follow Esme out of the kitchen. My eyes wander as we walk through the house, still amazed at how talented Esme is — in just about everything. However, decorating her home, making this overwhelming house *into* a *home*... well, that is by far her biggest and best accomplishment. Well, aside from raising two such wonderful beings as Edward and Angela. Oh, and marrying such a loving, tender, gorgeous man as Carlisle Cullen. Well... and opening, running, and expanding her business into what it is today. Hmm. If I didn’t know any better, I might believe Esme possesses some kind of super powers, and that she might possibly be hiding a cape inside of one of the fifty closets in this humongous house. Might. Maybe. Hell, she probably does have one hidden.

“Bells! Why didn’t you tell me that these guys don’t know how to fish? I would have brought my supplies and given them a proper lesson!”

I roll my eyes, discreetly. I learned long ago that my father doesn’t particularly care for the rolling of my eyes. He likes to tell me, “Roll your eyes one more time, young lady. I’ll roll your little head.” I learned quickly he wasn’t just joking.

“Sorry, Dad. Must’ve slipped my mind.”

Charlie shakes his head at me disapprovingly. “Well, that’s fine, that’s fine. Now we know. I’m sure there’s a good tackle store around here somewhere. We’ll remedy this straight away. What’re you doing tomorrow, Edward?”

My eyebrows shoot up and I turn my head toward Edward only to find him sporting a grin. “Nada. I figured you’d want to go fishing. So I searched out a tackle store. Oh! And I bought four poles for us.”

My eyebrows shoot right back down into a furrow. *Edward went and bought fishing poles?* “When did you do that?”

He looks at me, a somewhat guilty expression on his face. “The other day. I didn’t want to bother you with it. So I just made sure I got some good advice on what to look for and what was best.”

“Edward,” my father scolds, “I hope you didn’t let those clerks talk to you into a bunch of stuff you don’t need. Or a more expensive pole that just isn’t necessary.”

Edward shakes his head. “Not at all. I, uh, actually called Jasper. He seems to know quite a bit about fishing. Anyway, he helped me.”

If my father’s eyebrows could go any higher, they would probably disappear right into his hair. It’s another subject I have yet to breach with Charlie—Edward and Jasper’s budding bromance. I’m still coming to terms with it myself, but that doesn’t mean I’m unhappy about it. I always thought the two would have made good friends if the situation had been a little different.

I’m brought out of my guilty thoughts of withholding information from my father by his throat clearing. He says, “Well, yeah. Jasper’s been fishing with the res boys for a long time. It’s Bell’s fault, really. She introduced them all to each other. Haven’t been able to get a good bite since those boys started fishing on the same days as me.”

“Well, Dad, when you grow up, you get days off. Considering all those guys work at the same place, that means they all have the same days off.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve half a mind to call the damn plant and ask ‘em to change their days off. Think that’d work?”

“Uh—no.”

“Yeah, me either,” Charlie grumbles. “So, Edward, tell me about these poles.” I tune out on them and instead make my way to Angela. She doesn’t bother to hide her grin, and she doesn’t waste any time whispering how wonderful my father is.

I can’t agree with her more as I watch him interact flawlessly with the Cullen’s, and, most importantly, with Edward. My heart doesn’t slow for the rest of the day and I wonder if it ever will. The thought of my life finally starting crosses my mind more times than I can count, and I just know... that everything I’ve waited forever for... everything I’ve spent my life dreaming might happen to me... well, it’s all coming true before my eyes.

The drive to Edward’s condo is not a quiet one. Though really, I didn’t expect it to be. It is, however, longer than I expected. Edward has taken it upon himself to be Charlie’s own personal tour guide. It feels as if we’ve driven around the state by the time we actually park in the garage and make our way out—Edward carrying Charlie’s bags—Charlie arguing about it—and me, well I’m just grinning at their antics. They get along so well with one another, and if it wouldn’t give away too much, I might have asked when they got to know one another so well.

Alas, it would give away too much. Most likely, it would embarrass the crap out of Edward, but also, it would disappoint him. The thought stops me cold.

Edward would be disappointed to find I already have knowledge of his plans for us. I already know he wishes to ask for my hand. I’m unsure of when exactly he wants to do it, but that he wants to, I’m sure. I don’t even know that I’ll beat him to the punch, so to speak, seeing as I want to propose at Renee’s wedding. That’s the plan, but now... now I’m wondering. Would me asking him disappoint him?

An alarm begins its shrewd chime in my head as the facts begin to weigh me down. *Ding!* Edward didn’t travel all the way to Washington for nothing. *Ding!* He didn’t spend a week with my father for no good reason. *Ding!* He went to ask for my father’s blessing. *Ding!* He wants to ask for my hand in marriage.

The last *ding!* rips a question from my brain that I hadn’t thought of before: Would I be taking what Edward wants away from him with this crazy plan of mine to propose?

“Bella?” Edward asks. He and Charlie are both standing at the door to our condo, matching expressions of worry written across their faces. I realize I’m still standing in the door of the elevator, and the dings weren’t so much in my head as they were actually taking place around me. *Ding!* chimes the elevator as it, again, tries to close, but I’m standing in its way.

I blush furiously, realizing that I’m in my head when I need to be here, with the two men that mean the world to me. I sigh. “Sorry.” The expressions don’t fade from their faces, and I know I need to explain what I’ve just been thinking about, but I can’t exactly tell them the truth. So... I improvise. “Was just thinking about something Mom told me.” Which isn’t exactly a lie. I mean, Renee talked to me about marrying Edward. “And weddings.”

The non-lie works. Charlie blushes, most likely thinking of my mother in a wedding dress—for which I’m instantly contrite. Only... what’s this?

Edward blushes too! They’re looking at each other! Charlie is discreetly shifting his eyes toward Edward, who is trying his darndest to look anywhere but me while at the same time, sneaking a glance at my father. *Hmm. Interesting. And so not smooth. These two should never conspire or play poker together. They suck.*

"Anyway," I say, clearing my throat, "it's not really important." Which is a total lie; it's the most important thing in the world to me—marrying Edward, spending forever with him. "So... uh... let's go inside?"

Immediately, twin nods of relief spring from them both and Edward's back is turned to me before I can blink as he unlocks the door. Charlie follows him inside and I trail behind.

A low whistle blows through Charlie's lips. "Movin' on up, huh, Bells?"

My jaw drops. "I'm not—"

"Holy wow! Is that a fifty-two inch?" Charlie cuts me off before I can even begin.

"Sure is," Edward answers proudly.

Another whistle from Charlie, this one not so low, more appreciative. "High definition, too?"

"Yes, sir."

My father shakes his head. "Now, now, Edward. I'm going to have to insist you call me Charlie. Or something else besides sir. Makes me feel old."

"Think I can handle that," Edward replies, grinning all the while. "You know... I'm pretty sure I get all the sports channels. Weren't the Mariners playing tonight?"

"Hot damn! A man after my own heart!"

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, uh, we put you in the guest bedroom, Dad. That's the door on the—"

"Plenty of time for that later, Bells. There's ball on television needs attending to."

They round the black, leather couch at the same time—only on opposite ends—and plop down in a fashion that might have looked planned, if I didn't know better. Edward reaches for the remote, and after a short discussion with Charlie on how to work the listings, they're watching the Mariners. Happily. Oblivious to me, still standing by the door next to Charlie's bag. I sigh and shake my head, but resign myself to the fact that I've been abandoned for America's favorite pastime.

Instead of moping, I do what I always did growing up. I make my way to the kitchen and pull two beers out. 'Vitamin R' for my father—which I had to special order because they do *not* sell it in the state of Florida, and a Bud Light for Edward, who didn't want my father to think him pretentious for drinking only foreign beers.

I don't bother to round the couch because I know I'll only get yelled at for stepping in front of the action. Instead I sidle up to the back and pass the beers over the shoulders of their respective drinkers. Identical mutterings of, "Thanks," make their way to my ears and, unwittingly, a smile creeps its way across my lips.

There really is no point in trying to carry on a conversation with two people of the male persuasion when there is baseball on television. I know this, have known this for most of my life. Hell, I grew up with Charlie Swan. Mariners or Seahawks games mean that Charlie is off-limits for the duration. Still, knowing this and coming to terms with the fact that the man I wish to spend the rest of my life with is exactly the same is... baffling. How did I not know that Edward is aware of what a 'ground rule double' or 'seventh-inning stretch' is? Honestly, aren't these things one should know about their significant other?

In my defense, I've never seen Edward actually watch a sports game. From the way the two talk though—in broken sentences and grunts, no less—he knows much about football as well. Also, how was I supposed to know that Jacksonville had its own football team? Just because I grew up with a sports-addicted freak doesn't mean I actually picked anything up. Still, from the crazy looks I received from the two of them... I'm kind of thinking I might need to brush up on my terminology. In fact, if what Edward is saying is true, if his family has a box at Alltel Stadium—the home of the Jacksonville Jaguars—well, yeah. I wonder if Angela goes to the games? Surely we can find something other than football to discuss while the men-folk speak in their weird, grunting speech.

Instead of trying to actually make sense of what they are saying, and being bored out of my mind watching the tiny white ball fly through the stadium—which, by the way, I have to wonder about the people that run the cameras, and how exactly they're able to keep up with something so small—I decide to pull my laptop into the living room and take up post in Edward's overstuffed chair. It's quite nice in here if I actually stick my earbuds in and pretend like the other two aren't in the room with me.

However, when I open my browser I'm struck with dumb. I can't think of a thing to look up. I mean, this is the internet, and it's practically smarter than me. Shouldn't it just tell me something to look up? After no less than ten minutes—and nothing to show for it, except for a still empty search box on Google—I close out the window with a sigh. My eyes find themselves looking back toward the television screen, but even with my music blasting in my ears, it's not interesting to me.

My vision wanders to the two men on the couch. They're still sitting identically; slouching with their legs kicked up on the coffee table and crossed at the ankle. As I watch, Charlie lifts his beer to his lips and tosses it back. His head flies back forward to soon, and he holds the can in front of his face before giving it a good shake. I cringe, expecting the liquid to foam over and onto him and Edward's leather couch, but it doesn't. Empty. My eyes then search out Edward's bottle, only to find it empty as well, sitting on the coffee table. Without a coaster. I glare at it for all of a second before hopping from the chair and snatching it off of the table. I then glare at the little ring of moisture residing in its place.

I shift my glare to Edward—he knows I can't stand when people don't use coasters—but he isn't paying attention to me. With a huff I realize Charlie is telling him some story about me when I was younger. I roll my eyes. Charlie's stories are more embarrassing than Renee's stories because they all involve either fishing or sports. Fishing I picked up on. Sports I never did. Obviously.

I don't bother walking behind the couch, instead choosing to lean one hand on Edward's outstretched legs as I reach over to snatch Charlie's can from him. I'm just at the brink of being really pissed because they haven't said so much as two words to me in the last half-hour—even before I put my earbuds in—when I feel Edward. One hand rests on the small of my back and the other he reaches under my body to hold my arm stable as I reach for Charlie's empty. Immediately, I blush.

Then, so low that only I can hear, he tells me, "Thank you, angel."

The grin on my face as I make my way to the kitchen is ridiculous, and I stay a few extra minutes just to make myself look more presentable. I can only imagine the teasing Charlie would give if he saw me like this. Cheesy and in love.

So it is with great joy that I make my way back to the two men. The loves of my life, and hand them refills. It is amusement, and not annoyance, that I regard them after that. Just a simple gesture from Edward, and I'm seventeen all over again. Only, I'm swooning over him, and not a blonde-haired, blue-eyed, Texan with a killer drawl. It's with this thought in my head that I open my closed laptop, pull up my word processor, and begin to type.

I'm going to rewrite my history, and this time, I'm going to do it right.

This? Is where I apologize, profusely. I can't even begin to tell you all how sorry I am for the *absolutely ridiculous* wait time on this. It's been almost five months to the day since I've updated *Through Glass*, and I have to tell you all, it was never, ever, ever my intention to take a break, at all, much less one of such epic proportions. When last I updated, my husband was getting ready to ship out to Basic Training for the Air Force, and, well, I found that the closer it came to that date, the further my mind wandered from anything fanfiction, or fanfiction related. When he left, my intention was to finish this story, and get crackin' on my next. I *did* get three chapters of that story written, but everytime I pulled up this chapter, it was like... Brick. Fucking. Wall. Just couldn't do it. And I know many of you grew frustrated with me in the course of this hiatus, some of you vocalized, and as upset as you might be with me, please know that, even frustrated words... were the motivation I needed to finish this chapter. As you can probably tell, I am sorry. So incredibly sorry, and I will *not* do this to you again.

That being said, it was my goal to finish the story before posting anything else at all. I have not. I finished this chapter today, and as I did, I told myself I wasn't going to post. It's been glaring at me, as I've been working on the next chapter - which, by the way, is coming along quite nicely - and finally, I decided to throw all of you a bone. I probably should have posted an author's note between the last chapter and this one, but honestly? I hate those things when other author's do them, so I decided to post the chapter, and to give you all my apologies along with it. With all of that, I'll tell you this: there are two regular chapters and an epilogue planned for this story, and I will be posting them ALL no later than November 1st. It truly doesn't take me long to write a chapter, and I know what is going in to these three, but now my husband is at tech school, and my nights have been sanctioned to skype and all that is *him*. So, I'm giving myself some leeway. Also, because I haven't been clear, the last three will post at the SAME TIME, on the SAME DAY. I will post them minutes apart, as my way of saying thank you to everyone who hasn't flounced, and to all of those who have been around since the beginning. Thank you all, so much.

Les, my deepest apologies to you, when I say fanfiction, I mean fanfiction, and there have been so few times that I've actually read. I get your updates still, and it's gonna be a hell of a day when I finally get to read all that you've done. I've seen where you've been rec'd, I've seen where you've faithfully kept up with your readers and your friends, and I've been a complete shit to you. I am so sorry, and please know I haven't forgotten about you or your awesomeness by any means, whatsoever. It's just been hell without my backbone here to keep me sane, and I've taken to moping in dark rooms and communicating with nods instead of words. I am so sorry.

Everyone please go read her story, *The Path We Choose*, you won't be sorry.

Lastly, Beausoir, if you're there... honey, I hope everything is okay, and know that you're still in my every thought. Love you, woman, let me hear from you soon.

Thank you all for actually reading through, your words are incredible, and... I'll be seeing you all again, very soon.

38. All My Life

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

When you smile, on your face, all I see is a glow,
You picked me up when I was down,
And I hope that you feel the same way too,
Yes, I pray that you do love me too.

All my life,
I've prayed for someone like you,
And I thank God,
That I, that I finally found you.

-All My Life, K-Ci & JoJo

"No! No, no, no! I swear! That arrangement does *not* go on the dinner tables. It goes on the side tables!" Esme shakes her head and I swear I hear her curse under her breath, right before she turns to me and mumbles, "You'd think I didn't use this *exact same crew* for Angela and Ben's wedding."

I stifle a giggle as I watch her face turn even redder. Apparently, the crew she's speaking of also doesn't know what a side table is. "Esme, really, it's okay. Don't stress so—"

"Are you joking me right now?" she yells at the poor man carrying the flower arrangement. He freezes and turns wide, alarmed, downright *scared* eyes toward her. "Bella remind me to hire a different crew for your and Edward's wedding."

She walks off then, grasping the man's arm as gentle as a vice, and directs him to a side table. I watch as she goes into a detailed explanation of the differences between dining, side, and refreshment tables. I almost feel sorry for the man, but in all honesty his misfortune is saving me a headache if things aren't perfect. Because then I'll have to listen to Renee. So don't want that.

I also don't mind because he's receiving Esme's full attention. Which means she didn't catch the blush at the mention of mine and Edward's wedding. Or the nervous twitching taking place all over my face. Or the way I can't stop wringing my hands for five fucking minutes after she leaves.

I turn away from the spectacle taking place now that Esme has a small crowd around her. She looks like a teacher at the front of a classroom, and all of her students are dumbfounded by her lesson. I snicker at the matching expressions of confusion stretching across all of their faces.

"Mrs. Cullen sure is a firecracker, isn't she?" Rose asks as she sidles up to the table I'm spreading the linens across. "This color is beautiful, by the way."

Her fingers sweep across the second set of linens—the one of top of the white bottom. "It's called 'tyrian,' and this one is called 'atrous.' Leave it to Renee to make 'purple' and 'black' into a spectacle."

Rose chuckles lightly at my expression. I mean, really, Renee's colors are purple and black. Who comes up with these weird names for colors? "Was Angela upset? You told me she was really shootin' for 'blush' and 'bashful.'"

I outright laugh at this, remembering Angela's pout when Renee unveiled the color scheme. "Oh my God, Rose! You should have seen her! I wanted to flap her bottom lip so badly!"

She shakes her head. I can tell she's trying to reign in her amusement. "I'll bet. She sounds very... exuberant."

"Exuberant is one way to describe Angela." I smirk.

"Can I be honest about something?" I nod. Rose bites her lip; she looks nervous—something I'm not used to seeing on Rosalie. When she speaks again, it's in a whisper. "I'm a little anxious about meeting her."

My jaw begins its drop, but I'm quick enough to stop it from gaping too far open. Breathlessly, I ask, "Why?"

Her eyes drop down and she shrugs her shoulders. "It's just..." A sigh here. "You..." A semi-chuckle here. "We..." Another sigh here. "You and me..." A breathless laugh here. "We're, uh..." A throat clearing here. "I mean..." A huff here. "Okay, shit. We're still friends, right?"

My brow furrows as I look at her. "Um... did I do something that would lead you to believe we *weren't* friends anymore?"

Some of the tension leaves her shoulder but her voice is still small as she asks, "So you aren't going to abandon us?"

"By us, you mean you and me, right?" She nods. "Hell no." More tension leaves her shoulders. "Why would you think that?"

Rose sighs. "She's gonna be your sister soon. I just—"

"Rose, stop right there." That worried expression on her face breaks my heart. I really didn't know Rose was so sensitive about this particular subject. I figured, maybe somewhat naively, that Rose would be just as excited to meet Angela as Angela was to meet her. "You and I have been through a lot together. Haven't we?"

"Yeah."

"And I'd like to think of you as one of my best friends. Isn't that how you think of me?"

“Of course.”

“Then don’t. Don’t ever worry about something silly like being replaced in my life. You never will be.”

Her eyes stay firmly planted on the floor and her arms cross tightly around her chest. In a small voice, she asks, “Promise?”

Both of my hands move forward to grasp Rose’s forearms. I tug a little bit, trying to loosen her grip on herself. “Hey.” I tug a little harder and she finally lets me pull her arms toward me. Once she’s standing with both arms to her side, I run my hands down until I’m holding both of her hands. “Look at me, Rose. Please.”

Slowly her eyes rise from the floor until she’s meeting my gaze. I smile at her before telling her, “I promise you. Nothing is gonna happen to our friendship.”

A small grin tugs at her lips. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say to her as I return her smile.

Her breath escapes her mouth slowly. “God! Overreact much? I’m so sorry, Bell—”

“Oh my gosh! Is this Rose?” Angela’s voice interrupts Rose’s apologies. She’s just arrived back in town. I received her text earlier telling me that she’d be here soon. She’s been in Tampa showing some land for a prospective client—grudgingly at that. She really didn’t want to leave town so close to the wedding, and had to pull some serious weight to get everything done and be back here today.

Rose’s eyes widen as they take her in. I know she can see the resemblance to Edward and Esme there, and I’m pretty sure she’s gathered that this is Angela. “I’m Rose?”

I snicker at Rose’s unsure tone. “Ang, this is Rose, yes. She and Emmett got in last night.”

Rose is still just standing there, looking kind of dumbstruck. Angela, however, is ecstatic. She’s been prattling on for weeks about finally meeting Rose. “This is so exciting! I’ve heard so much about you, Rose!”

I wiggle one hand loose of Rose’s death grip on my hand and pinch the skin on her bicep. “Ow!” She shakes out of her stupor pretty fast and turns a glare at me. *Wow, haven’t been on the receiving end of a Rose glare in awhile.*

“Ouch, Bella. Totally see what you mean. That’s scary,” Angela observes, laughing quietly and pointing a finger at Rose’s face.

The glare becomes confused as Rose contemplates Angela’s words. I would have laughed if I wasn’t still trapped in the gaze of her ice-blue eyes. Rose’s eyebrows furrow as she turns from me to look at Angela. “What’s scary?” she asks quietly.

Angela gasps. “Oh my gosh! Bella never told you how much she used to piss her pants when you’d glare at her?”

That snaps me out of my daze. I hiss, “Angela!”

She laughs at me; obviously she’s decided to embarrass me further. “You used to glare at her and make her cower! And then this big argument went on with my cousin and his wife at my parent’s house, and Bella told me later that my cousin’s wench of a wife wouldn’t have stood a chance against one of your looks!”

A smile cracks on Rose’s face before she lets out one of her signature, delicate chuckles. “Bella. Really?”

“What?” I ask, annoyed at the direction the conversation has gone.

“You were really afraid of me? I thought you always held up pretty well. I just really thought you weren’t confrontational.”

I scoff at her. “You big liar! You knew I was afraid of you!”

“I didn’t! I swear! I mean, you told me off pretty good when you’d had enough.”

Angela starts laughing harder. We both turn to her. She gasps as she tries to speak. “Should have seen her—was fabulous—Gianna didn’t even know—”

I roll my eyes. “Angela!”

“What?” she gasps.

“Make sense!”

We wait as she regains her composure. When she can finally breathe right again, she tells us, “Sorry... I was just remembering how much of a spitfire you were that day with Gianna. You really made Tanya’s day, ya know.”

Despite my frustration, I smile. “Well, I still maintain that Rose would have done a better job at telling Gianna off than I did.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Rose says with a real smile on her face as she looks at me. “Tanya told me you did a pretty good job yourself.”

“So B’s just standing there, like fucking dumbstruck—”

“I was not, Emmett!” *Damn Emmett McCarty and his big mouth.*

“You sorta were, Bell.” *Damn Jasper Whitlock and his stupid head.*

“I was *not!*”

“Um, Bella? I’ve seen the ‘Rose glare,’” Angela says, laughing as she makes air-quotes. “I’m gonna go with you being ‘fucking dumbstruck.’” *Damn Angela Cheney and her idiotic air-quotes.*

“When did this become embarrass Bella night?” I ask, annoyed.

“Well, Bella, I do believe Ang asked Rose about the first time you two met, and then Emmett took over the story, and then—”

“Yeah, Ben, I was here. I got the gist of how the conversation started.” *Damn Ben Cheney and his stupid smart mouth.*

“Bella!”

“Angela!”

“Bella!”

“Tanya!”

“Bella!” *Damn Rose McCarty née Whitlock and her scary glare.*

“That’s not fair, Rose!”

“Damn, Bell, that’s twice in one day.”

“It’s not my fault!”

“Well, if you’d let us finish the story—”

“Tell it right! I wasn’t ‘dumbstruck.’” *Oh, great. Now I’m making air-quotes.*

“Uh, B?”

“What, Emmett?” I snap, because, really, I wasn’t dumbstruck.

“You sorta were. I was there, remember?”

Emmett’s gentle, teasing tone reminds me of why I can’t ever stay mad at him. Just as I’m starting to calm down, Edward’s hand reaches to knead the skin on the back of my neck. His lips make contact with my ear as he whispers, “Don’t be mad, angel.”

Any anger I felt left me with the kiss he places underneath my ear, and I’m turning toward him with a smile.

“Oh, gag me,” Emmett says, as he fakes retching sounds.

I turn to him with a smirk. “Let’s get it right, Emmett.” My gaze turns to Jasper as I raise an eyebrow in his direction. He laughs as he takes in my expression. I point my finger toward Angela and Ben and they raise their eyebrows at me. Tanya is forcing herself to reign in her laughter, because she knows me too well, and she knows I’m about to say something funny. Finally I let my eyes rest upon Rose, who is still giving me a bitch glare.

“I wasn’t ‘dumbstruck.’ I was scared fucking shitless.” Everyone busts into laughter at my statement. We’re sitting at a rather large table at La Popular, sharing pitchers of margaritas. We all talked earlier about going to a bar after the rehearsal dinner, or heading to either Tanya’s apartment, Ben and Ang’s house, or Edward and my condo, but in the end the lure of La Popular won out. Emmett and Jasper ordered food even though we’d eaten ourselves silly earlier at the rehearsal, and everyone else decided to order something to take home with them. Edward was looking quite forward to feeding me sopapillas dripping with honey later. To be honest, I was looking forward to it too.

“So anyway!” Emmett’s voice carries over the sound of everyone’s laughter. “Rose and I left Seattle right after my football practice—”

“Well! You said you couldn’t miss practice!”

“—and she wouldn’t let me eat anything because she was all hellfire and in a hurry to get home—”

“I offered to bring snacks the night before! You said you wanted an empty stomach so you could fill it up with Momma’s cooking!”

“—and meet Jasper’s girlfriend’s best friend. And then B can’t get a damn word out of her mouth to say hi to Rose and Rose is all unimpressed and I’m—”

“Emmett! I wasn’t unimpressed!”

“—fucking hungry! Charlotte and Peter didn’t know which way to look, but I’m pretty sure they were afraid I’d tear their house down trying to get to the food—”

“If you were that hungry, you should’ve said something!”

“—and to be fucking honest I was about halfway to just dragging B and Rose to the dining room, staring contest and all—”

“Shit, Em, you make it sound like you’d never eaten or something,” Jasper cuts in, snickering.

“—and I was fucking starving, so fuck you, Jas. Anyway! Rose finally had enough of the glaring and we went to eat. And, fuck me if Charlotte hadn’t made sweet potato pie. Was a fucking awesome day.”

Everyone starts laughing again, and I join in with them this time, wholeheartedly. Ben recovers first, and asks, “So, if I may? Rose, why didn’t you like Bella?”

I’m curious about this myself, so I turn my gaze toward her. She’s blushing, and biting her lip; her whole body has some sort of nervous twitch. “Well… It’s not ever that I didn’t like Bella. Well, okay, that’s a lie. I didn’t like her for years, but on initial meeting, it wasn’t strictly a matter of dislike.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” Jasper snarks at her.

“Watch it, bub,” she snarks right back. The bitch glare is turned on in full-force, and it’s directed right at her brother. “It’s partly your fault, and you know it.”

He looks ashamed as he darts his eyes away from her and toward me for a brief second, before nodding and focusing on the table in front of him.

I clear my throat. “Explain that.”

“No,” Rose tells me. She turns her gaze to me and raises an eyebrow. The glare is still there, but it’s softer now. “Because that part of our history doesn’t matter anymore.”

My brow furrows in confusion as I take in her words. She raises her other eyebrow at me and looks pointedly at Edward and then Tanya before settling back on me. A light bulb goes off in my brain. “Oh,” I breathe.

“Yes, so, I think we all know what I’m talking about. Now, as for the rest of it… well… she, shit, this isn’t gonna sound nice, but… well… she annoyed me.”

My jaw drops open at her words. *How the hell did I annoy her? I didn’t even do anything!*

“See!” Emmett yells, finger pointing right at my face. “Fucking dumbstruck! That’s exactly how she looked!”

I flash an annoyed look at him and he puts his finger down. “I didn’t do anything, Rose. How could you be annoyed with me?”

She rolls her eyes. “That’s exactly why I was annoyed with you. You didn’t do anything. Alice was all spitfire and talk and big ball of energy, and then there’s you. Plain Jane, afraid of her own shadow, and so nervous she couldn’t even get a word out. I wanted you to call me on my shit. And you gotta admit, even though it took you seven years, once you did, well… look at us now.”

“Wow,” I say quietly. “You couldn’t have given me a heads-up or something?”

“Well, you are very dense.”

“I am not!” I reply, indignantly.

“Maybe dense isn’t the right word,” Rose says teasingly.

“What would be?” I ask, once again annoyed.

“Hmm,” she hums, bringing a finger to her chin and tapping. She purses her lips as she thinks and the longer she sits there the more my ire rises. Finally, her eyes light up and she turns to me. “Slow.”

“Slow?”

“Mhm, slow. You don’t catch on very fast, in other words.”

My jaw drops again as the table laughs, once more, at my expense. Edward, who has been silently amused for most of the night, speaks up beside me, “You know, Rose, I’m actually inclined to agree with you on that topic—”

“Edward!” Tanya and I exclaim at the same time.

“However!” He rolls his eyes as he yells the word over us. “There was one thing you said about her that just isn’t true in any way.”

Rose smirks at him, mirth dancing in her eyes. “Oh yeah?”

“Yes.”

“And what would I be wrong about? I’m usually right about everything. Ask Emmett.”

“Oh, I know. Emmett’s gone into extensive detail of how you’re never wrong.” I snicker as Emmett’s face goes pale. I’m not the only one, most of the table is quietly chuckling. “However… I just can’t agree with you calling Bella plain. There just isn’t a thing plain about her.”

I blush as the women around the table collectively coo at his romantic statement. Emmett rolls his eyes, as Emmett is apt to do when the conversation takes a turn toward love. Ben smirks, as Ben is apt to do when he feels like someone finally caught on to what he’s known all along. And Jasper?

Well, he responds with, “Yeah, Edward, but she is a plain pain in the ass.” To which everyone is laughing again. At my expense. Again. I can’t help but laugh with them.

“Oh! Emmett! Right there, baby, oh shit, fuck, mmm…”

“Never again, Edward. They are never staying with us again.”

“Fuck! Oh! Baby! Harder!”

“It was your idea to let them stay in our guest room.”

“Just like that! Oh, Emmett!”

“You said it was okay! You should have told me no.”

“Fuck! I’m coming! I’m coming, Emmett! Oh, baby! Don’t stop! Don’t stop!”

“Trust me. If I’d known I would be listening to this, and that it would be cock-blocking me in my own house, I would’ve said no.”

“Oh! Oh! Oh! Fuck! Spank me, daddy! Just like that!”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

“Harder! Spank me harder!”

“Didn’t she just say she was coming?”

“Yeah! Oh, baby! That’s right, baby! This ass is all yours!”

“Oh my fucking…”

“Yeah, baby! You like this ass, don’t you? Spank it, baby! Spank it!”

“I just don’t…”

“I said spank it! Harder, baby!”

“I can’t…”

“Harder, daddy, harder!”

“I don’t think…”

“Yeah, you like it when I call you daddy, don’t you, baby?”

“Okay!” I yell, finally having had enough. “I can’t listen to you two fuck anymore! Hurry up and finish and go the fuck to sleep!”

Laughter rings through the condo, and I know we’ve been had. I jump from the bed and throw open our door. Rose and Emmett are standing at their bedroom door, laughing their asses off. Fully clothed. Tears running down their faces. Fully clothed.

“You two fucking suck!”

“Sorry, B,” gasps Emmett. “We couldn’t fucking help it!”

I can hear Edward snickering from behind me. He’s propped another pillow behind his head and he’s laying back on one arm, watching the show. I glare at him, but he doesn’t stop laughing.

“Bella,” chokes Rose, “I’m sorry, but… so funny… can’t believe you let me say daddy more than once…” Emmett starts howling at that, and I cross my arms over my chest as I continue to stare them both down.

“Next time you guys come to visit, you’re staying with Tanya!” I slam the door in their faces and they start laughing *even harder*. I didn’t think that was possible.

Edward is staring at me, amusement written all over his face. He reaches to the night stand and pulls the remote to his stereo to him. The room fills with music as he beckons me to him.

“Let’s give them a little payback, angel,” he says, huskily, grabbing the sheet and flinging it away from him to reveal his fully naked, fully erect body.

My answering grin is downright wicked. Payback sounds incredible.

“You two fucking suck,” Rose gripes as she adjusts the massager on the pedicure chair. She’s sporting some major bags under her eyes this morning.

I snicker. “You two fucking started it.”

“Started what?” Angela asks.

“Your brother and Bella kept me and Emmett up all fucking night with their stupid bed—”

“La, la, la, la, don’t want to hear! Never mind! That’s my brother!” Angela actually plugs her ears as she continues to make noises to block out anything Rose might say.

“What about your brother? Oh! Bella! Were you two practicing for *your* wedding night?” Esme and her eyebrow waggling is a little disturbing. She shouldn’t want to know that about her son.

“Can I just say that I’m mildly disturbed by your interest in mine and Edward’s sex life?”

“La, la, la, la! Warn someone, Bella!”

“And you! You wanted all the dirty details after we had sex the first time! Now it’s too much for your delicate ears?”

“I just mean—”

“Besides, what Edward and I did was nothing compared to having to listen to Rose call Emmett ‘daddy’ in the middle of the goddamn night.”

Rose snickers. “Just giving you some variety. If I have to hear you call Edward gorgeous one more time...”

“Rest assured,” I scoff, “I will *not* be calling Edward ‘daddy’ anytime soon.”

Angela shivers, presumably in disgust. “That’s just... very disturbing.”

“I know!”

“I don’t know... When you love someone—” Esme starts, but Angela and I quickly cut her off at the pass. Fingers firmly planted in ears and both of our tongues moving as copy her words from earlier. It’s very effective.

Until Renee shows up. “I’m so sorry I’m late! Oh, gosh! Traffic was monstrous!”

“Oh, it’s quite alright, Renee, dear. They have your pedi-bath ready right here next to me,” Esme says, eyes twinkling.

“So... what did I miss?” Renee asks distractedly as she fights with the straps on her wedges. I glare in Esme’s direction, but she pretends not to notice.

“We were just discussing Edward and Bella’s sex life.”

“Oh! Excellent! I’ve been dying to get the dish!”

“Kill me now.”

“She thinks it’s disturbing that I’m interested.”

“Please, kill me now.”

“Hmm, I wonder what she thinks about me being interested.”

“Kill. Kill. Kill.”

“Why are you two so interested?” Rose asks.

“Yeah,” Angela interjects, “You never drilled me about mine and Ben’s sex life.”

“Oh God. Kill me now.”

“Don’t be so dramatic, Bella,” Renee chides. “Besides, it’s my day. I want all the dirty details.”

Oh God. Now Renee is doing the eyebrow waggling thing.

“Kill me. Just do it, please.”

In unison, Renee and Esme roll their eyes at me. “Bella, we just want to make sure that you two are getting enough practice in.”

Esme said it so nonchalantly, I almost don’t catch it. Except I do. So, I ask, “Practice for what?”

“Our grandchildren,” Esme and Renee answer in unison.

“*What?*”

“Oh, you heard us, Bella,” Renee responds, rolling her eyes. *And Charlie wonders where I picked that habit up...* “And don’t act so surprised. You are getting up there in age, ya know.”

“Mom!”

Rosalie begins to laugh and Angela joins in. I turn my head to glare at the two. “You’re not gonna help me out here?”

This, of course, only causes the two to laugh harder. Esme looks at them in amusement.

Renee looks at them with wide, blinking, innocent eyes. She asks, “Help you out with what, Bella?”

“Are you serious, Mom? Edward and I aren’t even... I mean... We haven’t even... Ugh!”

Angela gasps, her words are jumbled. “But—Edward—Charlie—*oh*, Bella!” She can’t continue speaking with the force of her giggles.

I turn my head to Rosalie. She’s quieted down and is looking at me in bemusement. “Bella, you know. I know my brother wasn’t able to keep his mouth shut,” she says, quietly enough for only me to hear.

There they are. The nerves I’ve been trying to suppress for a month. The nerves that kicked in the night I decided to ask Edward Cullen to marry me. I’ve done well enough—considering that I’m a shit liar, and this is something that has been in the forefront of my thoughts every day.

I know my face shows them—the nerves, that is—when Rose’s face turns sympathetic. “That is what you want, isn’t it?”

She’s misread me. She thinks I don’t want to marry Edward. She thinks I’m having second thoughts. I panic. “Of course it is! I just…”

She reaches over and grasps my hand. “Then don’t worry about all of this. You know, and I know, that it’s all going to happen one day, regardless of when that day is, it *will* happen. So… don’t sweat the small stuff. And let the mother’s have their fun.”

She’s right. She usually is, I realize. I let out a slow breath. In a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, I say, “Laugh it up while you can, you old biddies. We’ll see how great you all think grandchildren are when me and Angela end up with babies at the same time, and we’re both calling you for help. That is Edward’s plan, after all.”

“*What?*” Angela chokes on her laughter and her words. *Ha! That’s what you get, Angela Cheney! For laughing at my expense.*

“Well, that’s what he told me, at least.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“Uh—no.”

“Holy crap!” Angela has a look of utter horror on her face. “*Why?*”

“So that our little Nessa has someone to play with.”

“Nessa?” Renee perks up at the name. “You’ve already chosen names?”

I roll my eyes. “You really don’t pay attention when I tell you things, do you?”

“Of course I do! I just—”

“Okay, ladies! Pedi’s are done, they’re about to move you all up front for mani’s, and then it’s off to the salon for your hair. Everyone remembered their dresses, yes?” Tanya’s all business today. She’s declared herself in charge, which is good, because even Esme has stars in her eyes today. The rest of us are useless. Myself? I’m worrying about flamingos, and if my mother actually pulled off getting them. Esme had talked her out of it, but I know my mother… Oh, and the whole ‘proposing to the love of my life in front of a crowd at a wedding’ thing. That’s kind of weighing on me, too.

Head in the game, Bella. Plenty of time to worry about that once you’ve managed not to trip while walking down the aisle.

We all answer positively, even my mother remembered her dress—a fact that amazes me. Spacy Renee remembered the only duty she’s been given today, aside from saying ‘I do.’

“You *so* owe me,” Tanya whispers in my ear as I move to pass her.

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I heard them giving you a hard time, so I sped the process up. You owe me.” Her eyes are twinkling as she tells me this, and I know I owe her for a lot more than just saving me from a few jokes at my expense.

I grasp her hand in mine. “I think we both know that today isn’t all I owe you for.”

A small grin graces her lips. “I think we both know that I owe you, too.”

She’s talking about Jasper, but I disagree with her. Jasper isn’t the same person he was when I met him, and he isn’t the same person he was when he and I were together. He’s different in every sense of the word—a good different. That’s all thanks to Tanya, and her never-ending reserve of patience.

“You don’t owe me a thing, and you know it.”

Her grin widens. “Well, you can think what you want, but… if I’d never known you… I’d never know him, and…”

“Yeah,” I whisper. She nods at me and no more words are spoken.

I make my way to the small desk they’ve set aside for my manicure. The women around me continue jabbering away about this and that, but thankfully, the conversation never veers back to me and Edward. Mostly they talk about the wedding, and how excited Renee is to be marrying Phil.

I can’t help but feel a small pang of hurt run through me as I think of my mother marrying. Not that I’m not happy for her, but the thought makes me think of Charlie. Alone in Forks on this day, knowing that his ex-wife is re-marrying. He was subdued for the rest of his trip whenever the subject of Renee was brought up, but I know it was tough for him. Even with all the years that they’ve been separate, I know he’ll always love my mother. His is the greatest kind of love—to love someone else enough to let them go, so that they will be happy, no matter what it costs yourself.

I ponder these things as the woman in front of me files and clips and soaks and polishes my nails a shiny black. It truly will look nice against the deep purple of

my dress. I begrudgingly admit to myself that Renee might just have taste.

Then we're off again, to the salon for our hair, then to the church to dress and wait. This is the part I've been dreading—the waiting. The nerves settle in the longer I sit. The dress my mother has chosen is more comfortable than the hideous monstrosity Alice had me wear for her wedding to Jasper, and it's the only comparison I have. Still, it's not helping with the nerves.

It's not even that I'm nervous about the people, seeing as I'll be asking my question in front of a live and captive audience. A rather large, live, and captive audience. It's not that I'm unsure of my question either, I'm not. Not in any way, shape, or form. I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

It's that I'm afraid of taking something away from Edward. I know he wants to ask me himself, and I'm afraid I'm ruining some grand plan of his with this grand plan of mine. I don't want to disappoint him—ever. I'm so afraid that what I'm planning will do exactly that.

Then we're being pulled from the small room, me and my mother. We're being lined up behind the doors that will lead us to the alter, and to her soon-to-be husband. I turn to look at her. She looks beautiful—all cream-colored dress and blushing cheeks, and I find myself amazed by her lack of nerves. I'm sure when my day comes I'll be a big ball of nothing but.

The words leave my mouth before I can stop myself. “Are you happy, Mom?”

She doesn't look startled or upset by my question, for which I'm thankful. “I've only been happier once in my life.”

“If you say the day you married Charlie, I might have you committed.”

She laughs. “Oh, Bella. Please believe that I loved your father, I love him still, but... Charlie and I were a wrong fit right from the start.” A fond smile graces her lips. “No, baby girl. The only day I've ever been happier was the day you came into my life.”

“Oh,” I breathe. I feel like an ass for saying what I've said to her. Me and my lack of a filter when it's needed.

Her hand touches my cheek and my eyes meet hers. “Thank you for being here today. For standing beside me. It means the world to me.”

I'm unable to respond because the doors are opening and I'm marching up the aisle. I'm taking my place and I'm watching my mother walk solo to Phil.

I cry when she says her vows, but I'm truly happy for her. My eyes search him out and I find him easily. Edward's eyes are on me. I'm sure they've been on me the whole ceremony.

I mouth my love for him and he does the same for me, and the ceremony is over much quicker than I thought it would be. I'm walking behind my mother and her new husband back down the aisle. I'm watching her cry her own tears, but I'm positive, positive, these are tears of joy.

A calm settles upon me as I look at her. I see the happy written across her face every time she looks at Phil, and I can't help but feel the same.

The nerves are gone. It's time to get on with the asking.

Keep going...

39. Through Glass end

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

And it's the stars,
The stars that shine for you...

-Through Glass, Stone Sour

"Bella? Where are we going? You need to give your toast soon, you know," Esme's voice sounds slightly panicked as she asks. She probably thinks I've lost my mind. She would be wrong, however, I can understand why she'd think that. I did just grab her arm and drag her from her chair at the reception.

I have good reason, though. "There's something I need to ask you, and I couldn't do it out there."

"Oh, dear... are you going to be sick? I think I might have some Alka-Seltzer in my purse—"

"I'm fine," I tell her, and I'm proud when my voice doesn't shake. The nerves haven't come back, another reason I'm glad, but without the nerves my mind began to wander. When it did, I found there was something I hadn't done—something Edward did, but I hadn't.

We finally make it to a hallway that's relatively empty and I pull us to a stop. Esme's eyes are worried as they take me in, so I decide to get through this as fast as possible. I don't want her any more upset than she already is.

I clear my throat. "I know you're wondering, and worrying, but please, don't. It's not bad, I promise."

Her face loosens and she looks more at ease, but not enough for my liking. "Well, dear, what is it?"

I lick my lips because they're dry as all get out. So is my mouth, so my tongue doesn't really offer up much moisture. "Like I said, there's something I wanted to ask you. I—" I can't get the words out now. They're stuck. The nerves shoot back through me.

"Bella?" Esme asks, alarmed. "Bella, breathe! Breathe!"

I draw in a deep breath and immediately feel light-headed. I didn't know I was holding my breath until Esme told me so. "Whoa, head rush."

"Dear, you're worrying me... is it Edward? Is he okay?"

I nod quickly. "Edward's perfect."

She huffs a small laugh. "I'm inclined to agree with you, but you could say I'm biased."

"It's not Edward. Well, it is, but it isn't. It's... I... shit."

"Spit it out! You're freaking me out, young lady!"

I look into her eyes as I ask, "Can I marry him?"

Her eyes turn amused and her eyebrow furrows. "You're asking me if you can marry my son?"

"No! I mean yes! I mean—"

"Oh," breathes Esme, "you're asking for my blessing."

My eyes squeeze shut as I nod helplessly.

"You clever little girl. You've been planning this, haven't you?"

Again, I nod.

"For how long?"

"For a little over a month," I whisper. "I should probably tell you that Jasper opened his big mouth and told me Edward was with my Dad asking for my hand."

A gentle smile forms on her lips. "So... Edward asking for your hand... tell me, Bella, dear—how exactly did that translate to you asking for his?"

"I just... shit. I just, don't... want him to doubt me. I want him to know how much I love him. I want him to know how much I want to marry him. How I dream about it. How I've hoped for it. How I want nothing more than to spend forever with him..."

Esme draws in a deep breath before asking, "And you believe that just saying yes to him—when he proposes—is not enough to convey just that?"

"Esme," I begin quietly, "Edward has had to watch one man propose to me, kiss me, hold me, love me, give himself to me... and... he's held doubt in his mind, that he's enough for me. I want him to know how much he means to me. I want him to know that he's the only one. Ever. There could never be another."

"Bella, Edward knows how much you love him. I think going to ask Charlie, hell, the fact he wants to ask you to marry him alone... well, that's enough to

prove it.”

“No,” I say, adamantly shaking my head at her. “No. That’s enough to prove how much *he* loves *me*. I want to prove how I love him. Can’t you see that?”

“Oh, Bella,” she whispers, grabbing my face between her hands, “I can. I can see that. You... absolutely have my blessing.”

I choke on my breath and my laughter before grabbing her and pulling her in for a tight hug. “Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

“Now, let’s get back. You do have a toast to give.”

Not a toast, Esme, I have a question to ask.

Have I ever mentioned how I love Esme Cullen? The woman is the picture of class and grace and everything that women strive to be. She marched back to the questioning glances of her table with a lie firmly in place—as she handed me the Alka-Seltzer and told me to drink water for the rest of the evening. Everyone bought it, too! Every single person at the Cullen table, my boyfriend, Rose, Emmett, Jasper, and Tanya included, now believes that I pulled her out for a case of nerves. That I’m nauseous at the thought of speaking in front of all of these people.

“Ladies and gentlemen! May I please ask that you raise your glasses, and join the Maid of Honor, Bella Swan, in a toast for our lovely couple?”

Here goes nothing.

I stand, grabbing for my champagne glass as I do so, and smile at the guests in attendance before turning to look toward my mother and Phil. Clearing my throat, I turn back toward the guests.

“I just want to start by saying thank you to everyone who is here today. To everyone who has chosen to spend this day with my mom and Phil... really, thank you, from the bottom of my heart.” There’s light applause, and I wonder if these people really thought that was all I was going to say. I wait a few moments, letting it die down a bit before turning back to face my mother.

“Mom,” I begin, cursing my voice for it’s crackling, “you are one of the most... *unique* individuals I’ve ever had the pleasure of knowing.” I laugh lightly, hoping she doesn’t misconstrue what I’m saying. She smiles back, raising her eyebrows as she nods, and I know she hasn’t. “I’ve often wondered if you are actually older than me, because, ya gotta admit... sometimes... that’s questionable.” She laughs with me. “I guess the phrase ‘young at heart’ will forever apply to you, and somehow, I think maybe the phrase was made *just for you*. You, Renee Dwyer, are the *epitome* of ‘young at heart.’” I place my hand over my heart before continue, making sure to take a couple of deep breaths before doing so.

“Being here today, sharing this with you... seeing *that smile* on your face... well, there’s just no doubt in my mind that the man you’re sitting beside is the man you’re meant to.”

I turn my gaze to Phil. “And Phil... I don’t want to do that thing where I stand up here and pretend to know you, because I don’t.” Gasps ring out through the audience and I laugh. “Oh, calm down, people! I didn’t mean it *like that*.” Laughter replaces the offended noises. “What I was going to say—before I was so rudely interrupted—is that I can’t wait to *get to know* you. Because, let’s face it, we both love that woman next to you, and today... you’ve made us a family. So... thank you.” I tip my head toward him with a smile, both gestures are returned to me by him.

Now I turn my body back to the guests. “So, I have just one more thing I’d like to say. And really, it’s more of a question. Oh! But don’t worry, I won’t put anyone on the spot or anything. Well, okay, that’s a lie, I’m going to put one person on the spot, but... I’m sorta hoping they won’t mind.”

Turning back to my mother, I tell her, “I feel like Julia Roberts in *My Best Friends Wedding* saying this, but...” I laugh, and wipe tears from my eyes—I didn’t even know I was crying. My mother is grinning at me, but there’s a question in her eyes. I wink at her as I whisper-yell, “I didn’t get you a gift. So...”

My mother’s tinkling, girlish giggle rings through the room. “Well, Bella, I’m thoroughly disappointed. Tell me, baby girl, how are you going to make it up to me?”

I grin at her and step back from the table. I glance toward Esme and find her biting her lip in anticipation. Rounding the table, I continue to speak, “Well, I know there’s something you really want. But it’s not for you. Well, it is, but it isn’t.”

“Oh, how I love my daughter... she has such a way with words doesn’t she?” Everyone laughs at my mother’s question, and I see the wheels turning in her head.

I continue through the room, making my way slowly toward the Cullen’s table. I’m moving fairly slowly because the last thing we need today is for Clumsy Bella to make an appearance. “I’m getting there, Mom.”

“Get there quicker, Bella! I’m dying over here!” More laughter bursts from the guests, but I’m almost there.

I go ahead and rest my gaze upon Edward, who is looking at me like I’ve lost my mind. That’s okay, he’ll understand shortly. “Well, everyone, see... what my mother wants most in life... is grandchildren. However, she can’t actually get them until her only daughter gives her some. So...” More gasps but I don’t notice. My eyes are locked firmly on Edward’s face. His eyes are wide and his mouth is open and he knows. He knows exactly what I’m about to do.

Two steps and I’m in front of him. One bent knee and I’m kneeling before him. “I want to give my mother what she wants... however, I sorta need a willing participant to do that...” I chuckle as I look at him. He hasn’t blinked—not once. I clear my throat and look straight into his eyes.

“Edward Cullen, I love you. I’ve loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you. I’ve never loved another the way I do you. I can’t imagine spending a day apart from you, for the rest of my life, and I hope the same is true for you. Will you do me the honor of being my husband?”

A pin could drop, ice could shift in a glass, hell, someone could swallow and you’d hear it. The room is deathly silent. Edward still hasn’t blinked.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jasper's hand come forward and slap Edward's shoulder. Edward shakes his head and clears his throat. He stands quickly, muttering something under his breath that I can't make out because in his haste to stand, he's almost knocked me on my ass. He catches me quickly though, and sits me down in his now-empty chair.

I'm starting to freak out, to be honest. I thought he would straight up say yes, regardless of whether or not I'd ruined any plans of his own. I'm not sure what he's thinking.

But then he's kneeling in front of me. He's taking something from the lapel of his tuxedo jacket. He's *laughing*.

"I'm not sure who to thank first... Renee for wanting grandchildren, Charlie for his blessing, or Jasper for lighting a fire under Bella's ass, but..." He smirks at me and I realize, he *knew*. All this time, I've been keeping it to myself, knowing he wanted to ask me, but not knowing when he *would* ask. And this jerk has known all along!

I smack his shoulder. "You knew! Edward! I'm gonna--"

"Regardless of who I should thank first... I'm going to fail miserably. Because I'm too excited to do this." At that, he opens the box in his hands. Nestled in black velvet is the most beautiful ring I think I've ever seen. Swirling white gold surrounding flawlessly cut round diamonds. His fingers surround the band as he pulls it from its box. He poises the ring at the tip of my left ring finger before saying, "Yes, Bella Swan, I would love to marry you."

His lips are against mine, and it's probably not a kiss that's meant for public, but I can't bring myself to care. Applause breaks out, the loudest of which is going on at the Cullen's table, but I can't bring myself to hear it.

When he pulls away, his arms wrap around my waist and he lifts me from the chair. With my feet dangling above the ground, I look toward my mother and yell, "Congratulations, Renee and Phil! I expect a better present at my wedding!"

"I can't believe you did that!" Edward's voice is breathless as he says this. His lips are trailing kisses up and down my neck and my eyes can't open. The sensation is too much, too great. I want to stay like this forever.

"Are you complaining?" My voice sounds more like a moan than the snarky tone I was going for. My hands are reaching under his jacket, trying to get it off of him.

"Hell no, I was trying to figure out myself if the wedding was the right time to ask you." My earlobe gets pulled between his teeth and I can hear his heavy breathing. The hot moistness of his mouth rendering me useless.

Except for my mouth, apparently. "I still can't believe you knew that Jasper told me all this time and just made me carry that secret!"

He kisses me, open-mouthed and sloppy on the juncture of my neck and shoulder. "Angel... I didn't know what to say, and I really wanted to find the perfect opportunity to ask you..."

My hands finally get that damned jacket to slip from his shoulders, and I go right to work on the buttons of his shirt. "You could have asked me in the bathroom and I wouldn't have cared."

"Bella, wait," he says breathlessly, grabbing at my hands. He raises them to his bowtie and together we unwind it from his neck. "It's easier if this comes off first." He grins his stupidly sexy crooked grin at me. "Besides, you waited a whole month, you knew you wanted to ask me *specifically* at Renee's wedding. So don't hold it against me that I was waiting for the perfect moment too. Unless, of course, you really were just trying to get out of buying her a wedding present..."

We both laugh at that. My hands go back to his buttons and before I know it, I'm pulling his shirt from his pants and trying to get it off of him. "Okay, I'll give you that. I just..."

"I know," he says. His lips trail back down, over my collarbones to my chest. "Please don't be angry with me."

I get the shirt off of him and go straight to work on the pants. "I'm not." The pants fall down around his ankles, and the boxers follow. "Please, Edward, I'm not angry, just..."

"Okay, angel." His fingers work their way to the sides of my panties and he's sliding them slowly down my legs. "Tell me why I'm practically naked, and you're still fully dressed?"

"I'm not fully dressed," I say and then groan as his fingers work my clit. "You just took my panties."

His lips work their way up my dress until they're back on the bare skin of my neck. "I'll give them back," he whispers against my skin.

"You can keep them," I pant. "What's mine is yours, right?"

With a growl, he thrusts inside of me. "Damn right, Mrs. Cullen. Don't forget that."

Our love-making is fast and sloppy and over too quickly, but it's perfect. Exactly what the two of us needed. Before I know it, Edward is re-dressing and I'm trying every which way I can think of to get my panties back from his clutches.

"Seriously, Edward! I can't go back out there with none on!"

"Well, angel," he says, smirking at my flustered expression, "you should have thought about that before you told me I could keep them."

"Edward! I'll give them back to you, gosh! I just..."

“Or I could just keep them now.”

“You do realize that you didn’t use a condom, right?”

“Uh–yes. You do realize I haven’t used a condom in, like, half a year, right?”

“You do realize that when you don’t use a condom... stuff... it gets messy!”

“Oh! Shit, angel, sorry.” He scrambles to pull the pair back out of his lapel pocket and hand them to me. The blush adorning his cheeks makes me snicker. “It’s not funny! And I’m really sorry, angel... I honestly didn’t think–”

“Edward,” I interrupt, “hey, gorgeous, look at me.” He huffs a breath as he raises his eyes to meet my own. “Why are you so spazzy? It’s a pair of panties, for goodness sake.”

“Because! I should’ve thought of that! I mean... shit, angel, we’re not even close to being able to go home, and here I’ve practically assaulted you in a goddamn broom closet!”

I giggle. “I wouldn’t call it *assault*...”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Bella... I just... want to take care of you. I should be thinking ahead. Thinking about things like–”

“Things like using a condom when we have sex in a semi-public place? Edward, I don’t know about you, but, this was just one of those things I couldn’t really help or control. I don’t plan on doing *this* again for a while, at least...”

“Shit, no, I didn’t mean *that*.”

“Hey! What’d you mutter under your breath before you almost knocked me on my ass out there?”

To my surprise, he busts out laughing. “That Jasper fucking Whitlock was right! He told me as soon as we sat down that you were gonna ask me to marry you.”

“But I didn’t tell Jasper.”

“You didn’t?”

“No,” I say slowly, “I didn’t tell anyone. Well, except your mother.”

“Mom knew?”

“Not until a bit ago. I wanted to ask for her blessing... you know... like you did for me...”

His grin is crazy and wide. “Awww...”

“Shut-up, Edward!”

“Angel... awww...”

“Edward!”

“That’s so sweet...”

“I’m going to hit you, I swear!”

Three loud raps at the door keep Edward from humiliating me any more. I’m almost thankful, until I hear Carlisle’s voice drift through. “You two wanna wrap that up? Renee is asking for the both of you.”

“Oh my God,” I whisper. My cheeks flame bright red. I’m so beyond embarrassed, it’s not even funny. “Oh my *God!*”

“Yeah, Dad. Two minutes.”

“Alright, son. I’ll let them know.” I hear footsteps leading away from the door, but it doesn’t ease me any. If Carlisle knew what we were doing, and where we were... then probably most everyone else does as well. *How embarrassing!*

“Edward! Oh my God!”

He continues to chuckle, not seeming fazed in any way. “Angel... we just got engaged. Pretty sure everyone knows we’ve had sex, too.”

“So? That doesn’t mean that I want everyone to know we just had sex *in here!*”

“Why not? I’m pretty happy about it. Now, come on, I swear it won’t be as bad as you think.”

“How do you know?”

“I just do.”

He grasps my hand and pulls my unwilling body out of the closet. There’s no one around, for which I’m thankful, but as soon as we walk back into the

banquet room, the entirety of the Cullen table is watching. And smiling. Emmett's laughing. I want to die.

"See? Not so bad," Edward says, trying to reassure me. "Well, except for Emmett, but really, what more could you expect from him?"

I roll my eyes. "So not helping."

He chuckles. "I wish you wouldn't work yourself up so much." Edward leans closer to me, putting his mouth close to my ear. "Personally, I'm pretty proud to be walking through here, with my fiancée, looking freshly sexed. That's just me, though."

The blush on my cheeks is not helping either. "It doesn't bother you that these people can take one look at us, and know what we were just doing?"

"Well, angel," he says, chuckling, "you're the one that talked about giving Renee grandchildren, so..."

"Oh my *God!* You're right! These people—oh my God!"

The time I've spent worrying about what people are thinking of me in my newly crumpled dress, is all the time Edward has needed to lead me to my mother. She's got a huge grin on her face as she eyes up my wardrobe, hair, and make-up. She knows. She knows that her daughter just got it on in a broom closet. *Oh God!*

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?" Is it bad that I want to slap my mother on her wedding day?

"Renee, you look beautiful, as always. More so today, if my opinion were to mean anything," Edward says, all charm and grin and green eyes and sexy.

My mother blushes, which gives me a thrill. A tiny piece of vindication for all the teasing she's about to give me, I'm sure. "Oh, Edward! I swear... you are just..." She sighs. "Perfect."

I roll my eyes, though secretly I'm jumping for joy. Not that Renee's acceptance wasn't already clear, but when it's so freaking clear on her face, I can't help but be happy. "Mom."

"Yes, baby girl?" She's got stars in her eyes, literally, and she's still staring at Edward.

"Mom."

"Mhm?"

That no-good-for-nothing, crooked grin breaks out on Edward's face, because my mother wasn't already mooning over him enough. "I believe you summoned us, Renee."

"Hmm?"

"Yeah, Mom, you called for us. Carlisle came to find us?"

"Oh! Yes!" She shakes her head quickly. "He was so nice about it, too! Esme's in a tizzy because the caterer's brought the wrong pudding, and Angela just looked so happy dancing with Ben. I do hope I didn't put Carlisle out too much..."

"I can assure you, you didn't," Edward tells her. He gently grasps her hand in one of his. "Though I am curious... what did you need us for?"

I see her hand squeeze his as she tells us, "Well, it's not much, but... I was wondering? Would you two dance for me? The Maid of Honor is supposed to dance with the Best Man, at least, that's how Esme planned it, but... I think we both can overlook that, seeing how you two are newly engaged—which, by the way, baby girl..." Renee turns to face me now, and I gasp at the tenderness I see in her eyes. "I know I've been crazy with the pressure... but, oh, Bella, I wish I could tell you how much it means to me that you would do that today, here. I never would have guessed, and it was—perfect. More than I could have wished for."

My throat feels like it's closing up on me and I can feel the beginning of tears in my eyes. "Oh." I clear my throat; the tightening is making it hard to speak. "Um... I just—"

"It's okay, baby girl, you don't have to say anything. However, I really would like to see you and Edward take a whirl out on the dance floor. You know... since you didn't get me a gift?"

I laugh—only my mother would try to guilt trip into something so silly as a dance. It's not a big deal though, and if she wants it, I'm glad to do it for her. *Even though I suck at dancing.* "Edward?"

He's already reaching a hand out to me. I've already taken a step toward the dance floor. Then his arms are around me and I'm staring into his eyes, and we're dancing. I peek to the side. The look of utter contentment on my mother's face is something to behold. When Esme steps next to her, and loops an arm through Renee's... *I can't imagine ever being happier.*

"I can't either."

My head jerks up and my eyes fly to Edward's. "Huh?"

"Still saying that, I see."

"Edward—"

"You said: I can't imagine ever being happier. I was agreeing."

"I didn't say that!" *Except in my head.*

"Oh, angel, when will you realize that some things you say in your head... you also say out loud."

Dammit.

"Edward—"

"Shut-up and dance with me, Bella," he says, laughing at my indignant expression. I do, I do dance with him. Forever, it feels like, but I don't complain. When the song changes, we make no move to separate or stop, and that's just fine with me. Being here, dancing with Edward, having his arms around me and his nose in my hair and his cheek against my temple, well, I'd stay here for the rest of our lives. If I could. Which I can't.

The bright spot is that we get to do it again soon, at our own wedding.

"Oh! And you will go and check on my house while we're gone, won't you?" Renee laughs. "Of course you will! What was I thinking by asking? Oh, well, never mind." *Ah, Renee, asking questions and answering them herself. It's nice to know some things don't change.*

"Of course I will, Mom."

"And the mail? You'll make sure to—"

"Table by the door. I remember."

"And I might have forgotten to empty the fridge. Now, normally I wouldn't ask you to, but I made my special recipe tuna noodle casserole the other—"

"Say no more," I interrupt, shivering at the thought of Renee's lack of culinary abilities. "I'll empty it. I'll even throw in a good scrubbing."

"Oh... Bella... baby girl, you don't have to—"

"I want to. Stop stressing, Mom! It's your honeymoon!"

"Oh my goodness! I know! Can you believe it? Cayman Islands, Bella! I've always wanted to go there!"

"I know," I say, smiling. Because she has. Renee has always wanted to go to an island resort. When I was five, we were sitting at the diner waiting for Charlie—it was Thursday, cobbler day, and we were looking through a *National Geographic* magazine as we waited on him. There was an article on the Cayman Islands, in particular, Grand Cayman Island, and Renee was smitten. She's been collecting seashells and dolphins and various forms of sculpture that are related to islands ever since. "I remember."

Her face softens and in the quietest voice she can muster, she tells me, "I remember too. Everything, Bella. I want you to know that, okay? I never forgot one thing about your life. Never."

"Mom—"

"And I could kiss Charlie for raising you to be the woman you are." *I'm going to cry again. If she keeps up this speech, I'm going to cry.*

"Mom—"

"Now! You make sure to call him—tonight, no later! He's going to be so excited for you, baby girl. So excited."

"I will... Mom—"

"Nope! That's enough of that! I don't want to cry before I walk out there. Do you think the cameras will be going off?" She laughs, again, but it sounds teary. "What am I saying? Of course the cameras will be going off!"

I laugh with her at that. "Did you know that you do that?"

"That I do what?"

"That you're always asking questions, and then answering them before the other person can?"

"Oh, Bella," she says, laughing genuinely this time—no tears, "that's because I know everything!"

"Oh my God! So do I!" Rose exclaims as she slips through the door. "We were just talking about that last night, in fact."

She throws a wink my way. "Really? We must get together sometime then, Rose. It's not often that you meet someone who knows as much as we do."

"I agree... however, it must be some other time. Esme asked me to slip in and tell you that it's time."

"It's time? Oh! Oh my goodness! Bella! It's time!" Renee's eyes go wide and she starts swinging her head to and fro, looking for things she might have forgotten.

"Mom? Mom! Look at me," I say gently but firmly. The tone does the trick, and she stops and turns her wide eyes on me. "Everything's in the car. Stop worrying. Go out there and be beautiful. Show that new husband of yours the woman he married. Not this crazy lady!"

She laughs, her shoulders ease back down. "Yes, you're right. You're usually right, you know. Not always—not like me, but usually." Rose and I join her

laughter for a moment. Then she turns to the door. "I can't remember... do I go out first?"

I smirk at her, and move to stand in front of the door. "Silly lady. Thought you knew everything."

I don't wait, I just open the door and exit in front of her. She doesn't even have time to respond because Phil has her locked in his sights, and she's following him through the applauding crowd, to their getaway car.

Two arms surround my waist. Edward's smell invades my senses. He doesn't say anything, just holds me. We watch together as my mother turns around before she enters the car and tosses the bouquet. We both turn to each other and smirk when Tanya catches it.

And then she's gone. My mother and Phil are speeding down the street.

"You alright, angel?"

I wipe a tear from my eyes. Again, I didn't even know I was crying. I turn in his arms and lay my hands on his chest. His eyes are bright—I'm assaulted by the memory of the first time I looked into them. How different it feels to see them now versus how much I dreaded seeing them after that day. I almost want to laugh. The thought that I ever dreaded looking into this man's eyes.

"What are you laughing about."

"I was laughing in my head. I guess you're right about that."

"I usually am."

I smack his chest lightly. "Don't get used to being right."

"I won't," he quips. "So what did you want to do tonight?"

I smile as I raise my hands to wrap around his neck. He grins back—the crooked one, the one that gets me to do whatever he wants.

"Let's go home."

The End.

Hate me? Please don't! I swear there's an epi! If you just... extend me a tad more patience. It will be here in a day or two... it's giving me hell, I swear! I have like five different scenarios I'd like to happen and I've tried writing them all, hated them and rewritten them! It's driving me insane! So finally, I asked my good friend, Erin what she'd do. And you can all thank her for these two chaps. As this was her advice!

Also. Because I don't want to do this after the epi - I want to reserve that space for thanks... I'm going to do it here!

Recs:

First and foremost: *The Path We Choose*, and *The Greatest Gift*, you can find both by searching for author, les16. But beware! She collects readers as friends. And as her friends you're required to love her as much as I do!

Second: *A Pound of Flesh*, by jaxon22. Beware of this one too if you aren't reading it as it will suck you in and spit you out. Totally hooked. And Edward will own you, prison jumpsuit and all.

Third: *Let's Get Physical*, by Lalina. And now... as a heavy girl myself... this fic just, well, it sort of nails me. I hope it will nail you too.

and Fourth: *Through The Flames*, by SparkingTwilight. Now... this fic here... I resisted for the longest. I have this author on alert, have had this author on alert for awhile now, because of another of their stories, but I held out on reading this one. Forever. Well, I did. Finally, and let me tell you... it's worth every second of your time.

Not that any of these fics need my recommendation. They all have a very healthy review count, loyal readers, and they all stand out as well-written and well-thought out stories. But it never hurts to spread the love, does it? I want to hear from you guys! I want to know what you're reading, besides, of course, *Through Glass*, because if you're reading this AN, then you're reading my story! And thank God for that! :P Leave me a review in the form of a rec, and if you want to tell me what you thought of the last two chapters, hey, who am I to complain?

I'll be seeing you all again very soon, and please, if you don't have me on author alert, and if you are at all interested in reading my next story, well then please do put me on alert. Look for it soon, I know I have a few outtakes that need to be completed for TG, and I haven't forgotten. But I'm quite excited to post *shine*, (which would be the title, btw), and I hope you will head over there and read it too when it posts.

40. Epilogue

Disclaimer: Bella, Jasper, Edward and all things that exist in the Twilight universe belong to Stephenie Meyer. She's just nice enough to let us play with them!

It's amazing how you can speak right to my heart,
Without saying a word you can light up the dark,
Try as I may I could never explain,
What I hear when you don't say a thing,

The smile on your face lets me know that you need me,
There's a truth in your eyes saying you'll never leave me,
The touch of your hand says you'll catch me if ever I fall,
You say it best,
When you say nothing at all.

-When You Say Nothing At All, Alison Krauss

"Bella!" Edward yells as I hear the front door slam. I roll my eyes because he knows where I am. I'm where I always am, but no... he has to yell my name *as soon as he walks through the door*. "Bella?" He's only been yelling my name as soon as he walks through the door for the past seven years. It's not like I won't be sitting in my office, typing on my laptop. I'm trying to finish the last chapter of my latest book, so I'm more than a little annoyed with him for his interruption. "Bella! Ow! Shit!"

I hear him stumble and finally decide to give in. There's no telling what he tripped over. I rise from my chair, grabbing my coffee mug as I stroll out of the room. "What?"

He's standing with one hand gripping the back of the couch and one hand gripping his left foot. He's doing a sort-of dance that makes me giggle despite my annoyance with him. "Fuck, that hurts!"

"What'd you trip over?"

"I think it was Nessa's building blocks. Why were they right by the door?" It's his turn to be annoyed with me.

It's understandable, really. Edward and I agreed four years ago that I would be a stay at home wife. Granted, I don't just *stay at home*. I stay at home and write. My writing has yielded us quite a bit of money, in fact. My first story, remarkably made the best-seller list, and stayed there for fifteen weeks. Something to be proud of, I'd say. However, writing isn't all I do. I made a promise to take care of the house, too. Edward does his share when he comes home from work, but most of it lies with me. Obviously, I didn't hold up on my end of the bargain today.

"Sorry, I was preoccupied. Last chapter, ya know."

"Oh yeah? Damn, angel, you didn't tell me--shit! We don't have time! We gotta go!"

"Go? Oh my God! Edward! What time is it?"

"We have just over an hour before our flight takes off. Sorry, I didn't get home sooner. I--"

"Shit, Edward! I haven't even picked up the girls!" *Girls*. Plural. Edward and I have been quite busy the past couple of years.

Our first born, Nessa Renee Cullen, named appropriately for the waitress on our first date, and my mother because we became engaged at her wedding to Phil, came into our lives on a gusty New Year's Eve, two years ago. Her face was splashed on the front page of many papers, because she was the "New Years Baby!". The waitress, Vanessa, or Nessie, came to visit her in the hospital after seeing the three of us in the paper. She's been a regular in our lives ever since.

Our second, amazingly enough, was born just under a year later--on Christmas Eve. No joke, either. As soon as the doctor cleared me for sex again, Edward got busy. And poof, there's Mae, or more formally--Esmeralda Angelie, named for Esme, Angela, *and* Rosalie. All three women swear up and down that she was named solely after herself.

Speaking of Mae... tomorrow is her birthday. Her first birthday. Christmas Eve. It's also the first Christmas in three years I'll be going back to Forks.

My father came to Jacksonville for the first two Christmas' after Edward and I were married, but ever after, he's found some excuse not to come. His reasons range from hating to fly to covering for the boys on the force with family. Well, I'm not letting him get out of it this year. We're going to him. With his two grand-baby-girls. It's not the first time he's seen either one of them, but I'm excited at the prospect of seeing him with them on Christmas.

We're not the only four going, either. Angela and Ben and their brood--Lauren, Elizabeth, and Benjamin Jr., will be going, along with Esme and Carlisle. Also, for the first time in twenty years... Renee will be returning to Forks. She wouldn't miss it for the world, in fact. All of her baby girls on a plane together, sitting around the tree together, sipping hot-cocoa in front of the fire together... yeah, she's going. Phil wouldn't be able to make it, unfortunately, which I know she's sad about, and so am I, but it's a busy time for him. He opened a new restaurant six months ago after retiring from baseball due to injury, and it's still too new for him to just up and leave it. He wouldn't take no for an answer about Renee coming though, he knew how much she wanted to spend it with her girls.

Charlie doesn't know, we're all surprising him. We're not, like, invading his house or anything. Esme was in constant contact with Jasper for the longest time, well, still is, but in particular about her property just outside of Forks. Apparently they put their heads together, and the whole house is finished. Along with a garden, gazebo, and six car garage. *Really. Six car garage. Who the hell needs a six car garage?*

"It's okay. Mom's got them all packed up and ready... but, they're all already there, angel... We gotta haul if we're gonna make it on time."

Thank God for Esme. “Okay, well, I packed everything up last night... it’s all in the bedroom, but... Edward! I can’t go like *this*.” I motion with my finger toward my clothing. Sweats, sweats and more sweats. Comfort clothes. Writing clothes. Raggy clothes. Clothes I refuse to wear on a plane with my entire family there, ready to tease me. “I need a shower, too. I—”

“No time, Bella. Change real quick and I’ll put the bags in the car, but there’s no time for a shower. You can get one when we’re there.” He’s already in motion, striding past me toward the bedroom.

I reach out my hand and grasp his arm. “Hey.” He stops and looks at me, still somewhat annoyed with me because of the obstruction in front of the door. “I’m really sorry. Time got away from me and—”

“Oh, angel,” he breathes, pulling me into his arms. “I swear I’m not mad at you. Mad at myself is more like it. I wanted to be out of the office a lot earlier. I didn’t want us to have to rush.”

I plant my face firmly in his chest and breathe in deeply. Edward’s smell has always been calming to me. I mumble, “You were a little mad at me.”

He chuckles. “Okay, maybe a little.”

I squeeze my arms around him. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he whispers, “I know you’ve been working hard to try and get the book finished before we leave.”

“Still...”

“Hey,” he says, pulling back from me and tipping my face up with his finger, “don’t. Not today. Don’t beat yourself up about shit today. It’s a happy day, yeah?”

I smile, thinking of the look on Charlie’s face when we arrive. “A very happy day.”

Edward grins back at me, his stupid, get-anything-I-want grin. “That’s right.”

I rise up on my tip-toes for a kiss. He obliges me by meeting me halfway, and before we know it, we’re making out like teenagers in our hallway. Not the hallway in the condo, but in our semi-new house. Well, it was brand-new, but we’ve lived in it for a few years now, and that’s just how it looks—lived in. So, I call it our semi-new house, and Edward laughs at me. He had it built specifically for us when we decided to start trying for babies. We both decided that as nice as our condo was, and as much as we enjoyed living there... it wasn’t a place to raise children. So, we bought some land—close to Esme and Carlisle, but far enough away that we don’t feel smothered by their presence—and put a call in to Jasper. He had plans drawn up before we knew it, and the house was built as fast as it was thought of. *It’s amazing how money talks...*

Our house phone starts blaring its annoying ringing just as Edward’s cell phone starts blaring Angela’s signature ring tone. We pull apart, roll our eyes at each other, and haul ass to the bedroom.

Edward answers his phone on the way, only to say, “Yeah! We’re on our way!” before ending the call and hefting our bags into his arms. I hastily grab a sweater and a pair of jeans, throw them on, and just like that—we’re rushing out the door, barreling down the highway toward the airport. Our hands still find each other though. They stay firmly clasped together the whole way.

I raise my fist to knock, but for some reason, I find this silly. There’s six people and five babies behind me, and I know they’re all waiting for me to knock. But I grew up in this house, it feels weird to knock. So, I take a deep breath and reach up above the door for the extra key.

It’s not there. *What the hell!*

Charlie has left an extra key above that door since I was twelve years old. It hasn’t ever *not* been above that door, even when I had my very own key to his house. I furrow my eyebrows and turn a sheepish grin back toward everyone.

“Oh, for goodness sake, Bella,” Renee snips, and steps next to me. She raises her hand and knocks. She didn’t hesitate, so why the hell did I? *So weird...*

Really, I don’t know why Charlie hasn’t already opened the door. His little truck is parked off to the side of the house, and his police cruiser is in its spot right there in the driveway, so I know he’s home. Still, he hasn’t answered, which is so unlike Charlie, since three strange cars have just pulled up in front of his house and a brood of twelve are standing outside his door.

The door opens, and a woman is standing behind it. Her face mirrors mine, I’m sure. Smiling to shock. It’s Sue Clearwater. Leah and Seth’s mother. What the hell is she doing here?

The last time Leah mentioned Sue on the phone, she was doing better. Four years ago, her husband passed away from a heart-attack while he was out hunting. Jake and Seth were with him, and they got him to the hospital as soon as they could, but... it wasn’t soon enough. Sue went through a really bad time of it after, they’d been married for twenty-two years, and together for another five before that. From kids, those two.

So, for Sue to be answering my father’s door, well, it’s a bit of a shock. “Sue?”

She clears her throat. “Bella, how nice to see you.”

I always liked Sue Clearwater. She was always the fun mom, the one that let Leah and I and Alice do pretty much whatever we wanted—within reason. However, she’s never, and I repeat, never, been inside of my father’s house. To my knowledge, at least. Harry, her late husband always did the dropping off or picking up. “Um... hi?”

“Sue? Baby? Who is it?” Charlie’s voice drifts through the door to me.

Wait. What? Baby? What the—

“Baby?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. “Baby.” I take in the blush adorning Sue’s cheeks. “Baby... huh.”

“Sue? Did you—oh shit.” I watch as Charlie’s face turns bright red. I don’t recall ever seeing his blush quite that deep before, in fact.

There’s no noise around me though, so I’m apparently not the only one in shock at this development. There’s light shuffling, like someone adjusting their weight, but other than that... just dead silence. No one is brave enough to ask, apparently. That includes myself, absolutely.

No one, apparently, except my eldest daughter, who spouts off with, “Thupwithe!” at seeing her grandfather. Esme and I have been working with her for two weeks straight. Showing her pictures of Charlie, and coaxing her to greet him by screaming “surprise.” Which she just did. In her own, two-year-old-with-a-lisp way.

I hear chuckling now, and then Renee says, “Surprise, indeed.” *That so wasn’t necessary, Mom, thanks.* The insinuation in her tone is almost too much. I’m fairly certain if I were to turn my head and look at her, she’d be wagging her eyebrows in that disturbing way she has. “Well, well, Charlie. Aren’t you going to introduce everyone to Sue?”

Charlie clears his throat. “Uh—well, um...” Sue elbows him—right in his Vitamin R drinking gut. “Ow! Shit!”

“Thit!” squeals Nessa.

“Thanks, Dad.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, uh,” Edward begins, and then reaches a hand around me—the hand not holding Mae’s baby carrier—toward Sue, “I’m Edward, Charlie’s son-in-law. Sue, is it?”

She quickly shakes his hand. “Excuse me, yes, I’m so sorry... I don’t know where my manners have gone. Yes, I’m Sue Clearwater. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh, I’d say your manners went forgotten about the time Charlie’s secret did,” Esme says, snickering. “I’m Esme Cullen, Edward’s mother. And this is my husband, Carlisle, our daughter, Angela, her husband, Ben, and their cutie-pies, Lauren, Beth, and BJ.”

Sue reaches her hand forward to shake hands with each person as they’re introduced. Then steps back and looks shyly toward my mother. Quietly, she says, “Hello, Renee.”

My mom’s having none of that though. She reaches both hands forward and pulls Sue in for a tight hug. “I think we’re past shaking hands, don’t you?”

Sue seems more at ease after Mom says that, but she’s still unsure about me. I cock an eyebrow at her before turning toward my dad. “Were you planning on telling your only daughter about this, or is this the only way I would’ve found out?”

“Bella,” Edward admonishes me.

“I mean... how long has this been going on? Leah didn’t say anything to me!”

“Well, now hold on there, Bells—”

“Don’t try to use that fatherly tone on me, Dad! I have kids of my own now. I’m immune.”

“Sorry.”

“How long?”

“Couple months.”

“Yeah, right. You try selling that bull anywhere else? Because I’m not buying.”

Charlie sighs. “Okay, you got me. Sue and I... we been seeing each other for a couple years.”

“A couple *years*?”

“Bella, dear, perhaps we could continue this inside?” Esme asks, breaking through Charlie’s and my little bubble. “The children are getting chilled...”

That breaks whatever trance I’ve been in. Mention the children and I kick into overdrive. “Oh shi-shoot! Can we come in, Dad?”

“Yeah, yeah, of course, all y’all get your frozen behinds in this house!”

We all begin our shuffling—picking up diaper bags, picking up baby carriers... rearranging children on our hips and make our way into Charlie’s house. He steps back from the door, still blushing, but I notice his hand reaches for Sue’s next to him.

Now, I know, *I know*, that one person at least—my mother, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, my shrink brother-in-law, or my husband—is going to pull me off to the side and ask me why I’m acting like a child. I’m placing my bets on Edward, but Ben is close behind. I know I just acted like a child, but... I can’t help it. My father now has this... whole other *life* that I knew nothing about and aren’t a part of. My feelings are a little hurt, and I’m feeling rather childlike because of that. I realize that I’m now a wife and a mother of two, a successful author, and a grown ass woman, but... this is *my* daddy.

“Bella? Can I talk to you? In private?” Ah, Edward wins the race, though judging by the look on Ben’s face, and the way his mouth is poised to speak, I’d say Edward didn’t win by much.

“Actually, Edward, would it be alright if Bells and I talked in private for a moment first?” Charlie asks quietly.

“That’s a good idea!” Renee interjects. “And Sue can come meet the kiddos…”

Now, very few times in my life can I remember Renee making that face at me. The pursed lips, the raised eyebrow, the hard as nails eyes… the ‘I’m your mother and you will do as I say’ look. She’s making it right now though, and seeing as I want my children to obey me when I make it… I know I can’t refuse this request. So, I nod my head and pass Nessa off to Edward before turning and following my father to the kitchen.

“Bells—” Charlie begins, and my arms automatically cross across my chest. “Why are you acting like this? You didn’t even act like such a child when you were a child…”

I scoff, “Why can’t you pick up a phone and warn somebody?”

Charlie shakes his head. “You know damn well I could say the same thing. You think I’m not the least bit shocked about all these people in my house? Showing up unannounced on my doorstep? Hell, Bells—”

“Well, we wouldn’t have had to show up like this if you’d actually show up for Christmas with your real family!”

Charlie doesn’t say anything at first, and we can both hear the murmuring of everyone in the living room. I feel like complete shit because of what I said, but honestly, it’s how I feel.

“Well, then, you probably won’t like the fact that Sue isn’t going anywhere. I’m planning to ask her to marry me.”

My jaw drops. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, Bells.” Charlie sighs, shaking his head. “You know, all my life has revolved around you, kid. You got your own life now. A husband who loves you. Beautiful kids who adore you. Friends who’ll be there through thick and thin. And, above all, a family who is there whenever you need it. It’s time for me to find a place for myself, Bells. I don’t exactly fit in your new life.”

My jaw still hasn’t closed, and that’s okay, because it would have just dropped back open at my father’s admission. Tears form in my eyes as my nose starts to burn along with my throat. *Does he really feel that way?*

“Dad—” I start, but am forced to stop because of the thickness in my throat. I wipe the tears away that have fallen and focus on the sad, blushing man in front of me. I’ve never seen my father look so defeated, and I feel so fucking guilty for being the cause. I force the tears back and clear my throat—he needs to *hear* me.

“Look, Dad… I hear what you are saying. Loud and clear, okay? But… well, shit, I think you’ve been operating under some serious misassumptions. No one, ever, *ever*, will replace you in my life. Ever. I will always, *always*, need my… daddy.”

Charlie pitches forward and pulls me into a hug, and we both cry into each other. “Bells, I didn’t mean—”

“No. Don’t you dare! I’m gonna march my ass back in that room and apologize to everyone in there—especially Sue. I’m so damn sorry, Dad…”

“S’okay, kid.”

“Did you really think that? That anyone could ever replace you? That you don’t fit?”

“At first, no… but, the last couple times I’ve been down there… Shit, Bells, you live a life now that I could *never* have provided for you—”

“Did I ever complain?”

“No, but you were never a complainer.”

“Because I didn’t have anything to complain about.”

“Bells—”

“No. Nuh uh. Don’t argue with me on it. It’s true.”

“Alright, but only ‘cause I hate arguing with you.”

I nod against his chest and we pull away from one another, both still wiping tears. Charlie spins around and pulls two tissues out of the box on top of the microwave before turning back and handing me one. We blow together and laugh after, and then Charlie pulls me back for another hug.

“Love you, Bells.”

“Love you, too.”

“So, don’t really want to sound like a jerk, but…” He pulls away, smiling the smile I grew up with. “I really hope you all don’t plan on staying here. I love you, Bells, but, I don’t love you that much.”

I laugh and shake my head. “No worries, Dad, we’re staying at Esme’s. Did you…?”

“Dunno. I’d have to ask Sue.”

“Well? You better get on that. Renee’s got dreams of hot chocolate and fires and her grand-baby-girls. No offense, but your fireplace isn’t big enough, and well, my vision... sort of includes you in front of the fire with us.”

Charlie raises an eyebrow at me. “Guess you better get on kissing Sue’s ass for forgiveness then, huh?”

I grin at him and roll my eyes. “Dad—”

“Yeah, I am still your dad. So... roll those eyes one more time, young lady, and I’ll roll your little head.”

He pushes me through the door and all the way to the living room, where I proceed to kiss Sue’s ass and apologize profusely to everyone else for acting like such a child. Sue agrees, quite happily, to spend a night or two at the Cullen’s home, and she and Charlie race upstairs to pack some clothes.

That night, every single one of us—including Jake and Leah, and Seth and his girlfriend, Claire—sit around the Cullen’s fireplace. It’s amazing.

The next day is full of cooking. There’s too many damn women in the kitchen. So many women, in fact, that Angela and I decide to offer up our babysitting services—sitting for our own children—just to stay out of the way. It will be even worse tomorrow—Christmas day. Today, however, all the cooking is for Mae’s first birthday. I know I should be in there, cooking with the rest of them—I’d done all the cooking for Nessa’s first—but the grandmother’s all kicked me out. They said it was their duty as grandparents, and since I hadn’t allowed them to do it for Nessa, they were commandeering Mae’s. I let them. Sometimes it’s easier to just... not argue.

In the end, there was entirely too much food made, but we made a pretty good size dent in it. That night we welcomed another guest in the house—Tanya. She couldn’t fly out with the rest of us, she’d been the one to volunteer to keep everything under control for one more day at Cul de Sac, so today is when she arrived, and just in time for Mae’s birthday cake.

This Christmas might be a little difficult for her, though she swears it won’t be. I’ve only asked her about a million times if she’s alright with everything and, more importantly, everyone who’ll be attending the dinner tomorrow, and she swears she is. The everyone I’m referring to being the Whitlock’s and McCarty’s.

Tanya and Jasper didn’t last, and that’s okay, though sad at the same time. I haven’t lost contact with him, either, just like Esme and the rest of the Cullen’s, and Rose is still one of my nearest and dearest. When Rose found out the Cullen’s, namely myself and my kids, would be invading Forks for Christmas, she gently proposed that we spend it all together. She said her mother’s house has felt empty at every holiday since Peter passed, and maybe being in a house full of craziness would be perfect for her mother.

Of course that means one more woman in the kitchen tomorrow, but whatever.

Jasper would be attending with his new girlfriend, Lucy, to Christmas dinner. Apparently they met at a concert and the two really hit it off. I was completely fine with that, but I wasn’t entirely sure Tanya was ready for that. She hadn’t dated since Jasper, and their break-up wasn’t very clean.

He wanted her to quit her job and move to Washington to be with him... to marry him. They dated for two years before he asked, and he said he didn’t know she would protest quite as much, or, well, at all, to the idea. He thought she felt marriage was in their future as well, and she did. She didn’t want to quit her job and move to Washington, though, and Jasper couldn’t just pick up his father’s company and go. He’d built it up quite nicely. But, Tanya had worked her way to where she was in the business world, and I could also understand why she didn’t want to leave her job. In the end, they went their separate ways.

Until tomorrow, that is.

Tanya joins me that night, along with Angela, Esme, my mom, and Sue, around the fire. The kids were already down for the night—unless and until they woke up dirty or hungry—and the guys were somewhere else... doing whatever guys did together. We sip hot chocolate and laugh about the day until we can’t keep our eyes open any longer. After showing Tanya to her room, I slip into my own.

My husband is shirtless and sleeping. I somehow find the energy to wake him up and exhaust him and myself further. We fall asleep panting and sweating and naked against one another, with smiles on both of our faces.

“Oh, Esme! It’s been too long,” Charlotte gushes as she embraces my mother-in-law in a tight hug. Her eyes don’t look as empty as they did at Peter’s funeral, but I know she isn’t healing as fast as she would like everyone to think she is. She scans the room before setting her gaze on me, flickering to Nessa in my arms and back to my eyes. “Bella, come here, sugar.”

I smile as I hurry forward and wrap her up in my own arms. I whisper, “It’s so good to see you. You have no idea.”

She snuffles as she squeezes me even tighter and then pulls away. She smiles a big, bright, genuine smile at me as she wipes her eyes and holds her hands out in front of her. “Now, hush up, darlin’. And let me see this beautiful little baby girl!”

Rose and Emmett are next with the hugs before I scoop up their baby girl, Lillian and squeeze. I hear a sharp inhale behind me as I’m holding the beautiful daughter of Rose and whip my head around to look at Tanya. She looks almost petrified, but her smile is genuine. She’s happy to see the Whitlock’s but afraid of how they’ll receive her.

Rose solves the problem by stepping forward and pulling her in to a tight hug. I’m almost positive she whispers something in Tanya’s ear before she pulls back because the two regard each other closely before smiling and moving on to the next person in line for hugs. Emmett grabs Lillian from me and kisses me on the cheek before scampering off after Rose.

It’s then I see Jasper come in with who I assume is his new girlfriend, Lucy. It’s my turn to inhale sharply—she’s so similar to me in looks it’s almost

ridiculous. *Great, can't wait to see what Edward says.*

"Bell, this is my Lucy," he tells me in a quiet, pleading voice. I furrow my brow as I look from him to her, and no, I didn't make a mistake—she's like my sister from another mother. "Lucy, this is one of my best friends, Bella."

"Thought you said Bell," she says, teasingly, smiling hugely at me. "Just kidding, Bella, swear. He's told me so much about you, but he swore he'd wring my neck if I tried to call you by his nickname for you."

She's got a slight twang to her voice, and there's nothing malicious or underhanded about her words or her tone, at all. She does resemble me, but looking closely at her, I see the differences. She's shorter—more Alice's height. She's skinnier—more Alice's weight. She's obviously Southern—more Jasper's sound. The hair color and eyes are mine, but she's not me, and I know at once why Jasper was pleading in his introduction—because though she may look like me a bit, she isn't, and this isn't some depraved substitute for me. Which, sadly, is the first thing that popped into my head.

Conceited, much?

"Sorry! Sorry! Lucy? It's so nice to meet you," I tell her, smiling as I grab her hand and pull her into a hug. "You take care of him, okay?" I whisper into her ear.

She nods against me and pulls back, smiling. Her eyes drift to the right; I know she's found Tanya when they widen slightly. "You're Tanya?"

Tanya clears her throat and nods, biting her lip gently. She smiles at Lucy, though, and tells her, "Yes, and you're Lucy?"

"Sure am, hun. Can I just...?" Lucy doesn't finish what she's saying, just races forward and pulls Tanya into a hug before racing out of the room with her.

I turn to Jasper and raise an eyebrow. "Do I want to know?"

"No, probably not," he responds, chuckling. Two steps forward and he's hugging me hello. "Good to see ya, Bell."

"You too."

Footsteps enter the room and we both turn to watch as Edward approaches, eyebrow raised. I grin at him and he shoots me a wink.

"Do I even want to know why your new girlfriend looks so much like my wife, Whitlock?"

"Yeah, Merry Christmas to you, too, asshole."

The two leave the room together after doing their private bromance hug that I just roll my eyes at every time I see. I stand in the still quiet of the hallway and for just a second, a vicious flash of pain rips through me as I think of Alice.

I've heard nothing from her in years, nor do I have any reason to believe that I will, ever again. It hurts, because she was such a huge part of my life growing up and into my college years. And while I realize that her intentions toward me were not always in my or her best interest, or genuine in any way... she was still a friend to me when I needed one for so long and so many times in my life.

I miss her, not always, but times like this especially. I'm almost positive Charlie misses her, as well, but he wouldn't ever voice that to me. She was like a second daughter to him. I realize that she won't ever attend a Christmas with me again, most likely, nor will she ever see my girls, or know them.

I'm ripped from my thoughts by a gentle slap on my foot. I look down and stare into two beautiful green eyes. I can't help but smile as I bend down and gather Mae in my arms. The sadness I felt only a moment ago is gone because with my baby girl in my arms, it's impossible to be sad. Even more so as she giggles quietly when I tickle her and coo my love for her. I look up and see Edward in the doorway to the living room, holding Nessa and smiling at the two of us. I walk forward to him and, as a family, we join everyone else.

My life is complete.

Where do I start?

How about all of you that didn't give up – thank you so much!

All of you that alerted/favorited/reviewed – I don't even have words... I've been incredibly lucky with the readers of this silly little story. You've all put up with crazy delays, ridiculous Bella, sappy Edward, and annoying Jasper. And those that put up with what I did to Alice? You're my favorite!

Beausoir – you, lady, have been through so much with me, and I want to thank you for every moment you helped inspire, and every kick you gave my ass. I couldn't ask for anything more from a friend, and I hope you know I love you.

Les16 – there aren't words for you, at all. You're a special person, the kind of special person that we don't meet enough in life, and I wish that everyone had one like you. I know I'm certainly lucky. (she's also the whole reason this epi was finished, so if you, yes, you, reader, don't go over and read *The Path We Choose*, and my newest guilty obsession, *The Greatest Gift*, you'll be doing her a great injustice.)

For the best friend that won't ever know this is written... Julie, I love you, and I hope that one day we find our way back into each others' lives. Know that I'll never forget you, and I hope your life treats you well.

Lastly, for my husband, Layton. He's put up with more from me than any man ever should have to. And he still loves me. He's my inspiration in everything I do, and I will love him, with all of my heart, forever and ever.

The alt. Ending – Jasper/Bella ending, is, as promised to be posted directly after I post this. So, as you read this, it will already be up. Anyone who is interest, scroll on over to my profile, and click on the outtakes for TG. It'll be chapter 2. There's a few more outtakes to come for this story, but I don't have a time frame as to when they will post. I am sorry for that.

Also, I'm going to do one more read through on the first chapter of my new story, *shine*, before posting it, most likely, today also. It would tickle me pink if you all would give it a try. :)

Thank you all so much...

TTYL!

-Tia